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The Aristos in John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

Yoshiharu Iwayama

The main theme in John Fowles' earlier novels is his major characters' search for a self-awareness in becoming "the Aristos,"[1] an ancient Greek term which Fowles uses to refer to the most fully self-realized men. His philosophy revolves around two important concepts: the conflict of the few and the many within the self, and the role of mystery in the polar view of life. The *aristos* knows that he himself shares the traits both of the few and of the many, and he carefully guards against being dominated completely by either identity. Although mystery may shock and dismay the individual, it is necessary to man as a seeker of the vision of the Aristos. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman,* his third novel, Fowles continues to demonstrate his concern with the conflict of the few and the many within the self and the necessary existence of mystery.

Setting the novel in the nineteenth-century Victorian era, Fowles shows two characters who are deeply trapped in the few-many consciousness. Charles Smithson, the upper class London gentlman, and his fiancée Ernestina Freeman, the daughter of a rising upper-middle class businessman, share many Victorian upper class traits; thus, although they can communicate with each other, they cannot grow together. Because of his conformity to social convention, Charles has been resisting his own evolution; he has been giving himself up to extinction, failing to extricate himself from the entrapment of the few-many consciousness that would petrify his freedom and therefore his existence. Charles needs someone bigger than himself or Ernestina. This is Sarah Woodruff. Sarah is born in the lower class

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but possessing everything that Charles requires. Her freedom and intelligence are what he has never experienced in his relationships with other Victorian women. By the end of the novel, he has acquired these characteristics from Sarah and, like her, he is no longer controlled by his few-many consciousness.

Mystery has great influence on Charles' growth. Created by Sarah, it breaks his conformity and leads him into acceptance of the limitations that man cannot cope with mystery. It thus becomes a dynamic force which enables Charles to come out of the hypocrisy of his Victorian conventions and to accept the conditions of the outsider, a necessary act which builds his real strength, an inner awareness. By the end of the novel Charles corrects his shortcomings, appreciates more honest relationships and acts wisely. Sarah's mystery, indeed, helps Charles evolve toward the *aristos*.

1

The pattern of events in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is much like that of the previous two novels: the protagonists are suddenly put into tensional worlds which are filled with mystery, and undergo experiences which may alter their previous beliefs. Charles, the thirty-two-year-old, Cambridge-educated heir to a baronetcy, is engaged to Ernestina, the twenty-one-year-old daughter of a London businessman. While visiting Earnestina and her aunt Mrs. Tranter in Lyme Regis, Charles meets the mysterious Sarah, a working-class girl known as "the French Lieutenant's Woman" by the town's people because of her supposed affair with a French naval officer who convalesced in Lyme Regis after the wreck of his ship. Sarah had been left alone by the death of her father, a tenant farmer driven mad by thwarted ambition, then isolated because of her affair with French Lieutenant Varguennes. She has been hired by the wealthy Mrs. Poulteney who has forbidden her to visit an undercliff, a place of ill repute

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among the more pious of the town. While Ernestina remains in her room in the house of her Aunt Tranter and his servant Sam tries to win Mrs. Tranter's young maid, Mary's heart, Charles spends most of his time in search of the petrified sea urchin in the undercliff. In so doing, he discovers Sarah silently sleeping on the cliffs—not a fossil, but a new species for his search. She awakens and confronts Charles in surprise, and, with a formal apology, he leaves her alone.

Then Charles meets Sarah often in the undercliff and succumbs more and more to the charms of the enigmatic woman who has the hidden purpose to make him evolve. Sarah tells Charles about her miserable history and also confesses to him the broken affair with Varguennes.

Later, Charles meets his wealthy old Uncle Robert who announces his own approaching marriage which will deprive Charles of his expectation of inheriting the family estate and the baronetcy. He then receives a note from Sarah who wants to meet him once more in a barn in the undercliff; she had gone there alone after having been dismissed by Mrs. Poulteney for having been seen passing the undercliff after her previous meeting with Charles. Charles consults with Dr. Grogan, the local bachelor physician, about Sarah's request. Grogan advises Charles not to meet Sarah any more and Charles agrees with him. But Charles soon changes his mind and meets Sarah in the barn. He is dismayed when Sam and Mary, who also use the undercliff for their secret meetings, appear. Both Sam and Mary swear that they will keep the secret, even though they will disclose it later to Mrs. Tranter. Charles parts with Sarah, having given her money to live on. She goes to Exeter and takes rooms in the Endicott Family Hotel.

Charles then makes a decision to see Sarah at Exeter. He embraces and kisses her passionately. But after making love he discovers a blood stain on his shirttail which reveals that she had not given herself to Varguennes. Sarah admits that she had lied to him, tells him that she cannot marry him, and sends him away. Alone and

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puzzled, Charles enters a church and has an epiphany in which he begins to see his Victorian traits as the cause of his failure to form a true relationship with Sarah. He resolves to go back and marry Sarah but does not go back to her directly. Instead, he writes a letter to her; but to complicate matters, Sam opens the letter and decides not to deliver it to Sarah. Unaware of Sam's betrayal Charles breaks his engagement to Ernestina and goes back to see Sarah at the hotel, but she is gone. Sam also deserts him before his treachery is discovered. Charles makes a desperate, futile effort to find Sarah and finds himself alone and alienated from his last human tie.

After narrowly escaping the legal revenge of the Freeman family, Charles travels in Europe and America, while his solicitors search for Sarah.

Sam has now become a successful window dresser for the Freeman retail store, and his prosperity, fostered partly by his betrayal of Charles, has made him feel guilty enough to help Charles when his wife Mary chances to see Sarah enter a house. Sam sends an anonymous letter to Charles' lawyer, and Charles makes the long passage back from America.

Fowles devotes the last two chapters to the reunion of Sarah and Charles. Charles is surprised when he sees Sarah's change of dress into the style of the New Woman and is told that she is a secretary of the poet and artist, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. She tells him that she will never marry and resists his pleas that they be reunited. When he denounces her cruelty and turns to leave, she reveals their daughter, Lalage, who had been born from their brief union in the hotel. The three are reunited in a touching domestic scene, but Charles walks out of the house in order to let her live her own life freely

At first both Charles and Ernestina seem to be controlled by their few-many consciousnesses. They seem to conform in mind and action to their classes; they appear to be a perfect, respectable, Victorian couple performing the various functions expected by their classes.

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Because of this conformity, they are slow to change.

To begin with Charles, he is born in the aristocracy and seems to be deeply bounded by the upper class criteria. As a man of leisure, he likes foreign travel, superficial relationships and physical comfort. He is also naive about sexuality. His passion for social appearances makes him conventional. He equates personal responsibility with a false Victorian sense of duty and with doing the publicly correct thing. He is also an intellectual snob who is very much an adherent to his Cambridge education. In Fowles' earlier novels, an individual's snobbishness, egocentricity and conformity to class are often connected to his shortsighted view of reality. For Fowles, the individual should not limit his freedom to his class or to a particular idea but should be always alert and open-minded to adventurous circumstances, including mystery which might cause him uneasiness.

Fowles' portrayal of Ernestina also seems true to the Victorian higher class woman's mold and type. She is a bourgeois woman whose rich parents dote on her, filling all her superfluous needs. She is narcissistic and pleased with the way she can wear clothes to intimidate other women. She is like a doll, her behavior always within the view of the social eye, public and subject to censure if it does not conform to Victorian respectability. She seems to be without internal strength; her mind is childish, easily frustrated by anyone who offers her any conflict.

Fowles, in this way, seems to describe an overwhelming class-consciousness in Charles and Ernestina, but he does allow them some potential, especially to Charles. Charles doubts not only himself but Ernestina and his society as well. He is not lost totally in the old upper class.

Charles is not without his anxieties; he does not always enjoy the safety and conformity of his class. When he talks with Ernestina, he often feels uneasy. Because he is moving away from the Victorian stance, Charles becomes irritated by her superficiality. For him, her

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humor seems "unusually and unwelcomely artificial," and her face, "a little characterless, a little monotonous."[2] Increasingly, his coming marriage begins to represent the loss of his freedom and mere subjection to duty. He feels trapped by Ernestina's many-inspired self that wants to be someone she can never be, a member of the aristocracy. He becomes disgusted with his society: "he found English society too hidebound, English solemnity too solemn, English thought too moralistic, English religion too bigoted" (p.107). Charles wishes to be free and to experience something new. But although he is aware of what is wrong with his society, he lacks the courage to revolt against it.

Ernestina is also not completely lost in her class-consciousness. She does have an ability to see her faults. When Charles visits her to tell her of his intention to break off their engagement, she shows potential. She admits her ignorance and naivete and contends that she should become better and wishes to help him" (p.296). Her refusal to allow her father to prosecute Charles to the fullest extent is also a sign of her internal growth.

Although both Charles and Ernestina show potential, most of the time they try to conform to their few-many consciousnesses. Lacking anyone to lead her out of her limited consciousness, Ernestina fails to develop her potential. Charles finds Sarah who will fulfill his need for freedom and change. But the lesson he learns from her is unlike any he has ever experienced. By teaching him the mystery of human nature and the need for honest and simple relationships with others and by discouraging him from shaping life to scientific knowledges, Sarah leads him painfully toward the vision of the *aristos*.

2

Sarah is crucial to the novel in her role as creator of the mystery that becomes the essential force for Charles' growth. Sarah's mystery has no center. The more Charles learns about Sarah, the more intense

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the mystery of her and the sharper his dilemma become. At the end of the novel Charles almost comes to understand her mystery, but he no longer tries to conquer her mystery and lets it go. For he accepts by this time that lasting mystery is a necessary ingredient in his life. The narrator also supports this idea: "a planned world ...is a dead world" (p.81). For Fowles, a search for the inner awareness of the Aristos is endless; and mystery serves his protagonists as necessary stimuli to continue their search. Yet the protagonists' task is not an easy one. By choosing Sarah, for example, Charles gives up his place in society and accepts the condition of outsider which eventually furthers his self-knowledge.

In the undercliff, Sarah tells Charles that she has been living among people who are "crueler that the cruelest heathens, stupider than the stupidest animals" (p.116). That experience has taught her that life is without understanding or compassion, but unlike Ernestina she will not submit herself to class-consciousness. Sarah knows that life is not a matter of social taste or a means of overcoming her social inequality, but an inward vision and feeling, the seeing of things and people in themselves. In Victorian society she has no one to share such an outstanding self-awareness until she finds Charles. She chooses him to hear her past because her intuitive grasp of him indicates he will understand.

Sarah's first story is about her father's bankruptcy, his death in Dorchester Asylum and the inevitable, humiliating sale of their possessions. But the poverty and limitations of her social and economic position do not lead her toward the material possessions. Without parents, relatives or friends, Sarah has to struggle to exist freely. Her existential question, "Why am I born what I am?" (p.116) is a serious question which Charles has never asked. Confroned with her intelligence and the freedom of a new species, Charles feels insulted and defeated.

Her second story is about her broken affair with Varguennes who

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was shipwrecked and injured. Sarah tells Charles how she nursed him. She left her job and followed him to Weymouth at his promise of marriage. She then tells him that she deliberately gave herself to Varguennes with full awareness that he had no intention of marrying her.

This story expresses Sarah's need for freedom. She wants her affair known because only then can she prove she has freed herself from the living death in which Victorian society has entombed her. She emphasizes that she has freedom that others cannot understand: "No insult, no blame, can touch me. Because I have set myself beyond the pale. I am nothing. I am hardly human any more. I am the French Lieutenant's Whore" (p.142).

Meanwhile Charles is still a Victorian gentleman. Sarah's freedom terrifies him, since the Victorians "encouraged the mask, the safe distance; and this girl, behind her facade of humility forbade it" (p.119). Sarah wants him to throw off the social mask that he wears so well when he is with Ernestina. As long as he wears a mask, he cannot grow.

However, after Sarah's confession, Charles is put into serious tension. All of his previous complacencies come to an end. Charles, too, will face feelings similar to Sarah's various anxieties.

Charles is called to his uncle's estate where he learns that his uncle plans to marry, a widow young enough to produce an heir, an event that will reduce Charles' inheritance. He will now have less money than Ernestina, who taunts him when she hears the news. Charles wants sympathy, not rage, from graceless Ernestina, and when Charles returns to his room a note is waiting for him from Sarah, who wants to see him one more time. But he hesitates to go directly to meet Sarah in the undercliff; instead, he asks Dr. Grogan for assistance. Although he is a learned man, Dr. Grogan just dismmisses her as another hysterical young woman trying to trap an attractive man of a higher social position. Grogan concludes that he

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will make arrangements for Sarah to be placed in a private institution where her spiritual sickness can be properly cured, and Charles agrees.

However, he soon decides to break this agreement and go to see Sarah by himself before others reach her. At their last meeting in the undercliff, he embraces and kisses her for the first time. Yet he has not risen above the Victorian age: he violently pushes her aside in horror at what he has done to her. His horror increases when not Grogan but Sam and Mary appear. Charles immediately adapts the mask of the social superior even though he knows he sounds detestable. Sam, who sees Sarah standing behind Charles, is quickly silenced; Sarah's confession of love is ignored by Charles who worries about his position and reputation. He gives her money and advises her to leave Lyme.

Charles does not start to overcome his age until he himself reaches a state of despair as profound as Sarah's experience of nothingness. This point of despair comes when he meets Mr. Freeman who offers him a partnership, which would mean a complete surrender to Mr. Freeman's class. His uncle's marriage has forced Charles to the prospect of being the aristocrat marrying into bourgeois money, and his choice is to accept or deny his money-consciousness. In fact, he rejects this many-inspired trait. Like Sarah with her crushing experiences, Charles now has knowledge that his way of life is becoming extinct. In front of Freeman's store, he accepts his limitations for the first time:

> He would never be a Darwin or a Dickens, a great artist or scientist.... But he gained a queer sort of momentary self-respect in his nothingness, a sense that choosing to be nothing—to have nothing but prickles—was the last saving grace of gentleman; his last freedom, almost. (p.233)

The *aristos* is anti-possession; instead, through self-analysis, he

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adapts himself to undergo his psychological evolution. Sarah has come through such a period. Divorced from possession and through feelings of nothingness and loneliness, she has been preserving her free self. Here Charles also begins to see that his ultimate goal has nothing to do with social position, but with his inner self which must be educated and self-possessed.

Charles then progresses steadily throughout the last part of the novel. In the Endicott Family Hotel, Charles makes love with Sarah. The act, for him, is everything that is forbidden to the proper Victorian. He finally tries to strip off his mask—the hypocrisy of duty in the Victorian guise of avoiding reality—and starts a sincere relationship with Sarah.

However, his reaction is again Victorian when he notices blood on his shirttail. He feels horrified and guilty when he realizes he has seduced a virgin. Here his fears are again inspired by his few-consciousness, a belief that she is out to trap or ruin him. But she has not deceived him; she tells him, "There is one thing in which I have not deceived you. I love you... I think from the moment I saw you. In that, you were never deceived." But unable to see her deeper intention, he demands further explanation. She answers: "Do not ask me to explain what I have done. I cannot explain it. It is not to be explained" (p.279).

The truth of her story turns out to be another mystery. A great tension is now in Charles' mind. For him, Sarah is totally unattainable. This ultimate tension is not to be understood by Charles. Tensions are products of the mysteries by which the individual evolves. Charles, like Nicholas in *The Magus,* wants to go beyond the point where knowledge ends, but he must accepts the mystery.

After this scene, Charles finally makes a series of decisions, but everything goes against him. He first sends Sarah a brooch that she is to accept if she forgives him, but Sam, guided by his many-traits, decides not to deliver it. Instead, Sam and Mary together disclose

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Charles' affair with Sarah to Mrs. Tranter in order to obtain a position in Mr. Freeman's store. Second, after Charles breaks his engagement to Ernestina he belatedly goes back to the Endicott Family Hotel, only to find that Sarah has gone without leaving any message for him. Third, Mr. Freeman retaliates by bringing legal charges against Charles, making him sign a document in which he admits to his unethical, ungentlemanly conduct. Although Ernestina stops any further retaliation by her father, who wants to publish Charles' confession in *The Times*, the father's attitude here stresses the selfishness of few-inspired people who care only for the reputable public appearance of their class.

Charles is now disinherited, friendless, and cut off from the woman he loves most. He is now an outsider who, while private detectives search for Sarah, travels to Europe and America in a state of "nothingness, ultimate vacuity, a total purposelessness" (p.333).

In the last two chapters Fowles provides the last reunion of Charles and Sarah and dramatizes Charles' progress as he comes out of a state of nothingness and gains an existential awareness.

Sarah in the last meeting with Charles emerges with new strength. Dressed in the simple and natural style of the New Woman, she is now a career woman and assistant to the artist Gabriel Rossetti. She has mastered the loneliness that had previously tormented her; she enjoys her work. In his reunion with Sarah, Charles still thinks of the emotional anguish he has suffered during their separation.

Sarah then tells him that there is a woman whose appearance will be a better answer to his anger than her words. A small child, Lalage, is brought to him, and he is shocked when he soon discovers that Lalage is their child. But they are reunited. Charles wonders why she disappeared knowing of his disengagement from Ernestina, and why she carried their burden alone without telling him. Sarah answers his questions with her eyes full of tears: "It had to be so" (p.360). It is not important whether she had known about his disen-

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gagement or not; the important thing is that she knew she truly loved him the moment she gave herself to him and also knew he loved her. That brief togetherness has been giving her strength and faith to live without him.

Charles finally begins to grasp her true nature and the mystery that she has been sacrificing her life for the sake of his freedom, and also sacrificing her true feeling that she still loves him as much as he loves her. This inner strength is the essence of her whole personality. Sarah, in short, becomes a figure who is larger than the self-interest and few-many traits within herself.

Then Sarah turns down Charles' offer of marriage. Charles by this time can understand her intention that he should continue his search alone. She does not want to marry him since their union might stop his search for self-knowledge. Her rejection of Charles, again, affirms Fowles' principle that mystery is the source of progress. Charles accepts this principle and leaves her. His action at this last moment is brave. He has accepted the limitation that he cannot get everything. He is alone. His hope of reunion with Sarah is cracked, but she knows that he will again come out of his despair and that he will continue to walk toward the vision of the *aristos*.

Notes

1 In *The Aristos* (1964, revised edition, 1968), Fowles uses the form *aristos* to describe the concept of the most fully self-realized man. He uses the form Aristos to designate those people who have most nearly achieved that state.

2 John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (New York: New American Library; 1970), pp.12–3. Subsequent quotations refer to this edition.