

The French Lieutenant's Woman Study Guide

The French Lieutenant's Woman by John Fowles

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Plot Summary

Charles Smithson, a member of the English elite, has come to Lyme Regis, a small southwestern town, before his wedding to Ernestina Freeman. Charles is a paleontologist, thirty-two, and a member of the aristocracy. Ernestina is the daughter of a self-made man. Her aunt, Tranter, lives in Lyme and she goes there every year for rest. She has come earlier this year to prepare for her wedding. Charles also arrives, and stays at the White Lion Inn.

Charles learns of the local outcast, Sarah Woodruff, known also as “The French Lieutenant’s Wife” and “Tragedy”. Sarah is employed by Mrs. Poulteney, an elderly widow who has taken her on as a secretary. Mrs. Poulteney is obsessed with her salvation, and with performing acts of good works to ensure it.

Charles and Sarah meet alone accidentally a number of times, and Sarah ultimately reveals her history to Charles. She had hoped to marry a French lieutenant, injured in a shipwreck, who was recovering at the home of the family to whom she was a governess. She gave herself to him sexually, only for him to leave the next day. He later married someone else, and never returned.

Sarah is later fired by Mrs. Poulteney, and she seeks out Charles through a letter. Charles finds her and the two embrace and kiss. Charles, bound by Victorian duty, senses in Sarah possibilities for his own life, and a freedom that he knows will end with marriage. Charles pays for her to leave, to start a new life, and she goes to Exeter near London. Meanwhile, Charles has been disinherited by his uncle, for his uncle intends to marry. Charles then goes to see Ernestina’s father to tell him of the disinheritance. Ernestina’s father offers a larger dowry, and a business position, but Charles declines. John Fowles then presents his first ending: Charles refuses any more contact with Sarah, and marries Ernestina.

In the second and third endings, Charles goes to see Sarah, makes love to her, and calls off his engagement. In the second ending, it is revealed that Sarah, who has disappeared for two years, has had a child by Charles, and a reunion between Sarah and Charles is possible. In the third ending, Sarah rejects Charles, and Charles goes to America.



Chapters 1-7

Summary

Chapter 1 – The scene of the novel is set in southwest England in the small harbor town of Lyme Regis in 1867. Lyme is famous for its beautiful gray cobb, or seawall, which stretches out into the ocean. A solitary, dark-dressed figure stands out on the wall.

Chapter 2 – Charles Smithson and his fiancée Ernestina Freeman are out walking on the cobb. Charles is a gentleman and a paleontologist from London who values Darwin's theories on evolution and natural selection. Ernestina's father is a wealthy trader who does not like Darwin. At the end of the cobb, they see the dark figure, a woman whom Ernestina calls "Tragedy". Tragedy is a nickname for the woman, who is also referred to as "The French Lieutenant's Woman".

Tragedy is a servant to Mrs. Poulteney, a friend of the Freemans'. Tragedy is the stuff of gossip. She supposedly had fallen in love and given herself to the French Lieutenant, who later abandoned her. She supposedly waits on the wall for his return. When Charles and Ernestina go near Tragedy, she looks directly at Charles, and then resumes looking at the sea.

Chapter 3 – After lunch, Charles returns to his room at the White Lion. There he contemplates his life and his future. He is due to receive his father's and his uncle's estates. Charles is a liberal in a conservative family and has no real interest in politics. His occupation is a joke among his family.

Chapter 4 – Mrs. Poulteney lives in a large home on a hill outside Lyme Regis. Mrs. Poulteney is a strict woman with high expectations, and this has led to a large number of domestic servants coming and going. Only one, Mrs. Fairley, who ran the kitchen, had lasted.

Mrs. Poulteney is proper and very formal, as well as outspoken on matters of morality and propriety. She is also very afraid of her own mortality and God's judgment. She gives to charity and funds good causes, but she is worried it is not enough. Mrs. Poulteney has a sneaking suspicion she is dying of stomach cancer, despite what her doctors say. In 1866, she decides to take on a companion to live with, and her local vicar suggests Sarah Woodruff.

Chapter 5 – Ernestina is beautiful, but she is shallow and bound by duty. Ernestina is staying with her Aunt Tranter, as she has done every year. But this year, as Ernestina is to be married, she has been sent to her Aunt Tranter's earlier than usual to prepare and to relax.

Chapter 6 – Mrs. Poulteney questions the vicar about Sarah Woodruff. The vicar assures Mrs. Poulteney that Sarah, about thirty years old, deserves charity and kindness. Sarah has been well-educated and recently worked as a governess for



Captain John Talbot, who was entertaining an injured French military officer. Sarah fell in love with the French officer, and was prepared to marry him. But the French officer only wanted to sleep with her, which Sarah would not let happen. He left soon after. Sarah still waits for him in vain to return. Mrs. Poulteney interviews and then hires Sarah.

Chapter 7 - Charles is wakened by his man servant, Sam, who has also become something of a friend. Charles has switched to more comfortable rooms. Sam is twenty-two, ten years younger than Charles. Sam is a commoner from London, who doesn't do the best at his job. He is already drunk when he serves Charles breakfast.

Analysis

John Fowles sets the scene for his novel as that of Regis Lyme, a small town famous for its seawall. As in any small town, there are always individuals who exist along the fringes of society in ill-repute, whispered about, but never directly confronted. In Lyme, it happens to be Sarah Woodruff, also known as Tragedy or The French Lieutenant's Wife, with "wife" being a polite replacement for "whore".

Charles Smithson, something of an anathema for his time –a liberal in a very conservative era –harbors progressive views about nature and mankind. He is a Darwinist, and is something of a Deist. He is engaged to be married to Ernestina Freeman, a beautiful yet shallow girl, who thinks only of pleasing Charles. Yet, for a liberal in his time, Charles has willfully submitted to duty and the politesse that dominates Victorian England. He can be considered a liberal in moderation.

Ernestina reveals Sarah has been taken in by Mrs. Poulteney, an elderly widow who adheres strictly to the Bible and attends mass religiously. Sarah works as Mrs. Poulteney's secretary. Mrs. Poulteney is the archetypal Victorian character –prim, proper, wealthy, God-fearing, and very snobbish. Mrs. Poulteney has taken Sarah in as a good deed, for Mrs. Poulteney fears she is dying. She and Sarah are diametrically opposed to one another in terms of character and reputation – and reputation in Victorian England matters more than anything.

Vocabulary

eponym, impeccably, millinery, perpetuity, ostracized, crinoline, baccarat, overfastidiousness, stygian, tantamount, crassly, impertinent, fervid, eleemosynary, bombazined, inexorably, parturitional, condign, urbanely, adroitly, proustian, asseverate



Chapters 8-15

Summary

Chapter 8 – Because Ernestina isn't feeling well, Charles goes to the Old Fossil Shop in Lyme Regis. He goes for a walk on the beach, and while jumping between boulders, falls flat on his back. He gets up and continues on, and realizes it is time to head back.

Chapter 9 – Sarah decides to become Mrs. Poulteney's companion and aide. Sarah and the other servants are expected to attend mass and say prayers. One of Sarah's duties is reading Scripture to Mrs. Poulteney. Sarah is a kind woman, and sees through shortcomings and recognizes there is suffering in the world.

Because of Sarah's depression she is given time off each day. Mrs. Fairley is given the task of spying on Sarah when Sarah goes out. Mrs. Fairley, jealous of Sarah's freedom, creates lies about Sarah's activities. Mrs. Fairley reports Sarah is now walking on Ware Commons.

Chapter 10 – Between Lyme Regis and Axmouth is a place called The Undercliff, where erosion has created a strange landscape. Visitors here are uncommon, but Charles daringly goes in on his return to Regis Lyme. While there, he encounters The French Lieutenant's Woman, who is sleeping and she wakes upon his approach. Charles apologizes, and leaves.

Chapter 11 – Charles has sent flowers to Ernestina. Ernestina worries Charles will flirt with other women. Mary, a pretty servant girl, reveals to Ernestina she has been flirting with Sam. If Sam makes advances on Mary, Ernestina wants Mary to tell her. This causes Ernestina to remember her own romance with Charles and their first kiss in her father's conservatory.

Chapter 12 – Charles, still on his way back, heads through the woods of Ware Commons. There Charles meets Sarah, who is heading home as well. He apologizes to her once more. But she insists on continuing on alone. She asks, before she goes on, that Charles not tell anyone she was in Ware Commons. Arriving late at Mrs. Tranter's, Charles is asked by Ernestina about his day. He tells her he was in The Undercliff.

Mrs. Poulteney's distaste of Ware Commons entails the use of the road through it as a Lover's Lane. She questions Sarah about her experiences there, but Sarah denies any knowledge of the place for the purposes described. Mrs. Poulteney seemingly lets the matter drop.

Chapter 13 – John Fowles intercedes and tells the reader about what novelists do in creating characters, and how characters take on lives of their own. Fowles indicates that he is Charles. Fowles explains that freedom is consistent with God, and God with freedom, and so the novelist, like a god in his own right, must give his characters freedom.



Chapter 14 – Visitors to Lyme Regis are expected to visit and speak with locals. Charles dutifully submits to doing this. Mrs. Tranter, Ernestina, and Charles visit Mrs. Poulteney. Mrs. Poulteney introduces Sarah, and she and Ernestina coolly exchange hellos. Mrs. Tranter, Mrs. Poulteney, and Ernestina speak of Mary and Sam. Mary, after being fired by Mrs. Poulteney, went to work for Mrs. Tranter and Ernestina. Ernestina, Mrs. Poulteney, and Mrs. Tranter are shocked at Mary and Sam's intimacy with one another. Charles is defensive of Sam, and he and Sarah exchange looks as if they have identified common enemies.

Chapter 15 – Ernestina and Charles discuss Sam and Mary possibly falling in love. Hoping to please Ernestina, Charles forbids Sam to return to see Mary.

Analysis

When Ernestina is taken ill, Charles finds himself with a free afternoon, and ends exploring a place called The Undercliff. The Undercliff is a maze of geological oddities, and few people ever go there. It is there Charles first comes across Sarah alone – which, in Victorian England, is horribly improper. From the first day on the cobb that Charles has seen Sarah, he has been interested in her circumstances.

Interestingly enough, John Fowles inserts himself into the novel, in which he talks about the novelist being like God, bringing things into creation, and then creation taking on a mind of its own, especially in the freewill of characters. This is especially true of Charles, it seems, for his character does not seem destined to remain in his current situation.

And indeed, Charles and Sarah meet once more, accidentally. Charles, bound by duty, realizes how inappropriate these meetings are, and so he redoubles his affections towards Ernestina, perhaps hoping these efforts will free his mind of Sarah. He even goes so far as to submit to Ernestina's desire that Sam no longer goes to see Mary.

Vocabulary

indeterminate, dissociation, ignominiously, pejorative, perspicacious, profundity, arbutus, hegemony, abominable, peremptorily, obstacular, obloquy, sepulchral,



Chapters 16-22

Summary

Chapter 16 – As the days go by, Ernestina becomes very submissive toward Charles, like a wife. He wants her to contradict him on something, and he realizes that Ernestina has fallen in love with the idea of marriage.

Charles goes back to The Undercliff and comes across Sarah again. He sees in her an independence and intelligence lacking in Ernestina. They converse about redemption and reputation. Charles does not believe anyone is beyond help who is able to make others sympathize. Sarah reveals she knows the French Lieutenant is not returning, for he is married.

Chapter 17 - Mrs. Tranter, Ernestina, and Charles at the Lyme Assembly Rooms, watching a religious concert for Lent. While there, Charles reflects on the mystery surrounding Sarah, and whether or not he would be able to properly explain this to Ernestina. Charles also reflects on Ernestina's shallowness, and wonders if he avoided an engagement with her because of the expectations of English society. To Charles, Sarah reminds him of a time of possibility, whereas now Charles is bound to his duty. Meanwhile, Sam and Mary continue to meet.

Chapter 18 – A few days later, Ernestina has a migraine, so Charles heads out. He realizes the desire to travel has been awakened in him once more. This time, Sarah finds Charles at The Undercliff. She has found two fossils for Charles. Charles believes she should leave Regis Lyme and start over. Sarah will not leave for she fears she will become a prostitute. Charles reluctantly agrees to become Sarah's confidante sharing her past, in exchange for Sarah taking Charles's advice.

Chapter 19 – Mrs. Tranter, Ernestina, Dr. Grogan, and Charles dine in Charles's sitting room at the White Lion. Charles again senses shallowness in Ernestina as they eat. Charles and Dr. Gage discuss politics and medicine in private, and Dr. Gage reveals he was the one who diagnosed Sarah with melancholia. The melancholia has become an addiction, a way for Sarah to make herself a sacrificial victim –and she is hopeless, according to Dr. Gage.

Chapter 20 – Charles and Sarah meet again at The Undercliff. Sarah reveals the French Lieutenant, Varguennes, was injured in a shipwreck and Sarah found him to be very brave. Varguennes eventually related his feelings to Sarah. Sarah's father had become insane, and Sarah had no family. Varguennes used this to try to compel Sarah to return with him to France.

At a later meeting, Sarah discovers through her own intuition that Varguennes does not care for her the way she cares for him. Nevertheless, Sarah says she sleeps with him



because she was humiliated, and thinks the shame of giving herself to Varguennes would keep her alive. Charles once more wishes he was traveling.

Chapter 21 – Sarah continues her story. Varguennes leaves the next day, and he gets married. Sarah continues to say she must now live as an outcast, and the country is full of outcasts in self-denial. She says if she leaves Lyme, she leaves her shame, and she is lost. Charles tells her she still needs to start anew, and Sarah asks for a day or two to reflect.

As Sarah and Charles leave, they hide because they come across Sam and Mary cuddled up together. This causes Sarah to smile. When Sam and Mary leave, Charles and Sarah also leave separately.

Chapter 22 – Charles returns to Regis, feeling accomplished and resolving he will never meet Sarah alone again, and he will force himself not to think of her. A telegram is waiting for Charles from his Uncle Robert, who wants Charles to come see him at Winsyatt at once. Charles suspects Uncle Robert wants Charles and Ernestina to move into the East Wing.

Analysis

As the date of their wedding approaches, Ernestina becomes submissive towards Charles. Charles contrasts this submissiveness to Sarah's independence and intellect, and wishes Ernestina would contradict him. Charles consents to hearing Sarah's account of her own life, torn by his duty and by his interest. Sarah has awakened in Charles a desire to be free, to travel once more. It is a desire Charles had thought gone. Sarah embodies all of the possibilities in Charles's life; Ernestina represents what his life will become.

Yet, Charles undertakes these meetings at his own risk. Dr. Grogan attempts to impress upon Charles that Sarah is a manipulative woman, and her distress is only to suit her own needs. Charles cannot believe Sarah is that far removed from reality. Charles urges Sarah to leave Lyme, to start her life all over again, but Sarah hesitates to do so.

Charles, ever the liberal in moderation, cannot believe his fate is not under his control. He exists in a society outwardly controlled by men; as a man, Charles has reason and objectivity to guide him in that male-dominated world. Apart from the intrigue surrounding Sarah, Charles is lured into speaking to her by his own false assumptions about his dominance.

Vocabulary

poetastrix, disengaging, imperceptible, frivolous, unrelievedly, surreptitious, demureness, vapidness, methodically, Paleolithic, apprise, modulations, quintessentially, matins, chivvied, automaton, taradiddle,, anathema, obliquely, altruism, hummock, coquetry, blasphemous, cozened, epoch



Chapters 23-29

Summary

Chapter 23 – Charles goes to Wynsiatt. There, he is impressed by duty and the seriousness of his role in his family. Meanwhile, it is revealed Mrs. Fairley has seen Sarah leave The Undercliff area.

Chapter 24 – It turns out that Charles has been disinherited, for his Uncle has married. Ernestina is upset. Charles turns the conversation to the events of Lyme, and asks what he has missed. Mrs. Poultenev has fired Sarah. Sarah has gone missing, and Charles is worried that he too, may have been seen leaving The Undercliff.

Chapter 25 – At the White Lion, Charles receives a note from Sarah, asking for one last meeting. He tells Sam not to mention the note to Mrs. Tranter.

Chapter 26 – Sam dreams of being a haberdasher and having Mary work at his shop. Charles reflects on the conversation he had with his Uncle Robert. Uncle Robert had been very lonely, sad, bound by duty. Charles now wonders about his income from his father's estate, and if it will be enough to support both him and Ernestina.

Chapter 27 – Charles goes to see Dr. Grogan, who sends a message off that Sarah is alive. Dr. Grogan tells Charles that he, Charles, has his confidence. Grogan believes Sarah is attempting to seduce Charles, and tells Charles he is half in love with Sarah. Charles is horrified. Dr. Grogan agrees to meet Sarah; Charles decides to leave for London on business, but to lay the whole situation out before Ernestina before he leaves.

Chapter 28 – Charles reads about a trial and study suggested by Dr. Grogan. A sixteen year-old girl, mentally distressed, attempted to ruin the life of a young French lieutenant. Several other examples of girls inflicting pain on themselves to achieve their own ends are also related to Charles. Charles wonders then why he has allowed Dr. Grogan to judge Sarah for him.

Chapter 29 – Charles goes out looking for Sarah, making care to avoid the farm where Mrs. Fairley saw Sarah. Charles comes across an old barn which he enters.

Analysis

Charles, it turns out, will not receive his title or his inheritance if his Uncle Robert produces a son. Charles also receives a letter saying Sarah has gone missing, and against his better judgment, decides to go see Dr. Grogan about the incident. Dr. Grogan again attempts to impress upon Charles a woman like Sarah is manipulative, and he presents a series of case studies about manipulative women to demonstrate the point. Charles is not moved, and goes out looking for Sarah anyway.



Meanwhile, Sam has also been unavoidably drawn into the intrigue. Charles has told Sam not to tell anyone of what has been going on, and Sam agrees keep his master's confidence. He and Charles enjoy a close relationship. Charles, existing in a world of propriety and obligations, assumes the master-servant relationship between himself and Sam is as foolproof as his dominance in all affairs because he is a man. Yet that dominance in all areas of life is tentative based upon Charles's reputation –which he is now endangering out of free will.

Vocabulary

vindictive, imperturbability, ruminative, samovar, flagrant, gnomic, escritoire, pernicious, extirpated, puerile, tautology, adage, excommunicate, derelict, premonition, atrocious



Chapters 30-36

Summary

Chapter 30 – John Fowles takes the reader back a few days to the firing of Sarah. Mrs. Poulteney fires Sarah without telling her why, and Sarah at last stands up to Mrs. Poulteney. Sarah calls her a hypocrite and questions whether or not Mrs. Poulteney will have God's ear when she dies. She then leaves the house.

Chapter 31 – Charles finds Sarah curled up in the barn and wants to protect her. Yet he tells her because of everything that has happened, now she really must leave Lyme. She begins crying, and Charles hugs her and kisses her, and then pushes her away in horror when he realizes what he has done, only to find someone in the door behind him.

Chapter 32 – Ernestina cannot sleep, for she is afraid she has displeased Charles by crying over his disinheritance. She is absolutely determined to please him. Sam, meanwhile, breaks the news to Mary that he and Charles are going back to London. Mrs. Tranter then comforts Mary, and allows her time off until Ernestina awakens.

Chapter 33 – Sam and Mary have walked in on Charles. Sam apologizes continually. Charles swears Sam and Mary to secrecy. Charles meanwhile confesses he has some feelings for Sarah, and tells her he can never again see her. He gives her a loan on which to leave. He then tells her goodbye.

Chapter 34 – Charles goes to see Ernestina. He tells her he has been up all night, thinking. He tells Ernestina he is going to London to see her father to make him aware of the disinheritance. Charles's title is also in question. Charles is also going to see Montague, who handles his father's estate. When Charles says goodbye to Ernestina, he feels sexual desire toward her, even after he has embraced another woman.

Chapter 35 – John Fowles speaks about the hidden sexuality beneath the shroud of Victorian England. He also talks about the difference between the present day and Victorian England, asserting Victorians were just as highly sexed as their modern day counterparts, but were more compelled to seek actual love.

Chapter 36 – Exeter, outside London, is described as place where the vice of mankind goes on. It is to this place Sarah comes to rent a small sitting room and bedroom at the Endicott Hotel. There, in Exeter, she procures some things for herself, including a nightgown and a shawl.

Analysis

Charles not only finds Sarah, but he kisses her. This act is one of wild rebellion in Victorian England, and its indecency is observed by Sam and Mary. Charles swears



both servants to secrecy, and then gives Sarah a loan to leave Lyme. Charles then goes to see Ernestina, informing her he is going to see her father about his disinheritance.

Charles's encounter with Sarah has also, for the first time in the novel, stirred sexual desire in him, which he also feels for Ernestina. This allows John Fowles to provide some historical context for his novel, telling the reader Victorian England, below the surface, was awash in sexual activity. For example, pornography was produced during the Victorian Era at a rate unmatched in history –but the sins of mankind were kept under a façade of propriety.

This façade –of dutiful obligations –and wanton abandonment of morality, is a large part of the hypocrisy to which Sarah alludes. The other part of the hypocrisy comes from individuals like Mrs. Poulteney, who preach piety and forgiveness, and exhibit nothing of either.

Vocabulary

omission, impertinent, incredulously, jezebel, inextinguishably, audible, fragility, chatelaine, illiberal, peculiar, envisage, elicited, subliminal, superlative, pecuniary, self-adjudications, alterations, obstinately, mollified, sensuality, ethos, sublimation, lyrical, sordid, amenities, louche, malodorous, rapacity, indeterminate, equanimous, inured



Chapters 37-43

Summary

Chapter 37 – Charles goes to see Ernestina's father, Mr. Freeman, a self-made man. Charles confesses his disinheritance, and Mr. Freeman decides to increase his dowry – easily affordable –so that Ernestina and Charles can be comfortable. He also tells Charles if he ever needs money, all Charles has to do is ask. He requests Charles consider a business partnership with him.

Chapter 38 – Charles feels invisible in the city. In Lyme he feels as if everyone is watching. He comes across Mr. Freeman's store, full of lace, cloths, and materials. He cannot imagine himself going into the store. He knows if he ever steps foot in the store, his life will be over.

Chapter 39 – Charles meets his old school friends, Tom and Nathaniel at a smoking room, and the three of them drink. Charles, Thomas, and Nathaniel then go to brothel called Terpsichore, where they see a show. But Charles becomes disgusted, and leaves early. He then picks up a prostitute.

Chapter 40 – Charles goes to the prostitute's home. The prostitute has a little girl, the daughter of a soldier fighting in India. The prostitute undresses, and Charles begins to feel sick. Charles asks her name, and she replies that it is Sarah. This causes Charles to become nauseated and he vomits all over her bed.

Chapter 41 – The prostitute helps care for Charles, and goes to call him a coach. While she is gone, her daughter cries out, and Charles comforts the daughter. When the prostitute returns, she thanks Charles, who pays her and leaves.

Chapter 42 – The night before, when Charles got home, he was short with Sam, and apologizes for it. Charles meanwhile reads a letter from Dr. Grogan, who relates he could not find Sarah, and cautions Charles that Sarah may have followed him to London. Charles opens and burns a second letter, which had only an address.

Sam reveals to Charles he plans to ask Mary for her hand in marriage. Sam also confesses he wants to open a shop. Charles says he will increase Sam's wages when Sam marries; and he will consider Sam's idea of a shop.

Chapter 43 – Charles knows that by destroying the address, he had committed himself to his fate. He has mixed emotions. Part of him knows he has done the right, moral thing, but part of him also feels he is weak for accepting his fate.



Analysis

Charles and Mr. Freeman meet, and Mr. Freeman offers to increase his dowry to Charles, which Charles declines. Mr. Freeman, a wealthy self-made man, offers to make Charles a business partner, which Charles decides he will reflect upon. Yet Charles knows once he sets foot in Mr. Freeman's store, his life is finished.

Yet, the sexual desire that has been awakened in Charles cannot be suppressed. He even goes to visit a prostitute, with disastrous consequences. He is both desirous of, and disgusted by, the prostitute's nakedness. Before engaging in sexual activity with her, he asks her name. It is the same as Sarah's, and the coincidence causes Charles to become violently ill. It leads him to begin reflecting on everything.

Charles receives a letter from Dr. Grogan, who cannot find Sarah. Dr. Grogan tells Charles he is concerned that Sarah may have followed him to London –and a second letter, with only an address delivered to Charles, confirms Grogan's fears. Charles decides to destroy the address.

Vocabulary

cryptic, solicitor, rectitude, cant, disconsonant, proclivities, equipages, interrelations, aniline, egalitarian, perennially, brougham, debauch, dissolute, copulatory, lecherously, obstinacy, remorseful, inexorably, prevarication, tumbril,



Chapters 44-50

Summary

Chapter 44 – Immediately upon his return to the White Lion, Charles goes to see Ernestina. Ernestina is embroidering for Charles, and she has missed him very much. He brings her a coral and gold brooch. Charles then reaffirms his love for Ernestina, and confesses to her what has happened.

John Fowles then relates, in the first of three alternate endings, that Sarah and Charles marry and have seven children. Charles lives on a decade after Ernestina, and misses her. Sarah's fate is unknown. Sam and Mary marry; Dr. Grogan and Mrs. Tranter live into their nineties, and Mrs. Poulteney does not go to Heaven.

Chapter 45 – Fowles reveals the preceding chapters could possibly be Charles's imagination of what Charles wanted to happen.. Charles was torn apart over the address he had been sent. Stopping over in Exeter, Charles goes to the Endicott Hotel.

Chapter 46 – Charles calls on Sarah, who has been injured coming down the stairs. He finds Sarah by a fire. She confesses she was worried she might never see him again. In a frenzy, the two make love.

Chapter 47 – Charles is horrified after the act. He tells Sarah he has no idea what will become of them. He says he no longer loves Ernestina. Sarah says she is not worthy of Charles. As he gets dressed, he notices blood. Sarah lied about not being a virgin. She has loved Charles since the day she saw him. He has given her strength to keep living, and she again says she is not worthy of Charles, and makes him leave.

Chapter 48 – Charles leaves, and goes to a church, seeking solace. He asks for God's forgiveness, and then breaks down and cries. He questions himself, and he wonders what the dead must think of his behavior.

Chapter 49 – Charles questions Sarah's motives for deceiving him. He gets back to his rooms, and bathes. He then writes a letter to Sarah to convince her she cannot live without him. He sends the letter with Sam to Sarah, but there is no reply. He then has Sam prepare to go to Lyme. Sam speaks to Mary about leaving Charles's employ. Mary is worried about finances, but Sam has an idea.

Chapter 50 – Charles calls on Ernestina. He tells her he only wanted to marry her because he was lost, and hoped that he might grow to love her and have faith in himself over time. Ernestina is horrified. She feels she has brought this on herself, and she asks Charles to reconsider, to have patience with her. Charles says he has a mistress and he does not deserve the honor of marrying Ernestina. Ernestina promises vengeance and faints. Charles leaves Ernestina in Mary's care.



Analysis

John Fowles intercedes in his world once more to enlighten the reader that there are three possible endings to his book. In the first ending, Charles follows the dutiful, moral path, puts Sarah out of his life, and goes on to marry Ernestina. Their marriage, while not always happy, is full of love and seven children, for Charles misses Ernestina terribly after she dies in their old age.

In the second and third ending, Charles does not tear up Sarah's address. He instead goes to see her and the two make love. It is revealed in time that Sarah – despite claiming otherwise – was in fact a virgin. Charles realizes his reason and his role in a patriarchal society have not allowed him to avoid manipulation; indeed, he has been used. Yet he has no idea to what end he has been used. Nevertheless, he wants to marry Sarah. He breaks off his engagement with Ernestina, who promises vengeance shall be visited upon Charles, who is now totally at the mercy of women, a great illustration of irony in Victorian culture. Yet, he does not even realize it. Ironically, Charles, ever the Darwinist, falls on his knees to seek God's help for the first time, humbling himself.

Vocabulary

abruptly, mosaic, priapic, amiability, prolix, impedimenta, inquisitive, narcissus, unendurable, penumbral, oblivion, curate, rictus, shriven, stratagems, dichotomy, ubiquitous, psychosomatic, anabatic, clairvoyant, volubly, existentialist, grievous, analogy,



Chapters 51-57

Summary

Chapter 51 – Charles finds Dr. Grogan and tells him to go attend to Ernestina. Charles reveals to Dr. Grogan what has happened, and that Sarah is not the manipulative creature Grogan believes her to be. Back at the White Lion, Charles tells Sam his wedding is off. Sam asks where Charles will live. Charles says London; Sam quits, and Charles is enraged. Charles then begins writing a letter to Ernestina's father, and Dr. Grogan arrives.

Chapter 52 – Aunt Tranter comes back from lunch to find her house in chaos. Dr. Grogan will not reveal what has transpired between him and Charles. Mrs. Tranter spares no expense in condemning Charles. When Mary tells Mrs. Tranter Sam has quit Charles, Mrs. Tranter offers to employ Sam.

Chapter 53 – Dr. Grogan demands an explanation from Charles. Charles does not want to be condemned to Victorian hypocrisy. Dr. Grogan says evil is still evil, whether intended or unintended, for whatever reasons. Charles intends to marry Sarah. Dr. Grogan then tells Charles he must live the rest of his life in proof of what he has done. Dr. Grogan tells Charles if he is not gone in an hour, Dr. Grogan will bring back a horsewhip.

Chapter 54 – Charles leaves Regis Lyme and returns to Sarah. But Sarah has gone to London. The letter Charles had written her had never been delivered. Charles prays that night he will find Sarah.

Chapter 55 – As Charles is about to leave on the train the next morning, a bearded stranger sits down beside him. Charles falls asleep, and the stranger reveals himself to be John Fowles, participating in the world he has created for his characters. He does not know what to do with Charles. Fowles reveals there may be two more possible endings, and flips a coin about which to reveal first.

Chapter 56 – Charles cannot find Sarah, and he hires private detectives to find her. Charles and Montague also go to Ernestina's father's house to meet with Mr. Freeman and his attorney. If Charles signs a statement of guilt, Mr. Freeman will not pursue legal action. Charles signs the document. Charles continues his search for Sarah, and then decides to go abroad.

Chapter 57 – It is now February, 1869, in Chelsea, England. Sam has gone to work for Mr. Freeman's store, and has made something of himself. He and Mary are married with a baby girl. They are also able to afford a maid.



Analysis

Dr. Grogan is horrified at Charles's behavior. Charles still does not believe Sarah is manipulating him, and contends he is still in control of things. Dr. Grogan tells Charles his life will have to be spent in pursuit of justifying his actions; and Charles seeks God's help once more, appealing to a power higher than his own, for his own powers have failed yet again.

Charles dedicates himself to finding Sarah. John Fowles again materializes in his own novel, to flip a coin and decide which ending to reveal to the reader first.

Charles, a male, now stands bereft in an age of men. His position as the dominant sex has failed, for he is now at the mercy of Sarah's love and Ernestina's forgiveness. His position as master has also failed, for Sam has betrayed their relations for his own purpose. Even the law, ever asserted to have been created for the promulgation of wealthy men, now stands poised against Charles for breaking his engagement contract. He barely escapes the third consequence.

Vocabulary

acquiescent, catastrophe, self-extenuation, repugnant, absolution, exculpation, exquisite, shunned, preliminary, nonce, cognizance, vulpine, funereal, pallor, sophisticated, aptitude



Chapters 58-61

Summary

Chapter 58 – Charles travels the world. He even goes to Israel. He spends a large amount of time in Paris, where he meets two Americans. Montague encourages Charles to go to America.

Chapter 59 – Charles leaves England once more. He goes to Boston, and to New Orleans. There, he receives a note that Sarah has been found, and decides to return at once to England.

Chapter 60 – Charles and Montague meet up. Charles intends to go and see Sarah, who is now working as a governess to another family. Charles calls on her, and discovers she has gone from being a governess to a model for an artist. She does not wish to marry Charles, for she is happy where she is. Charles has also fathered a child with Sarah, and she reveals the little girl to him. Marriage may still be possible.

Chapter 61 – John Fowles reappears in his novel. He turns time back fifteen minutes for the second ending. A child is not revealed this time, and Charles has the feeling he has indeed been used. Charles returns to America.

Analysis

For two years, Charles seeks to find Sarah. He travels to America, he travels to Israel, and he travels across Europe. At last, he discovers her safe and sound in England. From there, Fowles presents two endings: one of possible happiness and a possible union between Sarah and Charles; and the second of absolutely misery, rejection, and Charles's return to America.

The second and third of the three possible endings demonstrate freedom from each of the involved characters, except, ironically, Charles. Charles is no longer his own master, he is no longer his own sovereign. He has attempted, through pursuing Sarah, to find happiness and freedom. What he has found has been enslavement to his own desires toward a woman only concerned with her own ends.

In the first ending, Sarah does not openly consent to a marriage or a reunion of any sorts, though that sort of ending is plausible. In the second ending, Sarah rejects Charles. In both endings, she is the true master and has gotten exactly what she wanted.

Extrapolated further, Darwin's theories were applied to empire, race, and culture. In a socially-Darwinian world, in which the fittest survive, those thought to be fittest –upper-class men embodied in the person of Charles, a Darwin supporter –are overthrown by what is presumed to be the meeker, milder sex.

Vocabulary

hectoringly, loquacious, stereotype, hospitality, promontory, peregrinated, ostentatious, bohemian, apparition, panatela, malachite, suffused



Characters

Charles Smithson

At 32, Charles Smithson is a member of the aristocracy. He is a paleontologist, Darwinist, and a deist in terms of his faith in God. He is engaged to be married to Ernestina Freeman. Though a politically moderate liberal, Charles is nevertheless bound by his duty and his place in society to observe decorum and matters of politesse. He is consigned to his fate, until he meets and falls in love with Sarah Woodruff. Sarah, an outcast, stirs up the desire for freedom within him. In the first ending, he casts Sarah out of his life and remains faithful to Ernestina.

In the second and third ending, Charles destroys his reputation, sleeps with Sarah, breaks off his marriage with Ernestina and pursues Sarah. He narrowly escapes legal action. In the second ending, Charles discovers he has fathered a child with Sarah, and a reunion is possible. In the third ending, Charles is rejected by Sarah and journeys to America.

Ernestina Freeman

The 27-year old daughter of a wealthy, self-made man, Ernestina is a pretty girl who wants to please Charles and make him a good wife. She is very aware of the gravity of her situation in a patriarchal society, and is very aware of manners, duty, and societal obligations. She loves Charles with all of her heart. Yet she is a shallow girl, seemingly obsessed with social obligations and material possessions. Yet this obsession does not overcome her love for Charles. When Charles ends his engagement with her, she faints. She promises vengeance on him, but then ultimately relents when Charles signs a statement of guilt. In this action, she demonstrates perhaps lingering feelings for Charles, and her own kindness and sincerity. She is perhaps one of the few truly genuine Victorian characters in the novel.

Sarah Woodruff

Sarah Woodruff is the thirty-something year-old secretary to Mrs. Poulteney. Sarah is a social outcast, living on Mrs. Poulteney's charity. Sarah was supposed to be married to a French Lieutenant, but she slept with him before the marriage, and the Lieutenant left. Sarah is referred to as "Tragedy" and "The French Lieutenant's Wife". She is wholly selfish, and perhaps arguably the only truly free character in the book because of this. She manipulates Charles into her life, ultimately sleeping with him, causing him to break off his marriage. In the first ending, her fate is unknown.

In the second and third endings, Sarah disappears for two years, resurfacing as a model for an artist. In the second ending, she reveals a child she had with Charles to



Charles, and a reunion between Sarah and Charles is plausible. In the second ending, Charles is rejected and Sarah remains happy where she is.

Dr. Grogan

An Irish doctor who knows his Bible as well as Darwin, Dr. Grogan attempts repeatedly to warn Charles of his rashness. Charles does not heed Grogan's warnings, and Grogan tells Charles that Charles must spend the rest of his life in the pursuit of justice. Dr. Grogan knows evil does exist in the world, and Charles has participated in it. Like Ernestina, Dr. Grogan is perhaps one of the few genuinely good Victorian characters in the novel.

Mrs. Poulteney

Emblematic of the hypocrisies of Victorian England, Mrs. Poulteney performs nominal religious chores and pays lip service to the Bible. She is concerned with her salvation and her forgiveness, yet she is unwilling to forgive others for their sins. Mrs. Poulteney's taking on of Sarah is not done out of the kindness of her heart, or in the true interests of Christian life, but out of religious obligations and a fear for her own soul.

Mrs. Tranter

Mrs. Tranter resides in Lyme Regis, and hosts her niece Ernestina for periods during the year. Ernestina has come to Mrs. Tranter's earlier than usual in anticipation of the coming wedding to Charles. Mrs. Tranter is proper, and formal, but not without compassion. She is very concerned about the lives of her servants, for example, and comforts Mary when Sam leaves for London with Charles. Mrs. Tranter also hires Sam, after Sam leaves Charles's employ. Mrs. Tranter is perhaps another example of a genuine Victorian character, who practices what she preaches.

Mr. Freeman

The father of Ernestina, Mr. Freeman is a self-made man. He disdains the upper classes, but respects Charles. Mr. Freeman is kind, and fatherly, and generous. He offers to increase Charles's dowry rather than break off the marriage when Charles reveals disinheritance. Mr. Freeman also offers to make Charles a business partner to alleviate any potential financial difficulties in the future. Mr. Freeman is very caring and loving toward his daughter. If not for Ernestina's intervention, Mr. Freeman would have pursued legal action against Charles after Charles broke the marriage contract.



Sam

Sam is ten years younger than Charles, and Charles's humble manservant. Sam is in love with Mary, and dreams of opening his own haberdashery one day. He is inexorably drawn into his master's unscrupulous decisions, and decides to break free of Charles. He is given work by Mrs. Tranter until he becomes employed in Mr. Freeman's store. He marries Mary, has a child, and has a real future ahead of him.

Varguennes

The French Lieutenant, Varguennes is an injured sailor who is taken in by the Talbots, where Sarah is a governess at the time. She wants to marry him, and prematurely gives herself to him (or so she says). Varguennes then leaves, marries in France, and never returns.



Objects/Places

Lyme Regis

Lyme Regis is a small town in southwestern England, famous for its seawall, or cobb. It is the setting for the majority of the novel. It is described as having shops, churches, an assembly place for performances, and a fossil shop. The hills beyond town are dotted with the large houses of the wealthy. It is where Mrs. Tranter lives, and where Ernestina visits. Lyme Regis is also home to the White Lion Inn, where Charles stays.

Exeter

Something of a suburb of London, Exeter is a city where vice is plentiful. It is the home of the Endicott Hotel, where Sarah ultimately goes to live. It is where Charles passes through in one ending, but then stays over in during the second and third endings.

The Cobb

Built of gray stone and jutting out into the ocean, the cobb is the seawall paid for by the residents of Lyme Regis. It is on the cobb where the reader first meets the three principal characters of Charles, Ernestina, and Sarah.

The Undercliff

A strange geological cliff-like maze of rocks and outcroppings near Lyme Regis, the Undercliff is an area ventured into by few people. It is easy to become lost there. It is where Sarah begins spending her time to be alone from people, and it is the rich geological landscape which draws Charles in. It is in the Undercliff where Sarah reveals her past with the French Lieutenant to Charles.

The Old Barn

After Sarah is fired by Miss Poulteney, she arranges to meet Charles at The Undercliff. She spends the night in an old barn nearby, and that is where Charles finds her. The old barn is also where Charles and Sarah first embrace and kiss. It is where Victorian propriety has been defiled –and it is where Sam and Mary discover Charles.

Letters

The major means of communication in 19th-Century England, letters are exchanged frequently between characters in the novel. Dr. Grogan corresponds with Charles about



Sarah through a letter; Charles announces the end of his engagement to Mr. Freeman through a letter; and Charles and Sarah correspond through written letters before their relationship moves to the next level.

Hansom

The main means of transportation within towns and cities, hansom's are covered horse-drawn carriages with comfortable interiors. They are used mainly by the wealthy and the upper class. Charles travels in a hansom when he is in London and when he does not travel by foot in Lyme Regis.



Themes

Patriarchy

The Victorian Era in England is a time of strict propriety, duty, and obligation toward one's position in society and toward God. As such, it is an era of time—at least officially—dominated by men. Men, Charles notes, possess reason and objectivity. With those qualities, it is only natural that men like Charles should be at the very top of society. Women are dutifully submissive toward them and toward morality, as embodied in Ernestina's submissiveness toward Charles, and Mrs. Poulteney's submissiveness to God.

In every class level, men are expected to head up households and earn wages. In the relationship between Sam and Mary, Sam is the one who goes out to earn a living. In the potential marriage between Charles and Ernestina, it will be Charles who is responsible for providing income. Furthermore, Charles mistakenly assumes that his reason, objectivity, and rank, will protect his reputation and prevent him from becoming entangled with Sarah.

Survival of the Fittest

Charles Darwin is referenced frequently throughout *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, for Charles Smithson is a learned aristocratic male brought up in the tradition of reason and rank. Darwin's theories, popularly summed up in the phrase "survival of the fittest" is also applicable to the social world in which Charles exists.

Mr. Freeman, Ernestina's father, is a hard worker and self-made man. He has come into wealth through his own endeavors. He is emblematic of the rising middle class, of a new breed of species threatening the old class orders.

Charles is emblematic of the old class order, one that assumes the role one is born into. Charles knows he is on top of society, that he is supposedly a member of the dominant species which is why he is on top. Yet, despite his reason and his rank, Charles is not prepared for the manipulation of Sarah Woodruff. Sarah uses a veneer of melancholy to achieve her ends, preying on Charles and ultimately sleeping with him. Their relationship begins because Sarah encourages Charles to see her, who then falls for her. In the second and third endings, Sarah gets exactly what she wants—either a possible life with, or a life without Charles.

Hypocrisy

In an unabashed moment of truth, Sarah tells Mrs. Poulteney that all she has ever experienced from her is hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is a strong underlying theme consistent throughout the novel. It is prevalent in two major areas: religion and sex.



Mrs. Poulteney has a feeling she is dying. She is obsessed with doing good works so she might be offered salvation when she dies. A large part of salvation is forgiveness. Yet she shows no mercy or forgiveness toward Sarah. The other major hypocrisy consistent with Mrs. Poulteney's character is she is more interested in all public acts associated with religion –attending mass, for example –rather than actually carrying out the good deeds consistent with a Christian life, such as giving to the poor. When she does these things, it isn't out of the genuineness of a Christian heart, but rather out of dutiful obligation.

John Fowles, in chapter thirty-five, places his novel in historical context with respect to Victorian society and sexual appetites. He recounts how superficially, everything was proper and in order, yet below the surface, Victorian Englishmen participated in a dramatically sexual world of brothels, prostitution, and illicit affairs. The hypocrisy inherent in sexual behavior was evidenced by sexual deviancy, illustrated through Charles's affair, his visiting a brothel, and his soliciting a prostitute.

Style

Point of View

John Fowles writes *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in third person narration, making it very clear and very obvious that he is the narrator. He does this by referencing himself and inserting himself into the novel in a handful of places. He also shows up to manipulate events, such as when he turns back the clock fifteen minutes to illustrate a third possible ending.

John Fowles tells the story in third person narration because he speaks about how the novelist is like God. The writer can dream a world into being, but his characters ultimately can assume lives of their own. This is why Fowles narrates in the third person, rather than assumes first person narration for any one of his characters, for he cannot control them.

Setting

The setting of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is that of 1867 Victorian England. The majority of the novel takes place in the small seaside town of Lyme Regis, famous for its seawall and fossils. Setting the novel in Lyme Regis allows small town gossiping, high expectations, and a clear visibility not present in cities. Charles, for example, wishes at one point to be in the inconspicuous anonymity of the city, for there no one would know who he is or what he is up to.

Language and Meaning

Fowles tells the majority of his novel in rich, decorous English and sophisticated language, owing to the traditions of the Victorian Era. He does this because of his own education, and because it helps to contextualize the novel to make the reader believe the characters were written in 1867, and not 1969.

Structure

The novel is divided into sixty-one chapters arranged chronologically except for two instances. In the first, Fowles will use a chapter to backtrack and explain something that has happened. In the second, Fowles interjects himself into the novel and either changes things or delivers personal asides to the reader. This makes it seem as if Fowles is telling a story to someone in person, rather than writing one to be read.



Quotes

Mrs. Poulteney believed in a God that had never existed; and Sarah knew a God that did. (Chapter 9)

...the novelist stands next to God. (Chapter 13)

...I fear the country would be full of outcasts.” “It is.” “Now come, that’s absurd.”
“Outcasts who are afraid to seem so. (Chapter 21)

You shall stand in sunlight –and smile at your own past sorrows. (Chapter 21)

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 for only an hour or two. (Chapter 35)

They were certainly preoccupied by love, and devoted far more of their arts to it than we do ours. (Chapter 35)

... we are all poets, though not many of us write poetry... (Chapter 45)

He remembered Varguennes; sin was to meet in privacy. (Chapter 46)

Though this may seem like a leap into atheism, it was no so; it did not diminish Christ in Charles’s eyes. Rather, it made Him come alive, it uncrucified Him... (Chapter 48)

And if you do not leave here within the hour I shall be back with the largest horsewhip I can find. (Chapter 53)

He had come to raise her from her penury, from some crabbed post in a crabbed house. In full armor, ready to slay the dragon –and now the damsel had broken all the rules. (Chapter 60)

It seems –though unusual in an instrument from the bench of the greatest of watchmakers –that he was running a quarter of an hour fast. (Chapter 61)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Compare and contrast the characters of Sarah Woodruff and Ernestina Freeman; and the characters of Charles Smithson and Mr. Freeman. In what ways are these pairs of characters similar? How do they differ? How do they fit into the grand scheme of Victorian culture?

Topic 2

Explain social Darwinism. How does it fit into the plot of John Fowles's novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*? Explain which characters are supposed to be the stronger social actors, and why; and which characters are supposed to be the weaker social actors, and why. Which of the characters ultimately is the fittest?

Topic 3

Discuss Victorian society as portrayed in the novel. What words describe Victorian England, and why? What relevant historical context for Victorian England does John Fowles provide? Why is this important given the plot of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*?

Topic 4

Discuss the theme of hypocrisy prevalent in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. What are illustrations of religious hypocrisy? What are illustrations of sexual hypocrisy? Which characters are hypocrites, and why? Which characters are not hypocrites, and why?

Topic 5

Why does Fowles continually interrupt his story to deliver asides to the reader? Why does Fowles incorporate three possible endings into his story?

Topic 6

Is the character of Sarah Woodruff truly manipulative, or are her intentions pure? Why? If her intentions are manipulative and self-serving, can she be forgiven? Why or why not? If her intentions are truly pure, do the circumstances surrounding those intentions – i.e., Charles's sexual union with her and his breaking of his marriage contract – make them less pure? Why or why not?