



Sample essay 1

Explore Fowles's construction of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and his presentation of Charles and Sarah in relation to Postmodern ideas concerning freedom.

Grade A answer

Postmodernism is to some extent a reaction to scientific and allegedly 'objective' efforts to explain reality. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* Fowles nudges his readers towards building their own version of reality through the use of devices that subvert the 'grand narratives' of Victorian fiction. By constantly reminding us of the fictional nature of his characters and by inserting several juddering anachronistic or plot-based 'anomalies' and by the use of frequent parentheses on the construction of his fiction and the role of the novelist, Fowles effectively intrudes into his own text, even appearing as a character several times. Added to these devices borrowed from metafiction his highly unusual narrative technique of presenting three 'endings' to his novel certainly make it possible for *The French Lieutenant's Woman* to be classified as a Postmodernist text.

Fowles juggles with three distinct narrative voices in the novel: a seemingly omniscient narrator akin to a real Victorian novelist; an intrusive but clubbable twentieth century storyteller conversing with his readers as if they were his intimate friends and a voyeur-figure sometimes reminiscent of 'a successful lay preacher' or a 'butler' as in Chapter 55 or as the foppish impresario of Chapter 61, who observes the characters and events with a mixture of concern and disdainful amusement. The novel is therefore frequently ambiguous, lending itself to a multiplicity of interpretations. In this sense *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is the classic Postmodern text.

Up to Chapter 13's digression, Fowles's readers have been allowed to consider that they have been reading a conventional Victorian narrative to a certain extent. However, Fowles's repetition of 'perhaps' encourages his readers to establish alternative interpretations to his fiction. When Fowles teases that 'perhaps I live now in one of



the houses I have brought into the fiction' (he does: he lived in the dairy described in Chapter 12 when writing the novel) — he humorously blurs the standing of the novelist with his fictional characters, hinting that 'perhaps' the novelist is an 'illusion' and that therefore beyond that the novel is also illusory. When Fowles suggests that 'perhaps Charles is myself disguised' (in a way he is: Fowles, like Charles, went fossil hunting in the Undercliff) — he warns his readers to be wary of the playful, 'wicked' novelist and advises them not to place absolute faith on a 'Maker' who 'may not know all, yet...tries to pretend he does.' When Fowles suggests that writing a novel is 'perhaps only a game,' he refers to the manipulative power of the novelist to win over readers by maintaining an illusion of reality. Chapter 13's epigraph from Tennyson's 'Maud' (1855) effectively reveals why Fowles undermines the novel's 'univocal' voice; 'the drift of the maker is dark'. The novelist's motives are devious and hidden; hence Fowles encourages his readers to look beneath the shimmering surface of the text to see what lies hidden. Fowles's ambiguous repetition of 'I do not know' also tinkers with his readers' trust: is he deliberately withholding information? Or is he encouraging readers to think independently? By questioning the authenticity of the narrative voice, Fowles is provoking his readers to question the novelist — inviting them into the sphere of the Postmodernist deconstruction of texts.

Fowles also ruptures the illusion that what we are reading is reality when he buttonholes us, taking us to one side and giving his thoughts on the changing role of the novelist in fiction. Through these initially irritating but eventually amusing asides (I speak for myself), he disrupts the illusion of reality by commenting on the structure of his own work: 'I am overdoing the exclamation marks.' He also injects what we suppose to be his own personal opinions; 'You may think...you must not think' and he draws our attention to the artificiality of fiction that 'pretends to conform to reality'. In Chapter 13, Fowles compares the act of the novelist from the Victorian era to the modern day. He proclaims that novelists 'are no longer...omniscient and decreeing' as their authority has diluted over time with Postmodernist beliefs that one is incapable of holding all the knowledge in the world, and that certainty and 'fixed plans' will change 'for different reasons' depending on circumstances and 'hazard'. After all, the 'world is an organism not a machine' and therefore any 'genuinely created world must be independent of its creator' — individuals must reach their own understanding of the nature of reality to prevent a 'dead world'. The metaphor of evolution is therefore a brilliantly chosen one: Charles is a 'poor living fossil' and if he is not to become extinct under the intrusion of the much more adaptable Bella Tomkins into his environment he must adapt. Until he adapts into a sufficiently precise evolutionary model to enable him to fit into his new surroundings he is 'marooned like an ammonite in an ever-receding pool.' Change requires choice, an aspect of Free Will; therefore Fowles insists that the novelist's 'first principle' is 'not authority' — not overarching power, knowledge or experience — but the 'freedom that allows other freedoms to exist'. This existential freedom is explored through Fowles's presentation of character, where both major characters represent various points on the



evolutionary-existentialist journey towards Freedom: Sarah has already become partially free of stifling Victorian convention when we see her for the first 'unforgettable' time on the Cobb in Chapter 1 but Charles is a slave to Duty until at least Chapter 48 and it could be argued that he is still following his own newly-defined notions of Duty as late as Chapter 61. In Postmodern narrative there is never the easy, clear-cut definitive solution.

Sarah Woodruff's path to full existential freedom is in my opinion the novel's major theme. Through the way he constructs her character, Fowles explores the freedom of the novelist, his characters and his readers simultaneously. Contrary to a 'short sighted' Ernestina, Fowles presents Sarah as 'a figure more from myth, than any proper fragment of the petty provincial day' — a surreal character due to her radical difference in appearance and attitude. Fowles describes Sarah ambivalently to match her enigmatic quality and at times objectifies her with the pronoun 'it' to highlight that her humanity is not easily distinguished and that her personality is vague — whether she is viewed from afar or close by. Despite Fowles's comparison of Sarah to a 'nymph', a 'lance', a 'dark movement', a 'wild animal', a 'sphinx', a 'siren' and a 'ghost' — her identity remains unclear as readers are left to decide their view of her independently. Her 'unmoved' stare that 'aimed like a rifle at the farthest horizon', her 'unforgettable...tragic face' with 'no artifice...no hypocrisy, no hysteria [and] no mask' and the 'suppressed intensity' of her 'exophthalmic dark-brown eyes' that conveyed 'a determination to be what she was' all reveal her elusive and mysterious appearance fittingly. Her 'foreign' quality 'bewilders' Charles, and the distant 'black' figure 'haunted' Fowles in his dreams: in an interview he revealed that she had 'no face, no particular degree of sexuality. But she was Victorian; and since I always saw her in the same static long shot, with her back turned, she represented a reproach on the Victorian Age. An outcast. I didn't know her crime, but I wished to protect her. That is, I began to fall in love with her. Or with her stance. I didn't know which.' Falling in love with your own heroine is not quite Postmodern! Hardy did it with Tess.

Sarah is constructed with Postmodernism in mind: she is emblematic of Fowles's philosophy of freedom in the way she deliberately dismantles what she was made by the circumstances of her birth and upbringing and reconstructs herself to stand outside the stifling conformity of conventional Victorian society. The ways that Sarah seeks existentialist freedom parallel the ways Fowles seeks fictional freedom by standing outside and exploiting the traditional conventions of Victorian literature. When Sarah tells Charles that she 'cannot explain' herself and that her behaviour 'is not to be explained', Sarah echoes Fowles's Postmodern belief that not all truths can be explained rationally.

The impossibility of knowing all truths is conveyed through the different endings Fowles offers. In Chapter 44, the false ending serves to highlight the absurdity of a closure, and also the danger of conforming — and of doing 'the moral, the decent, the correct thing' at the expense of 'possibilities and freedom'. In the dual ending of Chapters 60 and 61,



the 'impresario' figure adjusts his 'Breguet' watch to make a 'small adjustment to the time' in order to allow an alternative ending. The penultimate ending is a passionate, yet cloying and rather unbelievable closure of a typical Victorian romance as Sarah and Charles unite 'with a mute vehemence'.

The final ending of Chapter 61 can be interpreted as pessimistic, yet a more realistic analysis is that it does not so much represent an unhappy ending to a doomed love affair as much as promising a new 'opening' for Charles as he continues his struggle to evolve into his own existentially free space unencumbered by his former self. Sarah is unwilling to give up her individuality, and Charles is unprepared to accept her again after the 'injury [she] planted...in [his] breast'. Charles is ready to 'return to America' and leave behind 'thirty-four years of struggling upwards — all in vain, in vain, in vain'. The repetition of 'in vain' creates a bleak atmosphere where Charles regrets his late realisation of the futility of his materialistic assets and titles. In exchange for a 'baby's helplessness' that would cleanse his hypocrisy and a 'black avalanche' that would fertilise his soil for survival, Charles chooses to abandon 'all height' — his ambition, title and life that he had built in England. The reason for his departure is ambiguous — whether to heal his heart, lead a better life in America or escape from Victorian hypocrisy and conventions is left fittingly uncertain — echoing the Postmodernist's stance that there is no stability in truth. It is also with this dual ending that Fowles once again forces his readers to recognise his novel as a work of fiction. However, Postmodernist readers are more likely to favour Chapter 61, as it offers no definite sense of closure.

The French Lieutenant's Woman is therefore a decidedly Postmodern text in that Fowles eschews all ideas of 'inexorably fixed' certainty. In the last chapter, the river's flow is symbolic of the instability of life, where 'high tides [of the] estranging sea' are the unpredictable events in its future course. Instead of pursuing the certainty of knowledge, Fowles uses his enigmatic but beautifully human characters and ambiguous narratives to explore the notion that the only authentic freedoms are based on the choices we make for ourselves.

Word count: 1775

Bibliography

Time Magazine Review; *Imminent Victorians* (Friday 7 November, 1969).

Metafiction by Patricia Waugh.

Exploring Postmodernism by Matei Calinescu and Douwe Fokkema.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postmodern_literature

<http://www.jstor.org/pss/1208259>



Examiner's comments

This is an outstanding essay. For AO1 the candidate demonstrates an excellent command of English. Her command of her subject matter is complete and at times breathtaking. The terminology is always highly appropriate and is used to support the candidate's exceptionally well-informed interpretations. To understand Postmodernism so completely and to tie it so intelligently and persuasively to the novel is a tour-de-force achievement. Analysis of language (AO2) utilises at least fifty direct quotations in a succinct, integrated manner, never interrupting the candidate's smooth writing style. The candidate's abilities to contextualise the novel are exemplary: Existentialism and evolution are both here, as is an excellent integrated understanding of Victorian notions of duty and obligation. Beyond all, the candidate shows complete and mature understanding of how Fowles's Postmodern structuring of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* links in to ideas concerning freedom. This essay would be awarded full marks at A-level and is therefore the highest grade A.