

International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme- Extended Essay

Representation of Social Pressure in the Victorian Era for the Different Genders in “The French Lieutenant’s Woman”

RESEARCH QUESTION: To what extent is the portrayal of social expectations for men and women in the Victorian Era accurate in the novel “The French Lieutenant’s Woman” by John Fowles?

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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, society has always held different expectations from men and women. Whether it be the very beginning of time, back when it was not even words that were used to communicate, the mighty and muscular men of the pack were expected to hunt, build and provide for the family whereas women were prized for their fertility and cared solely for the upbringing of the many children she bore; or in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when men went off to war to use the same might to conquer land or protect their own whilst women were tasked with the household tasks such as cooking for the family, knitting and sewing for their husbands and kids. Nowadays, as the feminism ideology spreads, a brighter light and hope for a more equal future can be seen. But as for the times in history where feminism appeared as a sin, men and women were given very different roles in society and were always seen in a different light. A notable time period where this situation was most evident is the time poverty and diseases ran wild: The Victorian Era.

The novel “The French Lieutenant’s Women” written by John Fowles, is set in the Victorian Era, in 1867, even though it was published in 1969. It is told by a “narrator” who is the writer himself. It deals with themes such as marriage, gender, affairs, love and shame and it is a book that is able to help to understand more about the gender roles and relationship dynamics in the Victorian Era. It is a historical romance story that includes a lot of ironic comments about the characters and events by the narrator. The main characters are Charles Smithson, who is a wealthy gentleman and an amateur naturalist, Ernestina Freeman, Charles’s fiancée who is also the daughter of an influential man, and Sarah Woodruff, an independent woman who was a former governess but fell from grace after her last love story went awry. The novel explores how an average heterosexual relationship occurs and progresses and what Victorian society expects from the average man and woman.

This essay dives into how the expectation from the characters has shaped the characters' personalities and their attitudes. As noted before, the novel was written approximately 100 years after when it is set. As expected, there are some historical differences between the mind-sets and behaviours of the characters and the rest of the society's expectation towards the characters. Considering the fact that the writer is a man, there are notable differences between how a woman in the 19<sup>th</sup> century may think versus how Fowles depicted how they may have thought, which causes a rift in the accuracy in the portrayal of the different expectations placed upon women and how it might have made them feel. Nonetheless, the novel is still an available source to gain insight on the topic and yet another way to compare the differences between how the truth appeared to men in the 60s about sexism in the earlier times and how accurate the research and portrayal was.

#### VICTORIAN MEN AND WOMEN ON SOCIAL NORMS

Getting married and participating in their husbands' interests and businesses was the primary responsibility of women in Victorian culture. Unless they were from an upper class family, they would study domestic chores like sewing, cooking, cleaning, and washing before getting married. The only exception to this situation was if they were wealthy, because this meant that they did not always have to learn how to do these tasks because their maids primarily took care of the household chores which allowed the women more freedom on how to manage their time, but they were still many factors limiting their independence from the men in their lives. Usually, since it was a male-dominated world, women were often not permitted to go to school or learn anything outside of the house. Considering this, it is possible to comment that a woman's wealth determined little, as one of the most fundamental rights that are given to people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which is education, was limited to men and men only. (UKEssays)

When it comes to how the men of the Victorian era lived, it is possible to see a drastic difference between the two genders. The English writer John Ruskin describes the men of the

Victorian era this way: *“The man’s power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation, and invention; his energy for adventure war, and for conquest...”* (John Ruskin). From the extract given from a rather popular book in the late 1800s, the overall mind-set of the society seems to be in favour of the fact that men were supposed to be the sole providers of their families and they were tasked with the welfare of all the women in their lives, whether it be their physical wellness or their financial needs. While this puts a lot of pressure onto them, it also allows them to have a presence in social life, which Victorian women often were not even considered to ever be a part of. So in short, being a man in Victorian society came with as many responsibilities as the power given to them in society. They had the power to speak for the women in the society, get a good education, and most importantly vote, which women were not able to do until late 1900s. (Felicia Appell)

In the novel, the characters’ social statuses are one of the most valuable aspects of their characters as their status draws the line between what they can and cannot do, and what is expected from them in society. The protagonist, Charles Smithson, who is a wealthy independent man is certainly a traditionalist, though he would want to believe otherwise. He follows Darwin and is fascinated in palaeontology. He depicts the trendy young man of his time, rebelling against what he perceives to be the stuffiness of his culture but never opposing "too much." Him being a true traditionalist, he is in the search of a suitable wife to provide for and spend the rest of his life with. (Fowles, 10-15) This much, as portrayed in the novel is consistent with what is known to be expected from a Victorian man. Darwinism was quite looked down upon in the 1800s, and many called him a fraud, but Charles is in favour of these revolutionary thoughts. This proves that Charles is in reality not fond of being called a traditionalist, but his views on social rules in the beginning of the novel show that he has most of the qualities to prove he is one.

The primary female characters of the novel are Ernestina Freeman and Sarah Woodruff. Ernestina is introduced at the very beginning of the novel as Charles's fiancée. She comes from a wealthy family, but it is revealed that she is still far from independent and getting married to a powerful man is the sole way to have a firm standing in the strict social circles of the Victorian era. (Fowles, 25-29) Sarah, who was working as a maid at the time she was introduced is doing significantly worse than Ernestina financial-wise, yet the case society tries to fit them into is very similar. (Fowles. 22-23) Sarah, who is more of an independent figure still tries to seduce Charles in hopes that he will become impressed by her and perhaps take her hand in marriage, proving that wealthy or not, whichever mindset they may have, women of the Victorian era needed to become a man's bride to survive in a man's world. This shows to the reader that Fowles did indeed portray Victorian women and the social rules and expectations placed onto them correctly.

#### STATUS IN THE VICTORIAN ERA

Victorian society was hierarchically structured. Gender and class were the two main pillars of Victorian society, even if race, religion, location, and profession were all significant factors in one's status and identity. According to the sexual double standard, gender was thought to be biologically based and to control almost every aspect of a person's potential and character. The "doctrine of different realms" (Aniqah Khan) served as the foundation for Victorian gender ideology. According to this, men and women were created for separate purposes and have different needs.

Generally, women in the Victorian Era, no matter their social class, were thought to be weak and their tasks were divided into two main parts, that are the tasks of unmarried women and the tasks that followed after they got married. Unmarried women tended to have a lot more freedom compared to married women, and most of their lives revolved around spending time doing crafts with other unmarried women of their corresponding status. Aristocratic and upper-

class women in particular were viewed as the weakest, most helpless people in society and they tended to always be surrounded by a flurry of servants and maids to do even the simplest tasks for them. Women in the lower ranks of society were usually tasked with being one of the said maids for a wealthier man or woman and they had too little chances to get educated or improve which resulted in the sharp social barrier between the different classes becoming almost impossible to change (British Literature Wiki). Women were seen as physically weak compared to men, and their primary purpose in life was to provide “heirs” for the family, specifically, the men of the family.

When it comes to how the Victorian men were viewed by the society around them, most men had very specific expectations towards women who they deemed their right. In Charles Petrie’s article, “Victorian Women Expected to be Idle and Ignorant,” he explains exactly what the Victorian man was looking for:

Innocence was what he demanded from the girls of his class, and they must not only be innocent but also give the outward impression of being innocent. White muslin, typical of virginal purity, clothes many a heroine, with delicate shades of blue and pink next in popularity. The stamp of masculine approval was placed upon ignorance of the world, meekness, lack of opinions, general helplessness and weakness; in short, recognition of female inferiority to the male (Petrie 184).

Whilst men had the all-consuming right to demand exactly what they wished for in women, they also experienced a fair share of setbacks and difficulties on their part. For example, men of the Victorian Era were often not allowed to possess qualities that are often seen as feminine, as masculinity was seen as strength and men were tasked with being the strong, unbreakable members of society. Many men refrained from showing a lot of emotion, as the

necessity to “be strong and keep a woman and family safe in a home and providing comfort showed success for the male sex.” (Steinbach, S)

To analyse the writer’s depiction of social status in the novel, it is truly important to once again note the ways the personalities of different characters are perceived in the novel. Sarah Woodruff is a good example to determine whether the portrayal of women’s social status in the story is accurate or not. She used to be a governess with great power when she fell for a French lieutenant who came to her as an injured war survivor on a ship. She knew she liked him, and before long she was rumoured to have gotten intimate with him. She, however, was not aware that the French Lieutenant was married to another woman. When people found out, she was shamed and stripped of her status and was cast aside as a mere maid. She lost everything she had and became a more reserved, meek woman. (Fowles, 3-4) In the Victorian Era, women had four main classes they were divided into which are the gentry, the middle class, the upper working class, and the lower working class. It is deemed as a high insult if a woman is to be considered a different class than she is, and a woman must always stay in the same class. (UKEssays) Sarah was an upper-class woman; however, she lost her pride and status when she unknowingly got into a relationship with a married man. Later on, it is revealed that Sarah never actually had sexual intercourse with the lieutenant, however, with how closed minded and set in their ways the others in the society were, she knew they would never actually believe her and chose to not do anything against the rumours and went down silently, on her own terms. This shows us how the social oppression has crept into everyone’s minds and being shamed unreasonably is known to be accepted by the victims without even trying to express themselves. Sarah is expected to appear grateful to Mrs Poulteney for taking her in as well: “

‘ “I am satisfied that you are in a state of repentance. Indeed I cannot believe that you should be anything else in your present circumstances.”

Sarah took her cue. “I am grateful to you, ma’am.”



“I am not concerned with your gratitude to me. There is One Above who has a prior claim.”

The girl murmured, “How should I not know it?” (Fowles, 27).

Sarah losing her status as a governess and becoming a maid was such an unbelievable situation when viewed by the others in society. How much the relationship harmed Sarah in many ways is an indicator of how shamefully the society viewed it and how quick they were to shift the entirety of the blame onto her. This proves the existence of the sexual double standard surrounding Victorian women, and how society would not hesitate to view her, a higher-class woman, in a shameful light for something she did not willingly do.

On the lieutenant’s part, his exact whereabouts and status after his “affair” with Sarah were not revealed, however none of the characters in the novel who are part of the Victorian society ever thought to think as low of him whereas Sarah was reduced to a common housemaid and often referred to as the property of the lieutenant and due to the affair she was linked with prostitution throughout the novel many different times, and no one even bothered to listen to Sarah’s side of the story. (Fowles, 8-9) Another point of view that proves to be slightly more controversial based on the standards of the Victorian Era is the way Charles is perceived throughout the timeline of the affair. Often, he feels great shame about the manner he handled the situation with Sarah and is perceived in a negative light by those around him as well. The great disappointment Tina feels proves as such. “She stared fiercely at him. “Did you think I should pardon you?” He mutely shook his head. “My parents, my friends— what am I to tell them? That Mr. Charles Smithson has decided after all that his mistress is more important than his honor, his promise, his ...” (Fowles, 163) This extract indicates that the loss of status of Charles following the affair is much different than the lieutenant.

## RELATIONSHIPS AND MARRIAGE

As aforementioned, the Victorian Era was considered to be a true “man’s world” and a woman’s independency was practically non-existent. To survive in such an environment, a woman had to charm a befitting suitor to be provided for and live more comfortably for the rest of her life. Nonetheless, the story would be far from over in that scenario. During the courting period and after the marriage, men and women would both be tasked with numerous responsibilities and as both parties would be trying to charm each other, they would also have to consider what is expected from them as a couple by the public as well. (Cambridge University Press) (The Saylor Foundation)

Women were forced to prepare for marriage because of the expectations men had of them, and they had very little independence. The ideal Victorian lady that society intended women to be underwent pressure from men's expectations. The future of the women depended on how well the ladies prepared for what was ahead in their life. A woman would be forced to remain single if she failed to live up to the expectations of the Victorian male. (Steven Marcus)

Similarly, women and the rest of society had preconceptions about the suitable Victorian bachelor. Because their peers critiqued their success, men were victims of social stigma. Victorian men had to strive for respect not only among their own gender, but also among women. If they were not married, it signified that they were not wholly manly because they were unable to raise a family. Raising a family was regarded as evidence of true male fulfilment. (Sharon Marcus)

When analysing the novel, it is abundantly obvious that Ernestina and Charles were constantly under immense pressure to maintain a flawless relationship. Ernestina appraised Charles' riches and strength on numerous occasions, and she often fantasized about having a large family for whom Charles would be the main provider. In this regard, Ernestina is a great

illustration of a conventional Victorian lady. However, Charles was more interested in women who could think outside the box and were not afraid to defend and rely on themselves, which is a far cry from what is expected of a classic Victorian guy. In this sense, Charles is not a good approximation of a Victorian suitor. A conversation between Charles and his uncle proves as such: “I never found the right woman.”

“Nonsense. You never looked for her.”

“Indeed I did. When I was your age ...”

“You lived for your hounds and the partridge season.”

The old fellow would stare gloomily at his claret. He did not really regret having no wife; but he bitterly lacked not having children to buy ponies and guns for. He saw his way of life sinking without trace. (Fowles, 8)

According to Fowles, who is also the narrator, this is done on purpose, as the novel's main two love interests are initially portrayed as a hopeless romantic and a mysterious woman who later grow in character and complexity. While this is a good method for making a protagonist stand out and give depth to them, the fact of the matter remains that Charles is not a realistic portrayal of a classic Victorian man set to marry a woman and establish a family of his own in the endings excluding the first one where he chooses to never see Sarah again and marries Ernestina. The backlash he faces in the other endings, however, is rather accurate after he has to face dire consequences when Ernestina's family finds out about his affair with Sarah in one of the endings. He must write a letter personally apologizing to everyone whom he may have inconvenienced along with an admission of guilt (Fowles, 176-177) and has to completely restart his life. This may seem harsh at first glance, but when considered just how much is expected of an average Victorian male, it is unsurprising.

## ECONOMIC OPPRESSION AND CAREER BASED ON GENDER

In the Victorian Era, all men needed to work regardless of their social status. In short, men were thought to have been made for working. They often worked in unsanitary, risky conditions but they were always expected to work nonetheless. On the contrary, the community had harsh views on women who were compelled to labour outside of their homes. The males in the house that did not make enough money to sustain their families, therefore many women had to work to support their families. Women were frequently harassed and not made to feel accepted when they arrived at the workplace. Due to this, these women employees were not socially accepted or at work (outside of their family). In light of the fact that practically every single job other than seamstress and housemaid was tailored for men, this left no other choice for some Victorian women, and they had to go with the only job that would help them gain enough money quickly, prostitution. Because of the wide scaled economic crisis in the Victorian era, prostitution was unbelievably common. The customary engagement rites that would have been anticipated in polite society could not be observed by working class families, and women were frequently born into precarious conditions to which they were obliged to adapt in order to live. This was extremely unsafe; however, most women often chose not to labour alongside members of the opposite sex. Considering the appalling sexism they faced in their day-to-day life on the clock, this was very common.

After Sarah's fall from grace, she must quit her job as a governess and begin working as a low-class maid. During the scenes where she is working, she is constantly being looked down upon, even by her own employer. (Fowles, 27) She is continuously ridiculed, heckled and even occasionally threatened. This instance is also Fowles' way of pointing out the ridiculousness of the standards that were imposed onto women, disregarding the difficulty of the situation they were in. The part that helps portray the hopelessness of her situation is that she cannot do anything to defend herself or quit her job, because she needs to fend for herself

somehow. Many are very surprised that she had not resorted to prostitution, and even more people accuse her of already partaking in sexual relations in return for money but is hiding it to not receive further backlash. The peer pressure of being a working woman in the Victorian era is depicted rather accurately with the struggles Sarah faces, and the unique personality she dons to cope with the extraordinary situation she is in also fits into the storyline as a puzzle piece fits into the whole puzzle. Much like Sarah, an educated guess would be that all men in the story were working to provide for their families. While it is mentioned a few times that Ernestina's father and Charles both indeed do have jobs, Fowles never goes into actual detail about the working condition of men, or actually describes the pressure they were under to work and provide for their family. While this does not seem very critical for upper class men such as them, more details about the working conditions of middle- and lower-class Victorian males was needed to perform a further analysis on whether it was accurate or not.

## CONCLUSION

This paper intends to analyse the accuracy of the portrayal of what was overall expected of the male and female genders in an average Victorian society.

The average social norms men and women faced in Victorian society was that women had to take care of their families and be good housewives and men had to provide for and protect the family. There were very prominent social classes, and overall, the backbone of the society was a very strict patriarchy. The author, John Fowles, was indeed successful in representing most aspects of the Victorian era in the novel, however this was not the main purpose of writing the novel. It's evident that the goal is to mock society's ludicrous standards and conventions rather than accurately duplicate and portray them. It's also possible that the areas where he fell short in representing the Victorian era were caused by the fact that Fowles himself did not live in the era. What he had for study was merely second-hand research, and he lacked the great variety of dependable materials that authors of the twenty-first century have.

Overall, the French Lieutenant's Woman depicts gender roles in the Victorian era rather accurately. It is most likely not a completely credible source of information for prolonged research, but it is still a semi accurate and mostly dependable means to acquire insight into a previous era.

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