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Victorian Love and Sentimentality in Postmodern Fiction: Fowles, Byatt and Waters

Relatore
Ch. Prof. Flavio Gregori

Correlatore
Ch. Prof. Emma Sdegno

Laureanda
Hilary Sgarbossa
Matricola 857348

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Introduction

The latest decades of the twentieth century were characterised by a deep change in the literary field due to the rising of a movement named Postmodernism. This term indicates a movement involving every sphere of life. In fact, as stated by Simon Malpas, 'postmodernism is "omnipresent" in all aspects of contemporary culture, and particularly in the arts' (11). For this reason, it is difficult to provide a clear and comprehensive definition of the term. However, in literature postmodernism can be defined as either the movement born after the modernism of the first half of the twentieth century, or a reaction against it (McHale 5). In fact, some scholars and critics tried to define the real meaning of the prefix *post-*, although they obtained no certain result. As stated by Bran Nicol, 'rather than postmodernism being a continuation or a break with modernism, it is more accurate to see it as both' (16). According to this interpretation, Postmodernism both refers to modernist poetic features and rejects them.

On the one hand, postmodern poetics relies on modernist disbelief in realism, which has been one of the paramount features of nineteenth century literature. In fact, both modernist and postmodernist totally reject the idea of portraying a fictional world based on the precise and accurate mimesis of the real world, representing real events and people's behaviours. By deeply disagreeing with the realist novelists of the nineteenth century, such as Balzac, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Dickens and George Eliot, modernist and postmodernist writers believed that the world represented in novels must be the fictional world created by the author's self, giving in this way importance to subjectivity.

On the other hand, Postmodernism rejects or changes some features of modernist poetics. An example of this is the grounding postmodern belief that the narrator should be present, or intervene, within the plot of the story, to state his authority as craftsman of that fictional world. For this reason, the idea of the 'writer as a god'[1] has been revived from the romantic tradition. In fact, 'the artist now makes his freedom visible by thrusting himself into the foreground of his work. He represents himself in the act of making his fictional world— or unmaking it' (McHale 30). An example of this can be clearly seen in the famous chapter 13 of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, in which Fowles intrudes into the plot of the novel, stating that all the novel is a work of fiction emerging from his own creativity, claiming in this way his authority as writer and creator of an artwork.

Furthermore, the foregrounding difference between Modernism and Postmodernism according to Brian McHale is the change of the 'dominant'. The dominant is a concept re-emerging from Roman Jakobson's theory, it is 'the focusing component of a work of art' (McHale 6), that is to say the totality of rules and features characterising the role and scope of the analysis of each work. It has been observed that during the shift from Modernism to Postmodernism, also the dominant has shifted dramatically. In fact, the dominant of the modernist poetic appears to be epistemological, whereas the postmodernist dominant is ontological. As regards Modernism, its epistemological dominant allows writers to focus their work on issues relating to knowledge, thus raising questions such as 'how can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it? […] What is there to be known?; Who

[1] The romantic concept of the God-like author concerns the unlimited power of the author, portraying the story from the point of view of the omniscient narrator, and developing the plot according to his/her will.

knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?' (McHale 9). Modernist writers attempt to answer by using typical epistemological devices as multiplicity of perspectives, interior monologue and stream of consciousness technique.

On the other hand, the postmodern dominant is ontological, because it is based on issues related to being rather than to knowing, and poses questions both on the real world and on the fictional worlds created by the authors in their works. Example of ontological questions raised by a postmodernist work are 'which world is this? What is to be done in it? […] What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?' (McHale 10). Moreover, a further shift from Modernism to Postmodernism can be observed in French literature, especially in the works by Alain Robbe-Grillet, where there is a consistent shift from the *nouveau roman* −constructed upon modernist conventions and features− to the *nouveau nouveau roman* based on an ontological foreground and focusing on the demonstration of the very writing practice (McHale 15). In fact, Robbe-Grillet aims 'to create an aesthetic world which exists separately from the real world and does not necessarily correspond to it' (Nicol 21).

Therefore, it can be said that the genre which most represents postmodernist literature is fiction. This is because, it is based on the ancient Renaissance's concept of 'heterocosm'. This term indicates the plurality of worlds and universes −called by Eco *subworlds*− stating their differences with the real world. Postmodernists in fact are rejecting the realist mimesis between real and fictional world, however they are attempting at reconceptualizing

realism, in order to shift from the act of 'transcribing' central among realist writers, to the act of 'constructing' (Nicol 23). As a consequence, as in the nineteenth-century realist novel the foreground concept was that of the reader's suspension of disbelief, the postmodernist fiction's first impression made on the reader is uncertainty. Moreover, the device of the unreliable narrator and his occasional intrusion in the plot, portray the writer's aim of creating and shaping a fictional world in order 'to raise questions for contemporary audiences about the historical and social traditions that organise the cultural and political discourse that shapes the present' (Malpas 103).

Firstly, it is worth describing the concept of 'metafiction', which can be basically defined as the report of a story within another story. It can be expressed through two major activities. On the one hand, the plot can involve a subplot, regarding the story of some of the characters, giving birth to a minor fictional story within a major fictional story, as can be seen in the case of Byatt's *Possession*. On the other hand, the major fictional world can be inserted into a fictional framework. An example to explain this concept more clearly is the plot of *the French Lieutenant's Woman*: the narrator starts as external, but later in chapter thirteen he intrudes in the narration, inserting the story in a fictional framework created by his own mind, and leaving the reader with the uncertainty about what to believe and what to trust not. Moreover, further in chapter 61, the author intervenes newly, on this occasion in the form of a passenger sharing the train coach with the protagonist and wondering what to make of him.

Secondly, it is worth analysing the use of parody and pastiche. As Postmodernism is interested in offering a vision of the world through the

contrast with fictional worlds, the use of irony is important. However, its use is implicit, through parody and pastiche. Parody is the rewriting of a test in a postmodernist critical way, dealing with postmodernist issues. As McHale affirms, 'parody, of course, is a form of self-reflection and self-critique, a genre's way of thinking critically about itself. Parody of allegory, then, is allegory reflecting upon allegory' (145). According to Linda Hutcheon the status of parody has changed from a ridicule imitation of the past towards the status of 'repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity […] parody enacts both change and cultural continuity' (Hutcheon 185). Pastiche, instead, is the playful mixing of genres, with the purpose of juxtaposing low and high culture (Nicol 2) and is said to be more neutral than parody. An example of pastiche as such is again the historical novel *Possession,* in which Byatt attempts to reach the creation of a fictional story within the main fictional plot with the mixture of mainly novelistic and poetic genres, by inventing poems and letters fictionally written by the two poets who are protagonists of the subplot. Another type of pastiche can be observed in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in which Fowles mixes −especially in the epigraphs starting the chapters− Darwinian and Victorian texts, in order to offer a credible portrait of the Victorian positivist society portrayed in this fictional work.

Therefore, postmodernist works aim at challenging the reader with ontological questions about fictional worlds and the reliability of the text, leaving them in a state of uncertainty. For this reason, Postmodernism is based on a continuous creating-understanding process, involving the author and especially the reader. Postmodernist fiction, in fact, encourages a 'creative approach to interpreting the literary or artistic text that

demonstrates how its meanings are always multiple and deferred rather than fixed' (Nicol 6). Thus, the role of the reader is of paramount importance, and often by the use of the fictional second person *you* s/he is invited, as McHale claims 'to project himself or herself into the gap opened in the discourse' (224). The literary school strictly connected to this thought is the so-called 'reader-response criticism'. This literary theory is based on the reader's subjectivity rather than on facts and contents, and highlights the importance of the reader in the literary process, especially in the reception and interpretation of literary works. The text is analysed in the light of the reader's response, of his thoughts and impressions. This leaves a great responsibility to the reader, because s/he is given the duty to offer the best and most suitable interpretation of a text. However, this is not always possible and an example of this can be found in *The French Lieutenant's Woman,* in which the reader is free to choose among three endings, all equally suitable to the plot, and each one providing a completely different meaning to the whole narration.

However, what is the reason for postmodernists to provide an immanent social critique? What is this common dissatisfaction feeling dealing with? To answer these questions, a brief overview of the background must be provided. In fact, Postmodernism, considered as a general movement, arises as a current in the postmodernity. Its roots have to be found in what Nicol names post-industrial capitalism, that is to say the capitalism affecting every sphere of society, including media and arts, which had not yet been included in the consumerist logic. For this reason, the life of the people from the middle of the twentieth century has become in some ways more virtual than real, due also to the increasing improvement of technology and digital resources (3,4).

On this purpose, it is important to explain Jean Baudrillard's poststructuralist theory of simulation. In his opinion, 'virtual reality is already here, and we all live in it almost every moment of our lives we "experience" the world through TV news or "reality TV" shows, engage with other people we have never met' (Nicol 4). Therefore, Baudrillard argues that life has become made of simulacra of real things −which people are experiencing− separating them from the reality. This is one of the reasons stating the importance of the concept of fictional world as a foregrounding idea for postmodernists writers. Moreover, Baudrillard's theory is sustained by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, who claim that 'reality is not "given" but is a fiction which we collectively subscribe to [and it] is manufactured as a result of the interaction between given elements of the world and social convention, language, and individual vision' (Nicol 8). They regard the real world as 'paramount reality' from which everyone is willing to escape, finding thus refuge in multiple realities, a concept which can be associated with McHale's 'heterocosm'. However, this loss of contact with reality and the real world can lead to the postmodern condition of psychosis, dealing with depression, schizophrenia, paranoia and nostalgia and featuring in a large amount of postmodernist literary works. For this reason, Postmodernism aims at being a social critique that challenges the socio-historical changes of the last half of the twentieth century.

This thesis aims to portray the Victorian themes of love and sentimentality in the postmodernist framework. It will state the way in which these Victorian themes are reported in postmodern fiction, by analysing three major postmodern works*: The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *Possession* and *Fingersmith*.

The first chapter will focus on the explanation of the postmodern fiction in detail. By highlighting examples from John Fowles's 1969 novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the major features of postmodern fiction will be analysed, especially metaliterature, the intruding narrator and the three endings of the novel. Moreover, a special focus will be given on the historical themes regarding Darwinism, existentialism and Victorian Duty, and how they are portrayed in the postmodern fictional world created by Fowles.

The second chapter will deal with the analysis of *The French Lieutenant's Woman.* Firstly, the plot will be explained, by granting particular importance to the difference between Charles-Ernestina conventional relationship and Charles-Sarah unconventional affaire. The Victorian background constituting the setting of the novel is of paramount importance, as well as the fictional framework constructed by the author. Secondly, the history of Sarah will be analysed, especially focusing on the way in which sympathy, which is the background sentiment starting the whole story, transforms itself as the novel progresses, becoming love. Thirdly, the three endings of the novel will be explained, granting attention to how the lack of a reliable and certain epilogue adheres to the postmodern uncertainty with which readers are left. Finally, a comparison between Fowles's postmodern work and a real Victorian novel will be made, by focusing especially on how love is portrayed in a postmodern historical fiction, and how love was actually considered and portrayed in the nineteenth century society, as for instance in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

The third chapter will consider the 1990 novel *Possession* by Antonia Susan Byatt. This novel has been written in response to *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. The former's plot is different from the latter's but involves the same themes: Victorian love, sentimentality and adultery. For this reason, through

a careful analysis of the plot and the structure of the novel according to postmodern conventions, this chapter will portray the two parallel relationships: the Victorian one between the poets Ash and LaMotte, and the contemporary one between the scholars Roland and Maud. Finally, a comparison between *Possession* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* will be provided, focusing on the similarities and differences in terms of love and relationships.

The last chapter deals with another postmodern piece of work, the novel *Fingersmith*, written by Sarah Waters and published in 2002. Although it is set in the nineteenth-century Victorian society, it deals with another kind of love and sentimental relationship, that is to say, the homosexual love driven by sexual attraction. Through a comparison with the love portrayed by Fowles as sentimental involvement, the plot and the major themes will be analysed, especially as regards the gender issue, which is present also in *Possession,* in the person of the poetess Christabel LaMotte. Finally, a study of the way in which the homosexual love is presented through nineteenth-century lenses will be provided.

Finally, the conclusion will grant an overview of the themes discussed in this thesis, especially by claiming Victorian love and sentimentality importance in the postmodern historical fiction.

I. Fowles and Postmodern Fiction*: The French Lieutenant's Woman.*

I.1. Postmodern Novel Features and Technical Devices

Postmodern literature is the context giving birth to postmodern fiction. In fact, as we have seen in the introduction, the change of the 'dominant', according to McHale, caused a change of the focus, which shifted from the epistemological to the ontological. Literary works raised no more questions about the 'knowing', on the contrary, they focused their attention on the sphere of 'being', raising in the reader questions about the world of the text, wondering what a world it is and what has to be done in it. Moreover, one of the major points concerning Postmodernism stated in the introduction was the complete disagreement with the realist eighteenth-century novel. In fact, postmodernist writers did not aim to portray the real world, but to create a fictional one. Thence, derives Eco's theory of subworlds, which implies the existence in a postmodern work of more than a fictional world, possibly one inside the other. All these reasons and the social dissatisfaction due to the advent of a post-capitalistic virtual society enhanced the need of people to escape from reality -in order to find refuge in fictional worlds- and the duty to develop a critique of the society from inside. This is the origin of the postmodern fiction. This chapter will analyse the major stylistic aspects and features of this new genre, providing examples from a real postmodern fiction of 1967, that is *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by John Fowles.

Firstly, it is important to affirm that Fowles creates a sort of parody of a nineteenth-century Victorian novel, because he sets his story in 1867, exactly one hundred years before the publication of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. For this reason, it is also considered a historical novel, although in postmodernism it is better termed historiographical metafiction. It is worth to analyse both the terms singularly. As regards metafiction, this is how postmodernists term the new way of writing, which is more conscious of its fictionality and creating self-critical works, in order to 'pose questions about the relationships between fiction and reality […] they explore also the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text' (Onega 6). Fowles's fiction not only, however, is concerned with using the imagination for aesthetic purposes, but it also aims to convey an important and intelligible message to the readers, through the use of the so-called metafictional devices. In the case of *The French Lieutenant's Woman,* the most significant device is the use of parody to criticise nineteenth-century Victorian conventions, especially in terms of love and relationships. Although the use of parody is of paramount importance, it is not the only device employed in this work of historical fiction, in fact, there are some major features which are worth to be analysed.

Firstly, the role of the narrator is of paramount importance. Fowles starts his novel as a typical Victorian novel, with typical Victorian features. Among these features there is the role of the omniscient narrator, who from the beginning intervenes in the novel creating a reinforcement of the fictional world 'blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality' (Onega 72). Examples of these minor interventions in the plot can be seen in the first chapter where the narrator establishes the setting as 'late March of 1867' (Fowles 3) and

then, he identifies with a local spy describing the whole scene. He portrays Lyme Regis and the landscape around the Cobb, addressing freely the reader: 'I exaggerate? Perhaps, but I can be put to the test, for the Cobb has changed very little since the year of which I write' (Fowles 4). This enhances both the metafictional and historical dimension, because it highlights the fact that the novel portrays the nineteenth-century society and states the difference with the twentieth-century situation. The novel is full of these observations regarding the Victorian conventions and people, who by contrasting with the twentieth-century point of view, result 'overclever and pedantic' (Onega 70).

The first huge intrusion by the narrator is found in chapter 13. The preceding chapter closes with a question: 'who is Sarah? Out of what shadows does she come?' (Fowles 94). The answer of the narrator is shocking and represents a kind of turning point in the novel. This is because, it destroys the Victorian convention of a realist novel told by an omniscient narrator by a speech of the 'author' who admits: 'I don't know. This story I am telling is all my imagination. These characters I have created never existed outside my own mind' (Fowles 95). This declaration of pure fictionality aims to define the novel as an artefact, according to the postmodern thought. In fact, this admission is followed by an important explanation:

> I am writing in […] a convention universally accepted at the time of the story: that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend that he does. But I live in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes; if it is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the world (Fowles 95).

A suitable explanation for this declaration is that the 'author' admits he is fictionally writing a novel according to the Victorian realist convention of the God-like author, yet he admits it is not possible to do it because he lives in a postmodern world, a period in which a new concept of novel has arisen. For this reason, he says he is uncertain about the behaviours and intentions of his characters. Later, he tries to name his work, as an autobiography by identifying himself both with the narrator living 'in one of those houses I have brought into fiction' (Fowles 95) and with the protagonist Charles because he may be 'myself disguised' (Fowles 95). According to Susana Onega, in doing this the 'narrator' is blurring the boundaries between the narrative world of the characters and the ontological world of the author, and therefore granting the author, narrator and characters the 'same fictional status' (75). Thus, Fowles aims to deconstruct the Victorian convention of the omniscient narrator − which is leading the first twelve chapters and requires the reader's 'suspension of disbelieve'− conferring the reader a sense of insecurity. A clear example of this can be seen in chapter 55 where the author intrudes in the novel in the role of a 'real' character, who shares the train coach with the dozing Charles and asks himself: 'what the devil am I going to do with you?'. Later in chapter 61, the narrator reappears as a foppish gentleman outside the residence of Mr Dante Gabriele Rossetti. Although he seems to have a minor and irrelevant role, actually he is of paramount importance because he adjusts his watch a quarter of an hour earlier, in order to gain the possibility to present the second ending contemporarily, at least in terms of the fictional time of the novel.

Moreover, in chapter 13 the author declares his non-omniscience together with his creative limits by affirming that 'a genuinely created world must be

independent of its creator; a planned world is a dead world. It is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live' (Fowles 96). He further highlights the concept saying that 'the novelist is still a god, since he creates […] what has changed is that we are no longer the gods of the Victorian image, omniscient and decreeing; but in the new theological image, with freedom our first principle not authority' (Fowles 97).

This leads to the second kind of metafictional device, that is the role of the characters. According to the narrator, 'there is only one good definition of God: the freedom that allows other freedoms to exist' (97). Therefore, the characters must be gifted with free will, follow their paths and be driven by their ideas. In fact, by explaining this, he admits having other plans for his protagonist Charles; however, as he seems to have real ideas the narrator 'must respect [its autonomy] and disrespect all my quasi-divine plans for him' (Fowles 97), thus allowing him the chance to be real. In order to blur the distinction between real and fictional, the author's attempt is that of granting humanity and content to his characters, appearing in this way to be 'of the same ontological status as the readers of their texts' (Docherty 118). Characters are given the autonomy to develop and to make their choices, in order to affirm their subjectivity and their freedom. On this matter, according to Thomas Docherty 'the greater the subject-hood of a character [is], the greater is his capacity for free action; and hence the greater his seeming humanity [is] and the less the character can be reified into a functional mechanism under the regard of the reader' (123). This means that in order to give the characters their freedom to exist, they must be given subjectivity, for example a name and ideas from which they can start developing, as happens in the case of Sarah. In fact, Sarah starts as a black-dressed figure at the Cobb,

no more than a gossip and a wicked nickname among Lyme inhabitants, who later has the courage to follow her own ideas and principles, choosing to be an outcast in a society she does not belong to, by inventing a history of the Lieutenant Varguennes and their affair. For this reason, according to the Darwinist principle, characters are considered for what they are and not for what they have, in terms of money and possession.

On the one hand, this is clearly demonstrated by Ernestina, who is the inheritress of her father's richness. The narrator identifies her with money –as even her marriage with Charles is a matter of commercial business. However, she is not able to assert herself as an independent person, remaining, on the contrary, affected by Victorian conventions and rules.

On the other hand, Sarah, who owns nothing except for a toby-jug, achieves her full development throughout the novel. Fowles's aim is to teach his readers to accept one's subjectivity, thus 'allowing for growth in the midst of the "hazard" of existence' (Docherty 126). Not only does Sarah achieve her own development as a real person, but she also acts the role of the instrumental character, who 'while performing a function […] is radically "more" than that function, has his own subjectivity to assert' (Docherty 129). This is because she represents a way for Charles to develop himself from a Victorian conventional man to the existentialist person he will become, able to choose his destiny and to gain the freedom to be whoever he wants to be.

Moreover, in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* are present also allegoric characters. An example of these is Mrs Poultney, the personification of Victorian Duty merely as bigotry and sexual repression (Brantlinger 340). She is the symbol of British imperialism in her being intolerant, and also represents

the allegory of Christianity. In other words, she represents the hypocrisy of Christian values of the Victorian Age, as opposed to the real values of Faith, Hope and Charity. In fact, she is a person obsessed with immorality, and so much intolerant that the narrator sustains that 'there would have been a place in the Gestapo for the lady' (Fowles 21).

Furthermore, Mrs Poultney's only weak point is her credulity: she believes in hell and because she is old and ill, she needs possibilities of redemption, though they prove only a mask for her hypocrisy and her anti-Christian behaviour. For this reason, she decides to offer Sarah a home, and the narrator ironically states that 'among her own class […] she was renowned for her charity' (Fowles 21). Her real personality is demonstrated in the possible epilogue, as narrated in chapter 44. After her death she is driven by her servants to the gates of Heaven, where the butler mocks her for her claiming to belong to Heaven by a paramount use of irony 'his infinitude has been informed of your decease, ma'm. His angels have already sung a Jubilate in celebration of the event' (Fowles 341). Consequently, she is flung to a 'much more tropical abode' where 'her real master waited' (Fowles 341).

Another symbolic character seems to be represented by Dr Grogan. He symbolizes two tendencies. On the one hand, he is the personification of science and scientific rationality because of his faith in Darwinism and especially for the reason that he attempts to confine Sarah to a category of disease: the fallen woman affected by melancholia who refuses to be helped and so in need to be enclosed in an asylum. According to him, Sarah in her being an outcast is highly manipulative, and he reduces her to a case of study previously recorded in the trial of Lieutenant La Ronciére, seduced by a hysterical woman. The narrator provides a modern definition of hysteria as

'the assumption, of symptoms of disease or disability in order to gain the attention and sympathy of others: a neurosis or psychosis almost invariably caused, as we now know, by sexual repression' (233).

On the other hand, Grogan represents, according to Katherine Tarbox, the Victorian morality, because towards the end of the novel he attempts to solve the whole matter according to Victorian conventions. In fact, he intimates Charles to forget about Sarah and marry Ernestina because according to him, he still has the possibility to be forgiven, whether he becomes a more generous Christian (Tarbox 91).

Moreover, it is important to highlight that the characters in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* are also readers. This is of paramount importance in order to develop a narrative conscience, and it is a useful attempt to describe the character's personality. In fact, each one reads the book defined most suitable for him/her, for example the hypocritical Mrs Poultney is obsessed with the Bible, and hires Sarah in order to read every evening versets for her. In the same way, Ernestina reads *Lady of la Garaye*, 'and from it learns a romantic conception of marriage and wife' (Tarbox 93). Mrs Talbot reads romance novels, worrying about Sarah's destiny. On the contrary, Dr Grogan reads scientific treatises and especially Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, to whom he is faithful, and which he even swears upon, in order to maintain Charles's secret.

As regard Charles, he is raised as a gentleman whose most suitable distractions should be hunting and riding. However, he profoundly dislikes the idea of disrespecting and killing living animals; instead, he 'had a sinister fondness for spending the afternoons at Winsyatt in the library, a room his

uncle seldom if ever used' (Fowles 15). As a result, when he sees Sarah, he compares her with Emma Bovary of *Madame Bovary*, admitting that 'such allusions are temptations' (Fowles 120), foreseeing in this way the development of the plot. According to Tarbox, the narrator participates in this sort of reading-game, demonstrating his knowledge of history and Victorian background 'through his use of epigraphs and footnotes' (93). In this way he aims also to demonstrate his narrative authority, thanks to the fact that the epigraphs often resume the content of the chapter they are introducing.

These features as described are not the only metafictional devices employed in order to transmit the message of the novel. It is important also to consider the historical themes, the existentialist aim of the author and the consequent metafictional choices, that will be discussed in the next paragraphs.

I.2. Historical Themes in a Postmodern Framework

In order to grant the novel historical reliability, Fowles attempts to collocate the events with referentiality to real historical happenings. One of these, for example, is the fact that Ernestina will outlive all her generations saying that 'she was born in 1846. And she died on the day that Hitler invaded Poland' (28). Moreover, he affirms that there could be a place in the Gestapo for the hypocritical Mrs Poultney, he claims that Mary great-great-granddaughter is turning twenty-two 'this month I write in [and] much resembles her ancestor' (Fowles 75). Furthermore, Sarah 'was born with a computer in her heart' (Fowles 53). As a result, by providing realistic example and connections with the contemporaneity −as the term computer, which was not yet invented in 1867− the author achieves the interpenetration between past and present, granting the novel a more solid base and truthfulness. By doing this, he offers

‘simultaneously a credible portrait of a historical period and a self-reflexive piece of artifice, referring both outside itself to the real historical world and inside to its own workings’ (Nicol 111)

Historiographical metafiction, as has been discussed before, is a work of metafiction which deals with the past and especially challenges past events in order to highlight changes and contradictions, by portraying them in a postmodern framework. A clear example of this can be seen in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* and especially in the way Fowles deals with typical eighteenth-century topics such as Marxism, existentialism and Victorianism. In order to proceed with the analysis of these historical themes in the novel, it is worth to state a premise. In fact, these themes are strictly linked to the use of the epigraphs opening each chapter in the novel.

By echoing the tradition of the nineteenth-century realist novel of George Eliot, who used to open each chapter with a suitable epigraph, Fowles attempts to reinforce his control over the novel through a cautious choice of the paratext, hence stating his authority as an author. The epigraphs opening the chapters in *the French Lieutenant’s Woman* are all related to the Victorian Age, despite being of different genres. In fact, the heterogeneity of the epigraphs −extracted from Victorian novels and poems, scientific treatises, Darwin, Marx et al− grants the novel a sense of completeness in terms of historical validity. In fact, the aim of the author is to provide a clear overview of Victorian Age and tradition, in which to collocate the novel. However, his intentions follow a double path.

On the one hand, he proposes epigraphs which perfectly confirm the point of view of the chapter, and thus reinforce the message provided. For example,

at the beginning of chapter 2 Fowles uses a combination of two epigraphs, an historical document and a folkloristic song. They open the chapter which introduces the three protagonists Charles, Ernestina and Sarah. The first one is an historical document recording the shortage of men during the Victorian age:

> in that year (1851) there were some 8,155,000 females of the age of ten upwards in the British population, as compared with 7,600,000 males. Already it will be clear that if the accepted destiny of the Victorian girl was to become wife and mother, it was unlikely that there would be enough men to go round. -E. Royston Pike, Human Documents of the Victorian Golden age (Fowles 6).

The second one is a song which portrays the ending of a love story:

> I'll spread sail of silver and I'll steer towards the sun, I'll spread sail of silver and I'll steer towards the sun, and my false love will weep, and my false love will weep, and my false love will weep for me after I'm gone. -West-Country Folksong 'As Sylvie was walking' (Fowles 6).

The aim of this juxtaposition is to foresee the main plot of the novel, that is the two female characters, Sarah and Ernestina, competing for the same man, and the sad epilogue of the Victorian relationship between Charles and Tina, however, 'long before this is made explicit in the story' (Bowen 76).

On the other hand, he inserts epigraphs contrasting with the meaning of the chapter, which, however, reinforce its point of view through the use of irony. An example of this can be seen in the opening of chapter 14 in which Charles and Tina pay a visit to the unpleasant Mrs Poultney. The epigraph is taken

from Jane Austen's *Persuasion* and explains the concept of good company, which requires a good social status and birth:

> "My idea of good company, Mr Elliot, is the company of clever, well-informed people, who have a great deal of conversation; that is what I call good company." "You are mistaken," said he, gently, "that is not good company-that is the best. Good company requires only birth education, and manners, and with regard to education is not very nice" (Fowles 100).

However, by reading the chapter what is evident is that this visit is completely unpleasant. Despite being of a high social status, Mrs Poultney does not provide an example of good company. In fact, the author, through the use of irony, employs this epigraph in order to convey the opposite meaning. According to Deborah Bowen, Fowles's purpose in providing the epigraphs is to eliminate 'the boundaries between art and life, the fictive and the real' (72). Through the multiplicity of textual elements, he achieves a high degree of truthfulness and mingles a fictional story with a real nineteenth-century background. The major Victorian topics he portrays in his postmodern framework are Marxism, Darwinism and its consequent evolution into existentialism and Victorianism.

Firstly, the link of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* with Marxism is not immediate, but worth to be analysed. Fowles decides to open his novel with an epigraph quoted from an early Marxist work*, Zur Judenfrage* (1844), which resumes the whole meaning of the story: 'Every emancipation is a restoration of the human world and of human relationships to man himself' (Fowles). The key word of this quotation is 'emancipation'. It is generally known that Marx

in his *Communist Manifesto* conceives the emancipation as the result of the class struggle between proletarians and noble class. According to him, as he states in *Zur Jugendfrage*, this emancipation must be achieved through human relationships, and then in *Das Kapital* through a class revolution. Despite the fact that the novel is set six months before the publication of *Das Kapital*, Fowles decided to include it anyway in the epigraphs, in order to give a wider overview of the nineteenth-century thought as regards class's conventions. In fact, an extract of this Marxist book is used to open chapter seven, in which Sam is presented. The epigraph reflects exactly the content of the chapter.

> The extraordinary productiveness of modern industry…allows of the unproductive employment of a larger and larger part of the working class, and the consequent reproduction, on a constantly extending scale, of the ancient domestic slaves under the name of a servant class, including men-servants, women-servants, lackeys, etc. (Fowles 39).

The description of Sam is suitable to a working-class young adult, hired by Charles as his man-servant. Despite being of a low social status, he is said to be a 'snob' with a 'very sharp sense of clothes style […] and he spent most of his wages on keeping in fashion' (Fowles 43). Moreover, Sam is described as a representative type of a new emergent class struggling to 'command the language' (Fowles 43). Despite the human bond and affection implied in the relationship with his master Charles, the contentious, vain and absent-minded youth is not satisfied with his employment and he 'suffered it' (Fowles 44). In fact, his ultimate desire is to open a haberdasher's shop in order to rise his social status and lead an independent life, however, he lacks money, which is the fundamental resource. Further in the story, he is increasingly dissatisfied both with his job, and with the way in which he is treated by Charles, for

example he is subjected to vexations regarding his ignorance about Latin or complaints about his laziness.

Differently, Charles is an exponent of the ancient Victorian upper-class, who is waiting to inherit his unmarried uncle's fortune. He occupies his time with leisure activities, like palaeontology, fossils' research and he often travels instead of working. His planned marriage with Ernestina −daughter of a rising entrepreneur in the drapery's commerce− represents 'the alliance of old money and new that was occurring in industrial England at that time' (Landrum 104).

The turning point in Sam's life is his love story with Mary, Ernestina's servant. She is both dissatisfied with her job, and envious of her mistress's richness and possibilities, especially regarding fashion. The two servants, however, are able to find comfort in each other and lead an honest and loving relationship in which sex is not forbidden but represents a symbol of freedom, and which is completely the opposite of the artificial relationship between their masters. However, Sam is struggling to emancipate from his subordinate situation in order to start a happy and independent life with his beloved Mary. Mr Freeman gives him an opportunity, as the grants Sam the opening of his own shop, but asking in change to be repaid with Charles's secret. At the beginning, the betrayal proves not so difficult for Sam, on the climax of his antipathy towards Charles, although at the end he will feel on obsessive guilt for his separation with Sarah and decides to intervene in order to reconcile the two lovers with an anonymous signalisation. At the end, although Sam is not fully free because working for Mr Freeman, he is able to grant his family a happy and comfortable life. According to David Landrum 'it is a relationship that

provides the impetus for Sam's attempt at emancipation, his "revolution" against Charles. Mary becomes the catalyst, for change in Sam's life' (107).

As a consequence, Fowles provides both a critique and an assertion of Marxism. On the one hand, he aims to argue the historical conception of Marxism as a struggle to be fought through a revolution. On the other hand, he asserts that the postmodern concept of Marxism implies a new kind of revolution, through the restoration of human relationships. Sam and Mary's emancipation is in fact triggered by their relationship, but Fowles's perspective in his re-reading of Marx highlights that 'their liberation is not that of workers rising up and casting off their chains in a flowering of violent revolution. It is facilitated by means of the very system Marx alleged caused economic discrimination and oppression [which is capitalism]' (Landrum 109). In other words, their emancipation is achieved through capitalism, which in the novel is represented by Mr Freeman's opportunity for Sam to open his shop.

In conclusion, Fowles attitude towards Marxism is ambivalent, however, the final consideration is that the quest for emancipation and economic advancement historically achieved through class struggle, should be aware of the importance of the humanizing element, because 'genuine liberation is a restoration of relationships' (Landrum 110).

Secondly, this re-reading of human emancipation implies also the new postmodern concept of progress and evolution. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* can be found multiple hints at Darwinism. The protagonist declares himself 'a Darwinist, and yet he had not really understood Darwin, [...] nor had Darwin himself' (Fowles 50). By affirming this, the author attempts to explain

the incompleteness of Darwin's theory during the Victorian Age and provides a postmodern revision of it. Moreover, Charles's involvement in Linnean obsession of classification and fossilization of species, expresses first of all his resistance to progress, his tendency to become fossilized, and an attempt 'to stabilize and fix what is in reality a continuous flux' (Fowles 50). It is important, because through the transformation of Charles, the novel portrays the development of Darwinism, which shifts from Victorian Darwinism to postmodern Darwinism. To explain this concept, it is of paramount importance to comprehend the strong points and the difference between the two currents.

The first response to Darwinism and especially to the publication of *The Origin of Species* in the Victorian Age was a strong rejection, due to its intrinsic agnosticism. The major point was the innate supremacy of human beings over all the other living species, and considered as a result, the fittest to survive. This anthropocentric perspective provided a sort of consolation to the religious side of the population, which before had rejected it. As a consequence, Darwinism started to be accepted also as a scientific theory. However, there still were discrepancies among scholars and scientists about the theme. One of the major arguments was the involvement of chance in the process. Transformation of species derives from genetic mutation, and it was thought to be at random, but in the long run, chance and randomness transformation provide a path to be followed, in order to adapt and survive.

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* Fowles considers the non-anthropocentric theory provided by Gould according to whom 'the assumption or attribution of any global rightness of evolutionary outcome is an unjustified, teleological repression of the significance of randomness' (Jackson 225). In fact, in his

opinion the species worth to survive and improve are to be judged along in the process which, instead of gradual, is discontinuous and sudden. This postmodern concept deals with the novel, because Charles develops from an exemplar Victorian Darwinists, nurturing in the anthropocentric vision of superiority, to an existentialist man, through this shift of Darwinist view. Therefore, existentialism is a philosophical current which deals with the most postmodern conception of progress and evolution, and concerns freedom. Scholars agree in saying that Sarah is the real actor of this change. Her character will be analysed in the next chapter; however, it is worth to provide an overview of this modern woman.

Despite belonging to a humble class, Sarah is over-educated and smart. For this reason, she is mostly dissatisfied with the role of governess, to which the girls of her social class were relegated, and she longs for a better future with possibility of emancipation and expression of her real self. However, she is disillusioned and decides to relegate herself to the role of outcast due to the fact that she is not able to find in the world a suitable place for her. She does so by inventing an affair with a Lieutenant, from whom she affirms to have been seduced. She does this, in order to be considered the scarlet lady of Lyme Regis, to be able to make her decisions without being judged from a reality still unable to accept a modern woman.

In his article, Tony Jackson argue that Sarah represents the figure of the 'hopeful monster' (231). Better explained, she aims to find herself a new identity in the world, but she can only do this through the repetition of her action, in order to be historicised. Whether she cannot fulfil her aim she would remain a hopeful monster, who is a figure, 'as a mutation among existing self-representations' (Jackson 231) not still categorized by history, a new type of

person for whom exists no definition, who is thrown into the world and hopes to survive to its circumstances. Sarah 'fits none of the roles by which women could be known at the time' (Jackson 231), so she attempts at affirming her identity as a new type of woman by leading Charles into the repetition of her same story.

Charles feels himself like a fossil, unable to choose and entrapped in an uncertain and unhappy destiny chosen by others as a business agreement. He states in chapter 28 that 'he never felt less free' (237) desiring 'if only [I] could act!' (238). In order to make a connection with the before-mentioned Darwinist theory, 'Charles Smithson is presented in the novel as the last exemplar of a species in danger of extinction. […] to survive he must adapt to the new conditions' (Onega 87). As a consequence:

> Charles will undergo a transformation, an individual, self-historicizing experience, and so will have a kind of self-knowledge that Sarah never really has. He will lack only the philosophical vocabulary through which his kind of experience will become recognizable as a historical concept (Jackson 233).

This is because he 'had not the benefit of existentialist terminology' (Fowles 343), however, he gradually perceives a change in him and especially an 'anxiety of freedom -that is, the realization that one is free and the realization that being free is a situation of terror' (Fowles 343, 344). This definition expresses the real essence of existentialist philosophy, the freedom to choose what a person wants to be. A clear exemplification of the new existentialist figure is the Sarah of the end of the novel, who is a model and a painter in the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, and who wants to assert fully her own

individuality and independence not yielding −in the second ending− to Charles proposal of marriage. In this ending, Charles too realises the existentialist matter, as while walking away he feels 'as if he found himself reborn, though with all his adult faculties and memories' (Fowles, 468).

The development of Charles and Sarah as characters can be considered a sort of 'bildung'[2], thanks to the fact that they create new identities for themselves, different from the former they had. However, the difference with the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman as for example Jane Austen's, is that in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* the two protagonists never achieve full maturity. As a result, their progress is not provided by the adaptation of the self to the conventions of society as it used to be, on the contrary, they attempt at developing new identities through existentialism, which provide them the possibility to freely choose for themselves according to their desires. In fact, 'Sarah is not becoming, but evolving, into something entirely new in her society, something unrecognizable from within its frame of reference' (Marais 247), acting later as a muse, inspiring Charles in his existentialist evolution.

The third major historical theme discussed in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, which functions also as general background of the novel, is Victorianism. This term identifies the whole number of social conventions and rules of the Victorian Age. The focus of the novel, however, is centred on the topics of love relationships, sentimentality, gender as regards roles and behaviour accepted by the society. The clearest example of this can be observed in chapter 35 of *The French Lieutenant's Woman.* It is opened by an epigraph extrapolated

[2] The common feature of Victorian novels, concerning the formation and maturation of a young protagonist, who learns to adapt to society and living according to its rules.

from a report of the Children's Employment Commission, stating the condition of young teenagers, especially girls who are mistreated and abused.

This chapter deals with the so-called Victorian Duty. In other words, all the paradoxes and conventions regarding sexual behaviour in the nineteenth century. Fowles aims to highlight the paradoxes of this period through the use of irony. In fact, he claims that religion provided only a mask to a country 'where more churches were built than in the whole previous history of the country; and where one in sixty houses in London was a brothel' (268). In fact, the Victorian Age was characterized by 'an enormous progress and liberation in every other field of human activity; and nothing but tyranny in the most personal and fundamental' (269).

Firstly, feminine nudity was forbidden, even in art. Fowles states a major paradox by claiming that woman 'was sacred, [but] you could buy a thirteen-year-old girl for a few pounds', and at the same time her body 'had never been so hidden from view' (269). Secondly, pleasure seemed to be forbidden, in the sense that Victorians 'chose a convention of suppression, repression and silence to maintain the keenness of the pleasure' (271). However, in this field there was a huge difference between men and women. Although the sanctity of marriage was important, a lot of people had affairs even if married and, despite being famous people, expected to be symbols of the Victorian Duty. Moreover, for gentlemen it was considered normal to visit brothels both before and after the marriage, in order to vent lust and sin and to return home pure to their wives.

On the contrary, the Victorian middle-class woman was considered as the Victorian angel in the house, a keen mother and loving wife, with no other aim

than family care, and especially profoundly ignorant about sex, thought to be not suitable for her gender. For example, women were supposed not to 'have orgasms, and yet every prostitute was taught to simulate them' (Fowles 269) for men's sake. Not only women were believed to lack any sexual satisfaction or ability by physiology, but they were also taught that it was forbidden, as considered sin. As Onega affirms 'the passionless Victorian maiden would never give way to the temptation […] her natural lack of sexual appetite protected her, while man could […] control his impetuous lust with the help of his intelligence or his notion of duty, or […] through marriage' (82). This example can be seen in the character of Ernestina, when she has impure thoughts about her fiancée Charles, she prays for forgiveness. As the author states:

> it was not her profound ignorance of the reality of copulation that frightened her; it was the aura of pain and brutality that the act seemed to require, and which seemed to deny all that gentleness of gesture and discreteness of permitted caress that attracted her in Charles. She had once or twice seen animals couple; the violence haunted her mind (Fowles 29,30).

Most of the middle-class women respecting Victorian conventions, as a consequence, were forced by social duty to respect a commandment like Tina's '" I must not"- whenever the physical female implications of her body, sexual, menstrual, parturitional, tried to force an entry into her consciousness' (Fowles 30). And she asked herself 'why God had permitted such a bestial version of Duty to spoil such an innocent longing' (30) as she was expected to procreate with her husband, although sex seemed to her a price too high to pay. However, according to Onega a woman would pay so excessive a price on

behalf of a higher social status provided by wedding (82), hence the wedding absorbs the connotation of matrimony, a legal and business agreement which deals obviously with money. Therefore, this is what happens between Charles and Ernestina, whose wedding has been settled on business matters between Charles and Mr Freeman, as an occasion for the emerging middle-class entrepreneur to enrich and to rise his social status.

However, these conventions were not so strict for country girls. In fact, in the countryside pre-marital relationships and sex were considered normal intercourses, almost a rule, in order to make a sensible choice in terms of marriage. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, this figure is represented by the servant Mary, who has a sexual affair and a consequent relationship with Sam, Charles's servant. Indeed, if Ernestina represents the puritanism of the Victorian middle class and Mary exemplifies the girl of the rural England free from social and sexual constrictions; Sarah represents the figure of the educated low-class woman. In fact, she represents something between the two sides, however, she is too educated to be free from prejudices, but she is neither rich enough to be granted other pleasures of life as a good marriage. This is the reason why she feels out of place, and she invents the story of the seduction by the Lieutenant, in order to be rejected and considered an outcast from the society, so as not to be subjected to all the Victorian conventions but free to choose her destiny. Sarah in fact is seen at the beginning as 'the fallen woman, […] who has distorted her nature, allowing passion to obfuscate her reason and her notions of morality and propriety' (Onega 82). Moreover, she wanders in the Ware Commons, a place considered by Mrs Poultney -who represents the parody of the puritanism- as 'Sodom and Gomorrah' (Fowles 89), in whose woods lovers are used to meet. In fact, in this kind of Dyonisiac

Eden, which seems at the same time both an idyllic medieval *hortus conclusus* and an oneiric wood of nymphs (Onega 83), nearly the whole affair between Charles and Sarah develops, on a continuous tension between lust and Duty, typical of Victorianism.

I.3.The Three Endings of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

One of the innovations Fowles borrowed for his novel is the multiplicity of endings. He took his inspiration by his Victorian forerunner Thomas Hardy. In his work of 1879 '*The Distracted Preacher*' Hardy broke the convention and provided the readers with two endings, although they were very similar to each other because the Victorian contest did not allow too much space for innovation. In the same way, Fowles provided readers with multiple endings. Scholars, however, argue to define whether there are two or three endings in the novel, due to the fact that Fowles employed the forking-path method in order to realize 'mutually-exclusive possibilities' (McHale 109).

The first bifurcation occurs in chapter 45, and this is possibly the reason because this ending is not considered serious and definitive. In the preceding chapter 44, Charles returns to Lyme, confesses the whole happening to Ernestina, taking her a brooch as a quest for forgiveness. The narrator provides an epilogue in which Sarah disappears from their life and they 'did not live happily ever after; but they lived together. […] they begat what shall it be seven children' (Fowles 340). Moreover, he adds to the narration the destiny of Mrs Poultney in hell, and the marriage of Sam and Mary, who

‘married, and bred, and died, in the monotonous fashion of their kind’ (Fowles 340).

This ending fully respects the convention of Victorian fiction, which implies the restoration of the order, to conform to the rules of society. However, neither the narrator nor the protagonist are satisfied with this epilogue. In fact, in chapter 45 the narrator refers directly to the reader explaining that ‘all I have described in the last two chapters […] did not happen quite in the way you may have been led to believe’ (Fowles 342). He explains the reason by saying that ‘the last few pages you have read are not what happened, but what he spent the hours between London and Exeter imagining might happen’ (Fowles 342). Although Charles has been firstly decided on proceeding with the wedding, he ‘felt himself coming to the end of a story; and to an end he did not like’ (Fowles 342) since this epilogue seemed a ‘betrayal of Charles deeper potentiality’ (Fowles 343).

Consequently, he realises that he is given the possibility to choose, and this translates in the existentialist concept of anxiety of freedom. However, in order not to betray his desires and personality, the narrator chooses to grant Charles a margin of decision, which in the text corresponds to the decision of stopping in Exeter for the night in order to visit Sarah. Despite these existentialist features, it is often not considered as a true and official ending, because this epilogue belongs to Charles’s subworld and not to the fictional world of the text and, as a result, it has a different ontological status (Mc Hale 110).

Furthermore, the author states the hypothesis of a fourth ending, that is ‘leaving him for eternity in his way to London’ (Fowles 408). However, it is not

suitable to the conventions of Victorian fiction to allow an open, 'inconclusive ending' (Fowles 408).

In chapter 55, the narrator intrudes in the narration as a 'prophet-bearded-man' (Fowles 407), sitting opposite to the sleeping Charles in the train. He wonders 'what could I do with you?' (Fowles 408). As it has been explained before, this intrusion has the purpose both of stating the narrator's authority and to limit it. In other words, he must allow characters the freedom to choose, because they have personalities and desires, and they cannot always be controlled. Anyway, the problem at this point is that 'the protagonist [Sarah] want is not clear', on the contrary what Charles want is clear enough.

According to the Victorian conventions, fiction should represent reality, and as a result, also the ending should be a clear reproduction of the real world. However, this is not possible, because the response depends on the readers, whose attitude according to Fowles can be optimistic or pessimistic. The problem is that as he has 'pretended to slip back into 1867' (Fowles 409), a century has passed and there is no point in being either optimistic or pessimistic.

As a consequence, he would try to be impartial in the two alternatives and to represent the both of them. At this moment, however, another concern arises: 'I cannot give both versions at once, yet whichever is the second will seem, so strong is the tyranny of the last chapter, the final, the 'real' version' (Fowles 409). For this reason, he tosses a coin with the purpose to decide the order in which to present the two alternative endings.

On the one hand, he starts presenting his first alternative. It is worth to say that it is considered the more classic and Victorian ending because there is a

happy ending. The order is restored as Sarah and Charles are able to reunite −together with their daughter Lalage− after two years of research, thanks to what could be chance, but is in reality the 'Watchful Providence [which] works to punish and reward' (Onega 89). Charles is relieved to see that 'those eyes, that mouth, that always implicit air of defiance…it was all still there. She was the remarkable creature of his happier memories −but blossomed, realized' (Fowles 446). She is the assistant of the Pre-Raphaelite artist Dante Gabriele Rossetti, and lives in his house.

Furthermore, she tries firstly to explain why she escaped from Charles in Exeter. She recognised herself guilty of seducing him despite his condition of betrothed man, and consequently she adds that she was forced to abandon him, as in their story she had the perception 'that the natural had been adulterated by the artificial and the pure by the impure' (Fowles 451). Secondly, she attempts to endure to Charles's proposal by affirming 'I do not wish to marry […] I do not want to share my life […] I am happy, I am at last arrived, or so it seems to me, where I belong' (Fowles 453). Charles's incredulity forces him to answer according to the Victorian convention and claims that 'you cannot reject the purpose for which woman was brought into creation' (Fowles 454). However, after the meeting of Charles with his daughter Lalage, Sarah yields tearfully to love, and Charles despite being agnostic comprehended that 'it had been in God's hands, in His forgiveness of their sins' (Fowles 462). In this way, the two characters restore the equilibrium by conforming to the rules of society, through marriage.

Nevertheless, Sarah's quest for independence, which she has been stating since the beginning of the novel is not satisfied but even sacrificed on behalf of a social order, which is provided as a reward for repentance by Providence.

According to Charles Scrugg ‘Sarah has become an Austen heroine, someone who has matured through experience’ (104), in the sense that she represents Austen’s idea of bildung, which is to develop and mature through adapting the new self to the conventions of society. All things considered, the first ending portrays the perfect situation of repentance, in which Sarah embodies the perfect Victorian womanhood. She ‘is able to mediate between outward and inward, between the obligation to self and the responsibility to another’ (Scruggs 111), and finally she reaffirms her humanity and achieves her emancipation through the restoration of human relationships, as states the epigraph from Marx, opening the book.

On the other hand, the second ending is more postmodern and as a result, less conventional. Firstly, it is important to explain how the author attains to present contemporarily the two epilogues. At the opening of chapter 61, the narrator intrudes newly in the story disguised as a foppishly dressed impresario staring at Mr Rossetti’s house, who adjusts the time on his watch a quarter of an hour earlier. This it is a clear metafictional device employed in order to allow the narrator to present the second ending contemporarily to the first one − at least as regards the time in which the story develops. At the same moment in which the impresario leaves in his coach, the story inside the house resume from the point in which the disappointed Charles is stepping away from the room, exactly fifteen minutes before. Sarah attempts to stop him in order to offer him the possibility of a Platonic friendship. However, Charles refuses because while looking into her eyes he ‘found only a spirit prepared to sacrifice everything but itself −ready to surrender truth, feeling, perhaps even all womanly modesty in order to save its own integrity’ (Fowles 467).

Consequently, he realizes that she has always played a part, and that 'from the first she had manipulated him [and] she would do so to the end' (Fowles 468), in order to reach her purposes. Her aim was to achieve independence and self-realization, she is ready to sacrifice everything on behalf of her individuality and she 'is incapable of transcending this egoism' (Scruggs 109).

Moreover, according to Scruggs, she is the clearest expression of the figure of the liberated woman of the twentieth century instead of the distressed Victorian woman she is portrayed throughout most of the novel (111). In fact, Charles acknowledges 'his own true superiority to her: which was not of birth or education, not of intelligence, not of sex, but on an ability to give that was also an ability to compromise' (Fowles 468). On the contrary, Sarah 'could give only to possess; […] and to possess him was not enough' (Fowles 468).

For this reason, he tearfully leaves the house, feeling a deep sense of void inside, also because 'he did not know where to go. It was as if he found himself reborn […] all to be recommenced, all to be learnt again!' (Fowles 468). Although he feels lost, 'he has at last found an atom of faith in himself, a true uniqueness on which to build' (Fowles 470), according to the existentialist belief. This ending portrays the whole development of Charles from a typical Victorian gentleman to an existentialist, free to choose and to create his destiny.

As far as Sarah is concerned, she achieves a kind of self-realization in the unconventional circle of Pre-Raphaelites. According to Margaret Bozenna Goscilo, the portrayal of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in the novel is controversial.

On the one side, it meant to be a critique of the Victorian bias on gender. In fact, despite the innovative and modern idea in their belief to reconcile art and life, the Pre-Raphaelites relegate women to the status of models or muses, not particularly skilled and who need to be re-educated in order to be suitable to their new role. For example, Sarah affirms 'I have no genius myself, I have no more than the capacity to aid genius in very small and humble ways' (Fowles 453). This reinforces the Victorian dichotomy and discrimination of gender.

On the other side, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood provides a celebration of a new kind of woman. She becomes the subject of the new art, not the object anymore. In fact, Sarah represents the archetype of the new woman, both morally and aesthetically. This is because she portrays the ideal of a new Pre-Raphaelite beauty as for example 'her rich, rippling hair, her striking but not traditionally pretty face, and her exophthalmic or prominent eyes' (Bozenna Goscilo 70). Actually, Sarah embodies the fictionalization of the two models employed by Rossetti: his wife and his mistress. As regards the moral side, Pre-Raphaelites used to represent the so-called 'fallen woman', with whom Sarah identifies. However, she develops through a process of self-realization and personal identification, and she becomes the muse who is able to lead Charles towards his existentialist metamorphosis.

As a consequence, this ending is considered the most postmodern, as it incarnates the existentialist view. A demonstration of this is found in the narrator's words 'there is no intervening God beyond whatever can be seen' (Fowles 469), differently from the first ending where the whole situation is solved as a reward for repentance, granted by the watchful Providence, in the fullest Victorian spirit.

Differently, here the focus is on the protagonists −and their actions− who are directly responsible for their future. Moreover, Fowles decides to represent the existentialist view through the Marxist definition of life as 'the actions of men (and women) in pursuit of their ends' (469) and they have to be driven by 'piety', the modern existentialist term for 'humanity'.

This ending is seen as less conventional, but Fowles recommends that readers 'must not think […] that it is a less plausible ending to their story' (469). At the end of this chapter Charles has transformed in a 'mature hero, free and with fully developed new qualities which will allow him to survive in the new medium' (Onega 90). The fact that Charles at the end is staring at the Thames, which is described through a personification as 'the river of life, of mysterious laws and mysterious choice' (Fowles 469), exactly in the same way in which Sarah used to stare at the sea, suggests a circularity. In fact, Charles is substituting Sarah as the protagonist of the novel, aiming at self-realization despite the Victorian conventions. This circularity is further demonstrated by the last sentence of the novel quoting 'the unplumb'd, salt estranging sea' from the poem *To Marguerite* by Matthew Arnold, which reminds readers of the beginning of the story when Sarah is seen at the Cobb staring at 'the empty sea' (Fowles 10).

In conclusion, the metafictional device of the multiple endings, not only grants modernity to the novel, but it also confers readers a kind of responsibility. On the one hand, they are challenged to choose the best suitable ending for the story according to their taste. On the other hand, however, this multiplicity of epilogues leaves readers in a kind of postmodern uncertainty, which is also the same feature of the real world from which they aim to escape by reading a work of fiction.

II. The French Lieutenant's Woman.

II.1. The History of Sarah: Sympathy Ending in Passion.

This chapter will provide a description of Sarah. Most importantly, the focus will be on Sarah's unconventional relationship with Charles, demonstrating how it develops from initial sympathy to unbounded love. In order to do so, not only is it necessary to recall her story, especially her encounters with Charles, but also to analyse her behaviour in order to link it to the truth she introspectively hides.

The French Lieutenant's Woman as a title is referred to Sarah, who is a young over-educated woman, despite arriving from a humble country family, which is her condemnation. This is because, on the one hand, she is too poor to rise her condition and hope to be married by a gentleman in order to increase her social status. On the other hand, she is too educated to accept her subordinated condition with no chance of personal realization and discovery of self-identity.

At the beginning of the novel, she is described as a black-hooded figure looking at the sea. Later Ernestina will introduce her beloved Charles to this woman known in the whole city of Lyme as 'Poor Tragedy' or 'The French Lieutenant's Woman' (Fowles 9), because she is said to have been seduced and abandoned by a French Lieutenant. In this occasion, the first encounter between the two protagonists occurs. Charles decides to approach Sarah in order to warn her about the danger of the sea. However, his first impression is physical,

concerning the belief that she was ignorant of London taste in fashion, and secondly that her face

> was not a pretty face, like Ernestina's. It was certainly not a beautiful face, by any period's standard or taste. But it was an unforgettable face, and a tragic face. Its sorrow welled out of it as purely, naturally and unstoppably as water out of a woodland spring. There was no artifice there, no hypocrisy, no hysteria, no mask; and above all no sign of madness. (Fowles 10)

Moreover, his second impression provided by her silence and her intensely staring at him makes him feel as 'an unjust enemy; both pierced and deservedly diminished' (Fowles 10). As a result, Sarah's striking appearance −and Charles's thoughts about this strange but appealing outcast, who is overwhelmed by sorrow− anticipates the tragedy in Sarah's past and foresees the one in Charles's future.

Despite the reputation she has among the citizens of Lyme, Charles is increasingly curious about Sarah and her story. For this reason, he starts investigating among people, in order to learn more about her unfortunate life. Mrs Tranter tells him that she was a governess at Mrs Talbot's house and that she was very affectionate both to her mistress and her children. According to the gossip, once upon a time she fell in love with a French Sailor, who seduced her and promised to marry her, and who, nevertheless, fled and abandoned her. She is said to have become mad since this happening, and this is the reason why, she often looks at the sea for hours.

However, further in the story, it is revealed that the truth does not correspond to the gossip. The real story of Sarah is explained through her narration to

Charles, as a result the reader discovers the truth gradually, exactly as Charles does. For this reason, it is necessary to start from the first of their random encounters.

As has been said previously, Charles has an overwhelming passion for palaeontology and for collecting fossils in order to catalogue them. One day, his passion brings him to pursue his research in the zone of the Undercliff[3], which is said to be rich in ammonites. At the same time, the miserable Sarah is laying asleep on a rock in the same place. Driven by curiosity, Charles sees that '[a] girl lay in the complete abandonment of deep sleep, on her back […]in a childlike way' (Fowles 70). He has not yet understood that the woman he is observing is Sarah, although he admits that 'there was something intensely tender and yet sexual in the way she lay' (Fowles 90), reminding him of a prostitute with whom he slept in Paris. At this moment he realizes who he is staring at, and although it was not suitable for a betrothed gentleman to be so impolite and snoopy, he cannot avoid doing that, because he feels like

> tranced by this unexpected encounter and overcome by an equally strange feeling-not sexual, but fraternal, perhaps paternal a certainty of the innocence of this creature, of her being unfairly outcast, and which was in turn a factor of his intuition of her appalling loneliness (Fowles 71).

This declaration constitutes the ground for the development of the relationship between Charles and Sarah. In fact, Charles's words demonstrate that he feels a mixture of genuine curiosity and pity, a sense of protection

[3] The Undercliff is the zone which Mrs Poultney associates with Sodom and Gomorrah, a sinful place in which lovers are used to meet and commit sin.

towards someone he judged an ‘unfairly outcast’. He is strongly convinced by the fact that her sorrow is largely due to the exclusion from society and the malevolent bias of the people in Lyme Regis. In fact, in sleeping among the wilderness she seems peaceful −not sad− and ‘the ghost of a smile’ (Fowles 71) gentles her face. Sarah wakes up and a very embarrassing moment follows. As a consequence, he hurriedly walks away and the narrator intervenes, claiming that although ‘Charles did not know it […] the whole Victorian Age was lost’ (Fowles 72), with the purpose to foresee the destiny of the protagonists, as a journey with no return towards the modernity. In fact, Charles will abandon his Victorian attitude, in order to transform himself into a modern man.

The next encounter between the two occurs five days later and is narrated in chapter 16. By using the excuse of the fossils’ research, Charles spends the afternoon on his own. The narrator claims that ‘he knew at once where he wished to go’ because ‘he had had no thought except for the French Lieutenant’s Woman when he found her on that wild cliff-meadow’ (Fowles 117), although his mind is convinced that he truly loves Ernestina. For this reason, he attempts to look for her on the cliff where she was sleeping during their first encounter, but Sarah is not there. However, after some time she appears in a narrow path, with her coat struck into the branches of a bush. They both show signs of embarrassment, Charles stands smiling in order to grant her the right to pass and when she notices him, her look grows suspicious. According to the narrator, a little but significant incident occurs on this narrow path. In fact, as Sarah steps forward hurriedly to pass next to him, ‘she slipped on a treacherous angle of the muddied path and fell to her knees’ (Fowles 118). Consequently, Charles helps her to rise and while he is holding

her, he realizes that 'she was totally like a wild animal, unable to look at him, trembling, dumb' (Fowles 118)[4]. These last words suggest that Charles feels a kind of pity towards Sarah, triggered by the sympathy for her outcast condition.

However, he realizes that her eyes 'could not conceal an intelligence, an independence of spirit; […] a silent contradiction of any sympathy, a determination to be what she was' (Fowles 119). This reflection is probably the beginning of Charles's process of understanding. This is because, despite feeling sympathy towards the innocent, mistreated and defenceless Sarah, he realizes through her eyes that she desires no sympathy and that she seems proud to be who she is. In fact, this is the real but yet unspoken inner condition of Sarah, which will be clearly stated towards the end of the novel.

Moreover, thanks to her unconventional appearance, Charles associates Sarah with a foreign woman with whom he slept in his past in Paris. As a result, this grants him a new awareness about Sarah's condition, as 'he had realized she was more intelligent and independent than she seemed' (Fowles 120), and he compares her with Emma Bovary. Furthermore, Charles starts noticing that the same face he did not considered pretty at the beginning, now seems to present some pleasant features. For example, 'her skin had a vigour, a pink bloom, that suited adorably to the wild shyness of her demeanour' (Fowles 118); and her mouth's 'suppressed sensuality' matches 'the suppressed intensity of her eyes' (Fowles 119). As a result, despite her request of leaving her alone, he admits that 'there was something in that face […] that made him

[4] This scene can be considered a parody of the love romances in which a brave hero helps a woman in distress. In fact, it is Sarah who falls at his feet because of the slippery ground, and ha cannot avoid helping her.

determine not to go'. In other words, this is the very occasion in which he starts being attracted by her both mentally and physically as he supposes she possesses even 'darker qualities' (Fowles 120).[5]

At this point, despite disapproving her social situation, Charles is driven by sympathy and attempts to offer her a chance to go to London as a governess, in order to start a new life with no prejudices linked to the past. Yet Sarah refuses the offer, explaining that she has ties in Lyme. Therefore, Charles feels the curiosity to inquire about the French Lieutenant. She looks hopelessly sad, and Charles feels an unnatural sense of guilt due to what he considers 'a callous lack of sympathy' (Fowles 125) on his part.

The third encounter between Sarah and Charles occurs two days later. The narrator reports it in chapter eighteen, claiming that she followed Charles to the Undercliff deliberately, to give him some sea-urchins she had bought. Indeed, this is only an excuse that Sarah uses to talk to him and to ask for his comprehension. He describes her as usually, by portraying her eyes. In fact, 'her look […] held an intensity that was far more of appeal. Her eyes were anguished… and anguishing; an outrage in them, a weakness abominably raped' (Fowles 140).

Sarah starts her discourse by playing the role of the victim and admits, 'I am weak […] I have sinned' (Fowles 141), in order to trigger Charles's sympathy. She further dares to grant voice to one of her inner thoughts 'why am I born what I am? Why am I not born Miss Freeman?' (Fowles 142). This sentence is

[5] Charles tries to hide his attraction for Sarah behind the pity he feels for her condition. In fact, the sympathy which triggers the whole relationship, becomes a coverage he uses to justify a behaviour which is in reality deeply unfair.

the source of the misunderstanding between them. On his part, Charles feels embarrassed for the reason that he thinks that he is the cause and object of Sarah's jealousy. For this reason, he distances himself from her by claiming that 'any greater intimacy …however innocent in its intent…between us is quite impossible in my present circumstances' (Fowles 143). On the contrary, Sarah's aim is to find a confident in Charles, someone able to understand her condition and her feelings. However, the question rises spontaneously: why Charles? 'Because you have travelled, because you are educated. Because you are a gentleman. Because…because, I do not know' (Fowles 142). Nobody is merciful and compassionate enough to understand her sufferings in Lyme, and she feels 'cast on a desert island, imprisoned, condemned, and I know not what crime it is for' because 'I suffer… and that, whatever sins I have committed, it is not right that I should suffer so much' (Fowles 142).

This sudden and articulated outburst bewilders Charles, and provides him the 'proof, already suspected but not faced, of an intelligence beyond convention' (Fowles 142). As a result, Charles continues to discover more aspects of Sarah's personality and her real self as an unconventional and modern woman.

Charles begins to feel entrapped in a situation from which he cannot escape. This is because he cannot either accept Sarah's quest for a further meeting − to confess him her past and the story of her decay− or is he able to refuse it, because it seems as if 'when she was before him, he had become blind' (Fowles 147). Nevertheless, after she kneels and begs him, he can only grant her the privilege of another meeting. Moreover, he has to struggle to resist those 'eyes without sun, bathed in an eternal moonlight' (Fowles 144). Consequently, he is torn between his two sides: on the one hand, he feels

dismay for this 'woman most patently dangerous' (Fowles 146) and the duty to adhere to the conventions of society, and, on the other hand, he feels an uncanny attraction towards Sarah, both physical and mental. He is obsessed with the inexplicable desire to help her and relieve her from her sufferings.

Charles's indecision reminds the reader of the topic of the uncanny[6] and especially of the sublime[7], which at the same time repels, frightens but also attracts, delights and bewilders. Therefore, Sarah can be considered the clearest incarnation of the uncanny in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, as she both repels Charles for her past, her reputation and her perceived instability −if not madness− and also unboundedly appeals and delights him. This dichotomy develops on the background of the Victorian society, whose aim is 'to try to contain, delimit, and circumscribe the sublime in any way possible' (Booker 181). According to Alison McKee 'Sarah is never simply victim or threat to Charles but rather both at once: even as he tries to save her, he is frightened by her' (149). A further explanation of this internal and external conflict can be demonstrated through the narrator's claim, according to whom Charles 'felt outwitted, inclined almost to stop and wait for her. But his feet strode on all the faster' (Fowles 147). In fact, 'he knew he was about to engage in the forbidden, or rather the forbidden was about to engage in him. The

[6] The romantic concept of the uncanny derives from the German word Unheimlich, that is a concept introduced by Freud. The uncanny is a definition of something inexplicable, both known and unknown at the same time, which generates fear and anxiety.

[7] The concept of the sublime is introduced by Burke in his essay *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful.* He identifies the sublime as an aesthetical concept, defining something terrible and fearful but at the same time fascinating. He states the difference between the beautiful, which created joy and peacefulness in the observer, and the sublime, which creates anguish, fear but also attraction and delight. In fact, the sublime is often described with an oxymoron, that is the 'delightful horror'.

farther he moved from here, in time and distance, the more clearly he saw the folly of his behaviour' (Fowles 147).

As a consequence, Charles is puzzled and attempts discretely to gain some information about Sarah by Dr Grogan. The doctor's diagnosis of Sarah is that of melancholia, demonstrated by her attitude, her weeping, her silence and the piercing look in her eyes. Moreover, he sustains that she is a hopeless case, due to the fact that she refuses anyone's help, because, according to Dr Grogan, 'she does not want to be cured' (Fowles 157). Nevertheless, if 'she could bring herself to reveal the feelings she is hiding to some sympathetic other person, 'she would be cured.' (Fowles 157). This is the reason why Charles finally convinces himself to meet Sarah one last time, in order to relieve her from the burden of her past through the confession of her past experiences. The plan which he intends to follow strictly is 'to be sympathetic to Sarah, but to establish a distance, to remind her of their difference of station' (Fowles 165).

Thence develops their fourth encounter, which leads firstly to an important revelation and secondly, to a turning point in the novel. The revelation occurs in the Undercliff where Sarah is sitting in a position, which is studied by 'ingenious coquetry, so that he must take note of her hair' (Fowles 167) and which makes Charles grow a smile 'in his mind if not on his lips' (Fowles 167). His reaction suggests the belief that there is some kind of attraction between the two. At this point, Charles starts listening to Sarah's story. She was a governess at Mrs. Talbot's home, when Mr. Talbot hosted an injured sailor, rescued from a shipwreck. As he was a Frenchman, Sarah, who was the only one in the house to speak French, was committed to serve him and take care of him. Later, when he started recovering, he found his interest in Sarah

growing, and began to pay her a great amount of attention. As a consequence, she felt delighted but actually, she was unaware of being deceived as 'he was the devil in the guise of a sailor' (Fowles 169).

At some point, however, it was no more only a matter of courting, due to his growing insistence. In fact, he repeatedly requested her to move to France with him, so that she could become his wife. Sarah was strongly convinced not to follow him. Nevertheless, as soon as the man left the Talbot's house, she started to feel a deep sense of solitude, and therefore decided to join him in Weymouth. They had sexual intercourse despite she knew he was taking advantage of her, that he had no sense of honour and respectability. Especially, she became aware that she 'had been for him no more than an amusement during his convalescence. [She] saw he was insincere… a liar' (Fowles 172,173). As a result −as she met him in a sinful place, a disreputable hotel− she affirms that 'I owed it to myself to appear mistress of my destiny' (Fowles 174). She adds that she gathered all her courage and decided to stay in the hotel in order to accomplish Varguennes' sexual desires. She clearly highlights the fact that this was her full decision and that she desires the astonished Charles to understand her reasons.

Charles is puzzled because, although Sarah is clearly requesting his sympathy and forgiveness, she seems proud of her sinful decision admitting, that she only pretended to be innocent, and she is 'a doubly dishonoured woman. By circumstances. And by choice.' (Fowles 175). Despite the fact that for Charles Sarah's decision appears to be an incomprehensible and appalling choice, she still tries to explain her innermost reasons:

> I did it so that I should never be the same again. I did it so that people *should* point at me, *should* say, there walks the French Lieutenant's Whore. […] so that they should know I have suffered and suffer […]. I could not marry that man. So I married shame. What has kept me alive is my shame, my knowing that I am truly not like other women. […] sometimes I almost pity them. I think I have a freedom they cannot understand. No insult, no blame, can touch me. Because I have set myself beyond the pale. I am nothing, I am hardly human anymore. I am the French Lieutenant's Whore. (Fowles 175, 176)

Charles finds this explanation incomprehensible, and it has the effect of diminishing the sympathy he used to feel for Sarah during her report; however, after the first moment of astonishment he starts thinking about his own dissatisfaction. As a result, this encounter represents a turning point for both Sarah and Charles. The former seems to be dropping the mask and present her real self as a modern woman who chose to be an outcast, not to be subjected to the bias of the community. The latter instead, though unconsciously, is beginning his transformation from a Victorian man to a modern existentialist, by interrogating himself about his own life and the low level of satisfaction his choices grant him.

Moreover, he sees her smiling and suddenly realizes that 'he really did stand with one foot over the precipice' (Fowles 187) as he feels that he and Sarah are both driven are driven by 'a passionate reciprocity of feeling' (Fowles 187). This also suggests a change in Charles's opinion towards her. In fact, he experiences an increasing attraction for her, enhanced by her 'unpredictability', described as a mixture of passion and imagination. However, he cannot be aware of this feeling, as 'those two qualities [passion

and imagination] of Sarah's were banned by the epoch, equated in the first case with sensuality and in the second with the merely fanciful' (Fowles 190).

This whole situation leads to a bigger turning point in the novel, triggered by Sarah's quest for independence and self-determination. In fact, she willingly wanders on the path which is visible from the Diary, as later reported to Mrs Poultney, who will decide to fire her. Consequently, she disappears. Charles receives a note from her, and so decides to inform Dr Grogan −who is in charge of a searching for her− in order to suspend the search. Charles then has a crisis of conscience and decides to confess the whole matter that happened between him and Sarah to Dr Grogan. His response can be analysed from three points of view.

Firstly, Dr Grogan claims that Charles is in love with her, by affirming 'you are half in love with her […]do you wish to hear her? Do you wish to see her? Do you wish to touch her?' (Fowles 225,225). Charles is still unconscious of his inner desire, and his answer reveals this uncertainty: 'I am an enigma to myself. I do not love her. […] I feel like a man possessed against his will -against all that is better in his character […] There is something in her. A knowledge, an apprehension of nobler things than are compatible with either evil or madness' (Fowles227).

Secondly, Dr Grogan casts Sarah's personality in the category of mental illnesses which is called melancholia, 'a typhus of the intellectual faculties' (Fowles 225). In his opinion, she aims to deceive Charles as 'she had eyes a man could drown in' (Fowles 226) and the only way to help her could be that of interning her in a private asylum in Exeter.

Thirdly, he strongly advises Charles to leave the whole matter to him, and to adhere to the Victorian conventions, thus marrying Ernestina. However, Charles starts doubting of his own relationship with his future bride. He admits that he is not made for marriage and that Ernestina 'would never understand him' (Fowles 227). Moreover, he feels to have 'no moral purpose, no real sense of duty to anything' (Fowles 226). This is the reason why, after having read the account of the trial of another French Lieutenant, La Ronciére – who has been deceived by a melancholic woman and with whom he identifies− he decides to depart in order to meet Sarah at an agreed spot, to help her to flee before Dr Grogan will inter her.

This last meeting in Lyme is narrated in chapter 31. Sarah is asleep in a barn, in which she reveals her sentiments to Charles and a consequent kiss occurs. However, they are discovered by Sam and Mary, who were romantically wandering in the woods. At some point, contrarily to Charles's wishes, 'Sarah was all flame. Her eyes were all flame as she threw a passionate look back at Charles'. Grasping Charles's hand, she 'raised it towards her lips' (Fowles 251). The narrator describes the whole situation through using some verses by the Latin poet Catullus, which derive from Sappho's love poetry. In fact, at some point 'their eyes remained on each other's, as if they were both hypnotized' (Fowles 252). Consequently, 'he took her into his arms, saw her eyes close as she swayed into his embrace; then closed his own and found her lips. He felt not only their softness but the whole close substance of her body; her sudden smallness, fragility, weakness, tenderness…' (Fowles 252).

The narrator highlights the paramount importance of this event, because from this moment on the story changes, at least as far as Charles is concerned, who

begins to be aware of the concept of being the master of his own destiny, walking towards an existential path.

II.2. Sarah and Charles: from attraction to love

Charles's metamorphosis is evident from the moment of his prohibited kiss with Sarah. Therefore, one of the most significative episodes which highlights his transformation is the night he spends in London, after his visit to Mr Freeman. The drunk Charles stops his coach in the street in order to meet a prostitute who vaguely resembles Sarah, by whom he is obsessed due to the abuse of alcohol. Actually, this prostitute does not resemble Sarah in any circumstance but the name. Charles is willing to have a sexual intercourse with her, but he feels sick and collapses before anything can happen. The prostitute Sarah takes care of him, although she has a crying baby to nurture, and for this reason Charles, once he feels better, decides to depart and leaves her some money as a reward for her kindness.

After the illicit meeting and illicit kiss, Sarah escapes to Exeter. She settles in a pension and sends its name in a note to Charles, who is travelling back from London. Indeed, the first bifurcation occurs at this moment. The first hypothetical but improbable ending is presented to the readers in chapter 44, which portrays the conventional Victorian epilogue. On the contrary, the second path leads to the continuation of the story towards the unconventionality, and it explores the topic of choice. In fact, by choosing to stop in Exeter for the night, Charles subverts the destiny established for him by the Victorian society and at the same time he signs his condemnation.

This happens because during his night in Exeter he visits Sarah, who smartly deceives him by pretending she has sprained her ankle, in order to attire him in her room. A great attraction between the two can be perceived, and 'all her mystery, this most intimate self, was exposed before him: proud and submissive, bound and unbound, his slave and his equal. He knew why he had come: it was to see her again. Seeing her was the need; like an intolerable thirst that had to be assuaged' (Fowles 349). However, seeing her is not the only need Charles feels, as at once

> he was overcome with a violent sexual desire; a lust a thousand times greater than anything he had felt in the prostitute's room. […] Suddenly he comprehended why her face haunted him, why he felt this terrible need to see her again: it was to possess her, to melt into her, to burn, to burn, to burn to ashes on that body and in those eyes (Fowles 350).

According to Onega, the attraction and the temptation that Sarah represents for Charles, is the 'release of the hold of rationality on the brutish instinctual passions inherent in the nature of man' (Onega 85). Nevertheless, sexual desire and bodily attraction is not the only matter in the relationship between the two. The narrator juxtaposes to the passion the romantic component, which is represented by their accelerated heartbeats, their eloquent looks, their hands touching and their mouths kissing. Moreover, they look into each other's eyes for an indefinite amount of time, that 'it seemed an eternity, thought in reality it was no more than three or four seconds' (Fowles 351).

The narrator is able to conjugate the ambiguity between the two sides −tenderness and passion− by claiming that 'their mouths met with a wild violence […] with all the hunger of a long frustration− not merely sexual, for a

whole ungovernable torrent of things banned, romance, adventure, sin, madness, animality, all these coursed wildly through him' (Fowles 351, 352). Therefore, this complexity of feelings find realization in the brief sexual act, which despite being shorter than ninety seconds, seems 'as if she would bind him to her for that eternity he could not dream without her' (Fowles 353). Thus, the climax of passion reaches its highest peak in the sexual intercourse, coinciding with 'the partial demystification of Sarah through the process of naming' (McKee 150). In other words, Charles calls Sarah by her name after the sexual act and grants her a kind of rebirth and consequently a new identity, provided by her true name and not by her old appellatives as 'The French Lieutenant's Woman' or 'Tragedy'.

However, their happiness proves to be only momentary and apparent. This happens because after the sexual intercourse the whole situation is not solved but worsened. On the one hand, Charles blames himself for having taken advantage of a defenceless woman with a sprained ankle, claiming to be 'worse than Varguennes' (Fowles 354). He starts doubting of his life's certainties and declares his duty to break his engagement with Ernestina. On the other hand, Sarah claims no right on him and affirms 'I ask nothing of you. I cannot. I am to blame […] I know you cannot marry me' (Fowles 355). Charles is willing to embrace all his responsibilities, as 'he had never felt so close, so one with a woman' (Fowles 356) and he is aware of his love for her. Nevertheless, Sarah resists him, claiming not to be worthy of him, and finally she reveals her deceit. In fact, she is still a virgin and she has invented the whole story of her seduction by the Lieutenant. Secondly, she reveals to have no twisted ankle. Charles feels deceived and disappointed as he realises that

> he had forced a virgin. […] she had not given herself to Varguennes. She had lied. All her conduct, all her motives in Lyme Regis had been based on a lie. But for what purpose. Why? Why? Why? Blackmail! To put him totally in her power (Fowles 357).

Sarah admits with her usual defying look the whole happening, by claiming

> yes. I have deceived you. But I shall not trouble you again. […] you have given me the consolation of believing that in another world, another age, another life, I might have been your wife. You have given me the strength to go on living. […] there is one thing in which I have not deceived you. I loved you…I think from the moment I saw you. […]it is not to be explained (Fowles 358).

Despite her love declaration, she is firmly convinced that 'there can be no happiness for you with me. You cannot marry me, Mr. Smithson' (Fowles 359). As a consequence, her deceit and her plan can be considered useless on the one side, because they achieve no happy ending and no other result but the destroying of two lives and the disillusion it takes.

On the other side, however, the existentialist view starts being perceived in Sarah's behaviour. She planned the whole deceit since the beginning, with the only purpose to feel desired by a man like Charles. Nevertheless, she is not willing to marry him in order not to lose her freedom, although acquired through a collective deceit. From her speech, it emerges that she feels proud both of her deceit and her condition, which she desires not to change. In fact, she does not want to lose −through a possible marriage and consequent reinsertion into the Victorian society− the freedom granted her by her outcast position, out of the judgements and gossip.

The disillusioned Charles, after this disappointing discovery, leaves her and encloses himself into a church in order to organize his thoughts and take a sensible decision. Not only is he tormented by Sarah's behaviour, but he has also internal conflicts to solve. He cannot cope with the loss of his uncle's inheritance, leading consequently to a decrease in his social status and richness. This has the result of diminishing his self-esteem, as he has become suddenly poorer than his fiancée Ernestina. Moreover, he feels dissatisfied in terms of love as he realizes that Ernestina cannot understand him and that they cannot be happy together, added to the fact that he has feelings for Sarah.

As a result, he takes a decision he reports in a letter to Sarah.

> I am resolved, my sweet and mysterious Sarah, that what now binds us shall bind us for evermore. […]my first necessity is therefore to terminate my engagement. […] I implore you, therefore, not to feel guilt in that respect. What is to blame is a blindness in myself as to my own real nature […] and my society with which I am not in sympathy. […] my thoughts shall be only of you- nay, of our future. What strange fate brought me to you I do not know; but, God willing, nothing shall take you from me unless it be yourself that wishes it so. I am he who will know no peace, no happiness until he holds you in his arms again (Fowles 373, 374).

He recognises Sarah 'as the necessary cross on which man has to be crucified to be truly himself' (Onega 86). According to Keith Booker, the character of Sarah embodies not only the feminine sexuality, but also the role of the author. In other words, 'the way in which Sarah spins invented tales and

manipulates people and events is clearly parallel to the way in which authors manipulate characters and plots in their own invented tales' (Booker 188).

Therefore, Charles's intentions are clear. He desires a future with Sarah, and he is willing to end his engagement with Ernestina as soon as possible. The day after, he travels to Lyme in order to end the betrothal and meanwhile he orders Sam to bring Sarah his love letter, together with a Swiss brooch as a symbol of binding. However, the resentful man-servant decides to rebel against his master and does not deliver the letter to the waiting Sarah, who at the same time disappears, leaving no trace.

From this moment, Charles's decline starts. He makes a huge mistake −according to Onega− in believing that Sarah represents the only way through which he may acquire freedom (87). He must learn to begin this experience of metamorphosis alone, and to solve the situation according to his possibilities. He is betrayed by Sam, who tells the whole story to Mr Freeman. The latter ruins Charles by forcing him to sign a document to remove from him the title of gentlemen for the rest of his life, and what's more Charles also loses Sarah, the love of his life. As a consequence, he publishes plenty of advertisements for missing people in the newspapers, until a day, after two years in which he has travelled around America, he receives a notification from his attorney, claiming that Sarah has been reported to be living in Chelsea. Later, it will be discovered that the signalisation has been made by the repenting Sam and his wife Mary.

As a result, Charles reaches Mr Rossetti's house, in which he finds Sarah in the vest of a Pre-Raphaelite woman, a self-realized assistant in the circle of the Pre- Raphaelite Brotherhood. Thence, the two epilogues follow one another.

The former establishes a happy ending through a reunion between the two and their daughter, who is the fruit of their brief intercourse. The latter, on the contrary, is the natural prosecution of the existentialist path taken both by Sarah and Charles. Sarah decides to sacrifice love on behalf of her independence and individuality, driven by a sort of modern egoism. Charles instead, is obliged to accept the situation and the consequences of Sarah's decision. However, he notices some differences in her, so that he cannot even recognise the woman with whom he fell in love, in the new Pre-Raphaelite artist. For this reason, he leaves the house disillusioned but conscious of his freedom and of his capacity to choose, with still 'an atom of faith in himself' (Fowles 470), as an exact representation of the existentialist belief growing and maturing inside him.

In the development of this relationship from sympathy to love, it is important to analyse the descriptions of Sarah's looks, because the whole story with Charles is represented through the portrait of her eyes. Dr Grogan defines them 'eyes a man could drown in' (Fowles 226) because she can both attire and destroy men. According to Alison McKee, Charles attempts several times to control her with his gaze, 'Sarah, however, resists all such fetishist gazes in two ways: by deliberately turning away (as in the scene on the pier) and by returning the look, thereby neutralizing the objectifying gaze' (149).

Mahitosh Mandal has discussed the role of woman in the Lacanian concept of the Phallic myth, whose aim is to enhance the power and the superiority of man. Woman can have two roles: a masquerade or a symptom[8]. In *The French*

[8] The woman who acts as a masquerade, reinforces the male power on her and triggers her dependence on man. The woman, who acts the role of the symptom instead, enhances man's deepest desires, usually connected with the sexual sphere.

Lieutenant's Woman Sarah is considered both −at least until a certain point− as she firstly acts as a masquerade, by affirming her need to be helped by Charles, and empowering in this way his sense of superiority and pride. At the same time, she is also a symptom, as she represents and triggers Charles's hidden sexual desire. 'Thus Sarah functions as masquerade while authorizing Charles's phallic myth and as symptom as she arouses desire in him' (Mandel 291). As regards the fact that Sarah's eyes could destroy, the act of destruction can coincide with her refusal at a certain point to perform neither the part of the masquerade nor the symptom. In fact, she aims at destroying the phallic myth through the affirmation of her identity and her refusal to marry Charles. Therefore, she develops from the category of the fallen women into the figure of the hopeful monster in search of realization in the society, on an existentialist background. Moreover, it is important to remember that 'Sarah's struggle for self-respect and a meaningful role outside those sanctioned by a patriarchal society reflects the incipient struggle of the women's emancipation movement from the late nineteenth century through our own day' (Barber, Messer 226). This is the reason why she is the emblem of the new modern woman.

II.3. Love and Sentimentality: Difference between the Charles-Ernestina's Relationship and Charles-Sarah's Affaire.

During the Victorian age, the relationships between people of different sex used to be governed by strict rules, which people had to follow in order to conform to the society. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Fowles provides a portrayal of the Victorian Duty, through the relationship between Charles and the chaste Ernestina Freeman. Moreover, this conventional Victorian relationship in the novel is set in opposition to the modern affair between Charles and Sarah, which has been analysed previously.

Ernestina Freeman is a young woman, daughter of an entrepreneur, who represents in the novel the new arising middle class. As her parents have always thought her to suffer from consumption −due to her weak constitution− she has been sent to Lyme in order to gather strength for her imminent marriage with the gentlemen Charles Smithson. Moreover, she is described as very beautiful and delicate, submissive, obedient and shy, so that 'she could cast down her eyes very prettily, as if she might faint should any gentleman dare to address her' (Fowles26). Actually, she has all the qualities that a Victorian woman should possess. In fact, she is the living example of the Victorian angel in the house, chaste, obedient and willing to dedicate herself totally to her future husband and children. All her features can be summarized by the claim of the narrator: 'fortunately she had a very proper respect for convention' (Fowles 29). This can be seen firstly in her attitude towards sexuality. Whenever an impure thought crosses her mind, she asks for forgiveness and penitence. The problem in this case is 'not only her profound ignorance' (Fowles 29) as regards sexuality, because Victorian women were

requested to be ignorant on the matter. The main issue is that, as Onega affirms, Victorian women were 'passionless' and had 'a natural lack of sexual appetite' (82), and as a result it proved unnecessary to inform them about sex.

According to the conventions of the nineteenth century, sex becomes a duty for women inside the marriage in order to enlarge the family and give birth to potential heirs. Ernestina is frightened by 'the pain and the brutality' of copulation, which seems 'to deny all the gentleness of gesture and discreteness of permitted caress that so attracted her in Charles' (Fowles 30). Therefore, she arrives at the conclusion that she really wants to marry, and that 'she wanted Charles to be [her] husband, [and she] wanted children; but the payment she vaguely divined she would have to make for them seemed excessive' (Fowles 30). This is one of the reasons why she conforms to the Victorian rules of the society, celebrating chastity and avoiding every improper thought.

Secondly, she is considered as a business item, due to the economic connotation her wedding acquires. Her union with Charles resembles a business agreement between Charles and Mr Freeman in the fullest Victorian spirit. This demonstrates how in the nineteenth century, marriage was totally linked with money, thus becoming a matter of business. In fact, Mr Freeman is interested in elevating his social status thanks to his daughter's marriage with a nobleman, and the narrator says that in the moment of the proposal 'the two men stood smiling at each other; the one as if he had just concluded an excellent business deal, the other as if he was not quite sure which planet he had just landed on, but hoped the natives were friendly' (Fowles 83). On the contrary, Charles is not completely convinced about his choice to marry Ernestina, which was triggered both by Mr Freeman's insistence and by the

affection Charles feels for her. However, he is disappointed when he discovers the loss of his uncle's heritage and realizes he has become less rich than Ernestina. This is one of the background reasons which leads him to cancel the wedding, together with the major one regarding his sentiments for Sarah.

> Charles now felt himself in a very displeasing position of inferiority as regards Ernestina. His income from his father's estate had always been sufficient for his needs; but he has not increased the capital. As the future master of Winsyatt he could regard himself as his bride's financial equal; as mere rentier he must become her financial dependant (Fowles 219).

Thirdly, despite being a spoilt child, Ernestina is described as very submissive and sensitive. She is very busy both with the organization of the wedding and the decisions about the furniture for the new house, which Charles is supposed to inherit from his uncle. This is the reason why, after the discovery that Charles's uncle was waiting for an heir, Ernestina's reaction is similar to that of a lady in distress. This is a typical Victorian feature, which is the excessive and oversensitive reaction to an event. According to the Victorian scholars, this is because women are more sensitive and bound to be overwhelmed by passion and feelings.

On the contrary, men can resist this high tide of emotions through the use of reason. In this episode, in fact, Ernestina is highly shocked, and her reaction is a mixture of hopelessness and rage, as 'she had very recently cried, and […] now sat twisting a lace handkerchief in a vindicative manner' (Fowles 200). However, although her reaction could on the one hand remind the figure of the lady in distress, on the other hand, Charles defines it as 'unladylike'. This

is because he expected ‘gentle sympathy, not a sharp rage’ (Fowles 202). In fact, despite her being a gentle and keen Victorian girl, she seems to have a spoilt side, which does not allow anything to escape from her control. An example is her subtle mistreating of the servant Mary, who hates and envies her, or the episode in which she is reading a passage of lady of la Garaye to Charles, and she throws the book against him because he is not paying attention to her.

The relationship between Ernestina and Charles is the evident example of a Victorian relationship. In order to explain better this concept, it is necessary to analyse their relationship under two points of view: physical and mental. As regards the physical perspective, it has already been said that ‘Ernestina Freeman stands in the novel for the Puritan ideal of the middle-class woman’ (Onega 82). As a result of her chastity and her Puritanism, she shows no clear sign of passion. They avoid kissing on the mouth also because it is not respectable for a middle-class lady and a gentleman to kiss in public. In fact, in occasion of their official engagement, the narrator states that ‘they did not kiss. They could not’ (Fowles 83). Charles only embraces her ‘as if feigning a passion he does not feel’ (McKee 152). Later when alone ‘they kissed, with lips as chastely asexual as children’s’ (Fowles 83).

After some time from their engagement their passion never blooms. Charles feels for her a profound affection, but he realizes that she is too young to understand him, because she lacks a lot of life experiences. Moreover, Charles ‘could not bring himself to kiss her on the mouth so he grasped her shoulders and lightly embraced her on both temples. He then made to go’ (Fowles 266). Nevertheless, when it is requested by Ernestina, he presses his lips on hers, he kisses her hands, or he kisses her ‘hastily on the crown of her head’ (Fowles).

However, although the passion has been slightly present between the two since the beginning, it is inversely proportional to the growing of his feelings for Sarah. In fact, at the beginning Sarah is not considered a problem as he is convinced to feel for her only true sympathy due to her outcast condition. After their third meeting and the following confession, he begins to feel guilty and disrespectful towards Ernestina, both because he passes much time with the scarlet woman of Lyme in a disreputable place, giving thus voice to possible gossip, and also because he starts unconsciously to feel sexually and mentally attracted by Sarah. After the kiss in the barn with Sarah, 'what he felt consciously was a sense of pollution: to feel carnal desire now, when he had touched another woman lips' (Fowles 267). At some point, the narrator grants two perspectives of the outcome of the relationship between Charles and Ernestina. The former coincides with the first ending provided by Fowles in chapter 44, whereas the latter is summarised in chapter 50.

On the one hand, the epilogue narrated in chapter 44, although improbable and simplistic, grants a happy ending to their relationship. In fact, according to the Victorian conventions, Charles does not sin but returns on his path. For this reason, he does not stop in Exeter to visit Sarah, but he travels to Lyme in order to confess to Ernestina the whole truth regarding the clandestine meetings between Sarah and him in the Undercliff. He offers her a Swiss brooch as a symbol of reconciliation and as a promise of faithfulness. In fact, he 'drew her head round and kissed her mouth and then her closed eyes' (Fowles 338), then he whispers, 'I wish tomorrow were our wedding day' (Fowles 339). Consequently, they are reported to have lived together although not happily, and started a family made of more or less seven children. However, the comment which the narrator grants the reader is that 'one lived

by irony and sentiment, one observed convention' (Fowles 339) as an explanation of their difference and of the fact that between the two there is no true love, but that their relationship is based on affection and irony, but especially on convention.

This is the demonstration of why this ending is considered conventional but improbable. It is defined conventional because it strictly adheres to the rules of Victorian society, as the redeemed fiancée confesses his sins and resists temptation given by passions. Nevertheless, it is improbable because, the lack of the protagonists' future happiness can be foreseen and moreover their future does not correspond to their innermost desires. In fact, Charles is starting his metamorphosis, though still unconsciously, into an existentialist man and as a result, he connects his decision and his freedom of choice to happiness.

On the other hand, the second perspective provided by the author is opposite to the first one. Chapter 50, in fact, reports the breaking of the betrothal between Charles and Ernestina. After the sexual and adulterous intercourse with Sarah in Exeter, −despite having discovered her deceit− Charles is firmly convinced of his feelings for her and of his existentialist will of starting a new life with her and consequently of leaving his whole past life behind. This supposes, however, the breaking of his engagement with Ernestina, who is looking forward to seeing him in Lyme.

Firstly, he claims not to be worthy of her, that 'I continue to have, the greatest respect and affection for you' (Fowles 380), and that his feelings are not enough for a wedding, although he affirms: 'I liked you very much. I sincerely believed that, that liking would grow into love' (Fowles 380). At this moment,

the heart-broken woman attempts to convince him and to change his mind by promising to 'become better. I should learn to please you, I should learn to make you love me for what I have become' (Fowles 382). As a result, Charles feels guilty due to her willing abnegation on behalf of his happiness and self-realization. For this reason, he decides to tell her the truth, that he has fallen in love with another woman. Ernestina faints at the end of the discussion, after promising him a bitter revenge, and Charles leaves with the existentialist thought that 'one can't resurrect what was never there' (Fowles 382). The narrator through this statement aims to convey two meanings. Firstly, he refers to the faith in oneself, which Charles lacks, as he despises himself and is dissatisfied with his life. Secondly, he hints at the never-existing love between Charles and Ernestina, namely an affection that never grew into love.

At some point, a comparison between the two female protagonists of the story is necessary. On the one side there is Ernestina, the ideal Victorian angel in the house, representing the arising middle-class. She is voted to abnegation on behalf of his husband's desires. She is chaste, immune to sin, respectful, innocent and conventional. Not only is she accepting, but also willing to adhere to the role, in which the society casts her. Her relationship with Charles, however, is not driven by passion or love, but only by affection and Victorian duty and respect for conventions. According to Alison McKee 'although Charles and Ernestina are not, of course, literally brother and sister, Charles behaves toward her as he would toward a sister' (152), as to foresee that their relationship would be incestuous.

On the other side, there is Sarah, the living emblem of the fallen woman, who has relegated herself into the role of an outcast with the aim to escape sufferings, the bias and judgement of people. She is willing to find her place in

the world, despite the strict conventions of the Victorian society, and she achieves her aim by taking advantage of Charles. Their relationship, all things considered, resembles much more an affair, constituted of clandestine meetings in devilish places, passionate and prohibited kisses and a brief sexual intercourse. However, it can be said that their affair started not with affection as in his relationship with Ernestina, but from sympathy. His piety and will of helping her out from her condition, drive Charles everyday nearer to Sarah, until the moment in which, through the development of physical and mental attraction, he realizes to be in love with her. Nevertheless, it is not completely clear whether he is truly in love with Sarah as a person, or if he just loves the idea of her as a symbol of freedom and of self- realization, and of a way to escape from a dissatisfying life with no attractive future. Sarah on her part, admits that she truly loves him, despite having used him to free herself.

However, the whole perspective of the story depends on the point of view. This is because, due to multiple endings, several intrusions and the narrator's commentaries, readers are left with the possibility to choose the development and the ending of the story, which suits best the plot according to their ideals. To sum up, not only the outcome but also the perception and the judgement of the two love stories is left to the audience.

II.4. References to Thomas Hardy in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

The French Lieutenant's Woman portrays several references to a nineteenth-century realist writer, who is Thomas Hardy. He is one of the sources of inspiration for Fowles in this work of postmodern fiction. Not only does he employ Hardy's poems as epigraphs opening several chapters, but he also clearly states references to him throughout the novel, especially in matter of love and delusion.

One of the novels which Fowles takes as his inspiration is *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. In fact, the figure of Sarah reproduces under many aspects that of Tess. They both are two country girls, raised in poor country families and most importantly, over-educated in relation to their social status. They are not willing to accept the cast-division of the society according to richness, and consequently they are not willing to adapt to a dissatisfying condition of life. In the respective stories, they both try to overcome this situation of impasse, despite using two different methods.

On the one hand, Tess tries to reach her fortune by presenting to the manor of the D'Urbervilles, of whom she recently discovered to be an heir. On the other hand, Sarah chooses to play a part by giving voice to a lie she invented, about her seduction by the French Lieutenant. In Tess's case, however, the situation worsens due to the fact that she has been raped by the wicked Alec D'Urbervilles and that she consequently gives birth to a child baptised Sorrow, who dies only a few weeks later. The whole matter seems to be solved when she moves outside the town, in order to work in a Diary, where she meets her old acquaintance Angel Clare, with whom she falls in love. The same seems

to happen for Sarah, though from a different perspective. She decides to move out from the Talbot's house to Lyme Regis in order to become an outcast and to live out of the prejudices. To the readers she appears totally unhappy in her situation, however, she declares that she feels merciful not to be on the subordinated condition of the other women, forced to live under the Victorian conventions.

Sarah's occasion to restart seems to present in the figure of Charles Smithson, who she finally manages to seduce. However, if Sarah is able to move away and start a new life in the Bohemian circle of the Pre-Raphaelites, the fate is not so accommodating with Tess. In fact, she marries Angel, but they soon separate due to her shameful pre-marital loss of virginity, of which he was unaware. Further in the novel she yields to Alec's request of becoming his mistress, however, during a discussion she stabs him to death. As a consequence, she flees together with Angel, who forgives her, and they reach Stonehenge where they rest during the night. When they wake up, however, Tess is imprisoned and executed for murder.

Although the two female protagonists look similar and their lives are commonly pervaded by sufferings, they achieve two opposites outcomes. Tess dies, although at least she is allowed to leave this world forgiven by her lover and ultimately free from her guilt and her shame thanks to her murder of Alec. Differently, Sarah decides to act a role in order to reach a freedom, able to grant her happiness, satisfaction and self-realization. However, the typical atmosphere created by Hardy is constantly perceived as tragic and full of sufferings.

Susana Onega reports that Thomas Hardy experienced a personal drama which provided him 'with one recurrent theme for his novels' (91), that is

> a hero or heroine, faced with having to choose between love and social advantage, mistakes social profit for happiness and condemns himself or herself to a sterile and frustrating marriage. On other occasions, when the hero falls in love and decides to attach himself to the beloved one, tragedy often arises due to social and psychological barriers (92).

This pessimism is due to his personal choice between the beloved woman and a suitable conventional marriage. In fact, in Chapter 35 of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Fowles recollects Hardy's personal story, and answers in this way to the question 'what has Providence done to Mr Hardy that he should rise up in the arable land of Wessex and shake his fists at his Creator?' (Fowles 273). Actually, Hardy was in love and engaged with his cousin Tryphena, an 'exceptional young woman' (Fowles 274), nevertheless they suddenly broke the engagement after five years, due to the fact that they were supposed to be not cousins but illegitimate half-siblings. He wrote a lot of poems dedicated to his beloved and to the disastrous fate which separated them. However, he later chose the marriage with the rich and insensitive Lavinia Gifford, a decision which he is said to have repented his whole life.

The fact that he was not courageous enough to defy the society and its conventions through a scandalous union, is reflected in his novels in 'this tension, then-between lust and renunciation, undying recollection and undying repression, lyrical surrender and tragic duty, between the sordid facts and their noble use' (Fowles 275). This is the exact content of most of his

novels, especially of *Jude the Obscure*. In fact, Fowles sustains that Hardy associates Tryphena with both Tess and Sue.

According to Onega, the comparison between Sue of *Jude the Obscure* and Sarah is evident. They are both intelligent, careless of the conventions imposed by society, and therefore considering themselves equal to men. They represent the new modern woman who is able to use people and situations on her behalf. Onega claims in fact that 'both of them provoke tumultuous passions in their respective lovers, but would only yield to them as a means to keeping them in their power: Sue to make Jude forget about Arabella; Sarah to separate Charles from Ernestina' (Onega 92). Finally, they abandon their lovers, destroying the whole situation. In fact, as the theory of the hopeful monster proves, the new type in order to acquire identity has to repeat the action, putting someone else in their position. This is the explanation of the fact that both Charles and Jude find themselves in the position in which their beloved ones were before, causing them 'the leap into the void, having seen the radical absurdity of life' (Onega 92, 93). As a result, both Sue and Sarah are responsible for their lovers' destruction, which results in Jude nihilism and consequent suicide, and Charles metamorphosis into an existentialist.

However, there is an important difference regarding the epilogue. Although undoubtedly Hardy represents a tragic ending, Fowles decides to grant his male protagonist another chance, and as a consequence, Charles's transformation into an existentialist should not be seen as a defeat, but as a possibility to create a new individual with a new identity.

Nevertheless, 'the source of strain and unhappiness stems in them from the man's inability to grasp fully the complexity of the woman, and from his

insistence that she conforms to his own illusory idea of her' (Onega 92). In other words, the man is guilty of his own unhappiness, because he is unable to distinguish the real female figure from the idea of her, he created in his dreams. This is demonstrated by the fact that Charles is unable to foresee the unhappiness, which he will experience on choosing Sarah over Ernestina and at the same time Jude is not able to realise the dark side of his union with Sue.

However, Charles seems to have no chance: he cannot marry Ernestina and be haunted by the thought of Sarah, but at the same time choosing Sarah does not imply a happy future together. This leads to the belief that 'it seems as if in Hardy, no matter how you choose, human happiness is always threatened by the combined forces of social conventions and bad luck' (Onega 92), although Fowles attempts to convey a postmodern view of this pessimistic concept, by inserting in it a bliss of hope through Charles's 'atom of faith' (Fowles 470).

III.Possession

III.1. Love and Sentimentality in *Possession:* The Relationship between Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte

Antonia Susan Byatt attempts to replicate Fowles's success in postmodern fiction, through her masterpiece *Possession* (1990). It was written in response to *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, in the sense that it explores the same topics and is set in the same period, which is the Victorian Age, aiming through parody both to represent and criticise its social conventions and rules. However, the structure of *Possession* is largely more complicated, as the author contemporarily presents two love stories, one set in the Victorian Age and the other in 1990, and he occasionally interweaves them.

On the one side there is the love story between the two fictional Victorian poets Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte mostly held through an epistolary correspondence. On the other side, there is the postmodern affair between two academic scholars, Roland Mitchell and Maud Bailey, investigating on the life of the poets and consequently on their correspondence and adulterous affair. As a result, the two plots repeat themselves continuously, mirroring each other and granting the reader the impression of confusion and misunderstanding.

Moreover, the pastiche of the fictional poems, proses, letters, diary's pages provide an overwhelming but challenging experience for readers. The whole intertext is completely fictional, and derives from the creative power of Byatt. In fact, the letters are extended for a consistent part of the book of some seventy pages, and in the same way the poems and the prose of the two poets occupy about sixty-five pages, granting them power and credibility as artists (Heilman 609).

The first storyline which needs to be analysed is the love affair between the two poets Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte. The whole matter is born with the discovery of Roland −who is an Ash's scholar− of an unfinished love letter written by Ash for a mysterious woman, and hidden inside a copy of Vico's *Principi di Scienza Nuova*, from which Ash was taking inspiration for his *Ragnarök*. The letter says:

> Dear Madam,
>
> Since our pleasant and unexpected conversation I have thought of little else. Is there any way in which it can be resumed, more privately and at more leisure? […] did you not find it as strange as I did that we should so immediately understand each other so well? For we did understand each other uncommonly well, did we not? Or is this perhaps a product of the over-excited brain of a middle-aged and somewhat disparaged poet, when he finds that his ignored, his arcane […] had after all one clear-eyed and amused reader and judge? I would not have you think that I do not recognise the superiority of your own fine ear and finer taste (Byatt 6,7).

From this draft, the overwhelming admiration Ash feels for this unknown woman emerges clearly, and it highlights the intellectual attraction he felt for her during their meeting, because of her intellective superiority and her fine taste in matter of literature and poetry. Moreover, he was so struck that he

> cannot but feel, though it may be an illusion, induced by the delectable drug of understanding~~, that you must in some way share my eagerness that further conversation could be mutually profitable that we must meet. I cannot~~ do not think I ~~am~~ can be mistaken in my belief that our meeting was also ~~important~~ interesting to you, and that however much you may value your seclusion (Byatt 7).

Ash's aim is clear, he desires another encounter with this mysterious lady who fascinated him so much. The sentence crossed out suggests his deep involvement, which is difficult to hide, however, mixed with the fear of being too straightforward and with the risk to be mistaken for insolent and inappropriate.

Roland discovers that Mr Crabb is the name of the man hosting the breakfast party in which their first encounter took place. He attempts in this way to retrace the list of the participants, and suggests that the addressee of this unfinished letter could be Miss Christabel LaMotte. For this reason, Roland requires the help of Maud Bailey, a fascinating and brilliant LaMotte's scholar. They attempt to trace back the path of the lives of both the Victorian poets in order to find some common points or places, and some concrete evidence of this shocking and supposed affaire. The importance of the whole matter indeed lies in the fact that, this discovery throws both the protagonists into a new light. This happens because, Ash was married to his wife Ellen, and

apparently happy despite the absence of children, and as a result an adulterous relationship 'did not fit into the preconceived mythic character of Randolph Henry Ash' (Fountain 203), thus providing Roland a possibility to be successful and innovative in his academic job. In the same way, Maud is shocked at the discovery of the hidden adulterous life of the chaste poetess, who lived with her friend and artist Blanche Glover, and therefore she was supposed to be lesbian. Both the scholars choose to pursue a common quest for truth, and they start their investigation from LaMotte's house.

While browsing in Christabel's room, they are able to find a bundle of hidden letters by following the clue in some verses of her poem about dolls. From here, the love affair between the two is revived and portrayed through their epistolary correspondence. Byatt's artificial device of the found correspondence is of great importance. She is portraying actually something totally fictional, deriving from her fantasy, although she forces the reader to think that the letters are a true piece of historical evidence. In other words, she creates a historical fiction inside another fiction.

In order to represent the development of the relationship between the Victorian Randolph and Christabel, it is worth to provide an excursus of their correspondence, by analysing their most significant letters.

The first letter is sent by Ash and resembles the unfinished copy found by Roland in the book. Although very similar as regards the topics, it is much more appropriate in the tone and does not show the emotional involvement and passion of the draft. In fact, Ash celebrates Christabel's intellective superiority, wondering the possibility of a further meeting to discuss about literature. To this chaste letter, a chaste answer follows. Christabel seems to be very modest

and not to possess a great consideration of herself as a woman. In fact, she uses the simile of the spider to explain her personality and admits that she is 'little inclined to take unorthodox snaps at visiting or trespassing strangers' (Byatt 101), because of a sense of self-protection. Moreover, she claims to have 'no graces, and as for the wit you may have perceived in me when we met, you saw, you must have seen, only the glimmering and glister of your own brilliance refracted from the lumpen surface of a dead Moon' (Byatt 101). As a result, she proposes to have a literary correspondence as the only skills she possesses are in matter of writing as 'I am a creature of my Pen, Mr Ash, my Pen is the best of me, and I enclose a Poem, in earnest of my great goodwill towards you' (Byatt 101).

Thence starts a correspondence, which at the beginning deals merely with their poems and with philosophical themes. In fact, they wonder about the existence of a Creator and of a supreme Faith, as in Randolph's opinion they are living in the age of reason and of 'scientific history' (Byatt 198), to explain the existence of everything. Moreover, they talk about the poems they are processing as *Swammerdam* for Ash, and Christabel's *Melusina*. He considers Christabel as 'some sort of Muse' (Byatt 223), and he remembers 'every small word of our one conversation− I remember your face− turned aside a little−but decisive− I remember your speaking with such feeling' (Byatt 203). From his words it can be perceived that between the two poets there is not only literary esteem or wit's admiration, but also some kind of affection developing at least from Ash's point of view. In fact, soon he starts 'calling myself your friend […] for my true thoughts have spent more time in your company than in anyone else's, these last two or three months, and where my thoughts are, there am I' (Byatt 214).

However, Christabel's answer is not so positive. In fact, she claims that 'we have rushed down a Slope −I at least have rushed− where we might have descended more circumspectly− or Not at All even' (Byatt 218). This is because in her opinion 'there are dangers in our continued conversation' (Byatt 218) and she therefore proposes to cease their correspondence forever. This happens for two reasons. On the one hand, 'the world would not look well upon such letters −between a woman living in a shared solitude as I do− and a man −even if that man were a great and wise poet−' (Byatt 218). Despite the clearness of her statement, this is only a coverage explanation.

In fact, on the other hand, she feels limited by the affection that this correspondence is implying. The whole concept can be clearly expressed through her words, 'I am jealous of my freedom to live as I do −and manage my own affairs− and work my work' (Byatt 218). Nevertheless, she claims the importance not to be careless towards the Victorian society, to whom eyes she 'must be more than usually careful to remain sufficiently respectable' (Byatt 218). This suggests the fact that she is subdued to the rules and convention of the Victorian society which does not allow women to enforce relationships, though epistolary, with men. However, at the same time she feels entrapped by this kind of relationship, because she needs to be alone in her individuality and solitude. This letter is shocking for Ash, who tries to reassure her. He believes that they are 'simply conversing− with a hint of harmless gallantry, courtly devotion perhaps− but mostly with a surely not illicit desire to speak of the art, or craft, we both profess' (Byatt 219). He defines in this way their relationship as a kind of innocent friendship based on art, poetry and wit. Secondly, he reassures her by stating that he has:

> no designs on your freedom […] I respect and honour and admire that freedom and the product of it, your work, your words, your web of language. I know to my own cost the unhappiness that lack of freedom can bring to women- the undesirability, the painfulness, the waste, of the common restriction placed upon them (Byatt 219).

Hidden in his words, there is a promise to leave to Christabel her beloved freedom in every sphere of life. Ash hints also at the lack of freedom, which women are used to experience in the Victorian Age, a theme which will be later explored in this chapter. At the end of this letter, Randolph inquires whether her view of the matter has been overshadowed by the opinion of someone else and pleads her to grant him the possibility to write one more time in order to send her his *Swammerdam*, adding that 'I do not know− so quickly have you become part of my life− how I should do without you' (Byatt 220).

According to Christabel 'the−precious −letters −are too much and too little− and above all and first, I should say, compromising. What a cold sad word. It is His word− the World's word− and her word too […]. But it entails freedom. […] the injustice is− that I require my freedom−from you− who respect it so fully' (Byatt 221). Despite holding in this way a respectful and artistic friendship, she feels that 'I know in my intrinsic Self− the Threat is there' because 'there are things we have not said to each other beyond the −One− you so starkly− Defined' (Byatt 222). As a result, she admits for the first time that she is attracted by the Victorian poet, and involved in something more serious and dangerous than a simple friendship. Ash on his part confirms this thought by admitting that he is 'fascinated and intrigued' by Christabel, her wit and her otherness, however, he ignores the reason why he insists on

writing her despite her decision to cease their correspondence and her consequent silence. He only claims that this need proceeds 'straightforward from my honest thoughts which are closer to my essential self than any such non-sensical gallantry' (Byatt 223), and pleads her to remain his muse.

At this moment, a turning point in the development of this relationship occurs. In fact, from the last letter Ash has received no answer, and therefore he sends another one in which he hints at Christabel's silence. In the answer, Christabel asks for forgiveness, and explains that she has received no letter since her last answer, −including the copy of *Swammerdam*− because her friend Blanche was apparently jealous of their epistolary relationship and so intercepted their letters and destroyed them. The decisive turning point at this moment is Christabel will of meeting Randolph because she says, 'I have an apology to make that I wish to make in person' (Byatt 225). Thence she proposes him to meet in Richmond Park, where she would wait for his arrival for the next three days at eleven o'clock.

Apparently, the two Victorians finally meet in the park and have a long walk. Although their meeting is not described by the narrator, it can be portrayed by the words written in the subsequent letters. Ash claims that he 'held your hand […] it rested in mine, with trust, I hope and believe' (Byatt 226), he affirms to be a gentleman and so requires a further meeting. Moreover, he praises their encounter, saying that their walk was 'never-to-be-forgotten' (Byatt 226). However, the reaction of the reluctant Christabel is not predictable, because she admits that 'I shall not easily forget our shining progress across the wet earth. Nor any Word you said −not the most courteous Nothing− nor yet the moments snatched to speak Truth and Justice about the Future Life' (Byatt 227). Apparently, she finds herself confused

because she is attracted by Randolph, however, at the same time she is aware of the impossibility of this relationship and of the harm it would create. She affirms that 'I am overawed by your voice −in truth− by Presence− however taken' and she wonders 'shall we see each other again? Will it to do good or harm?' (Byatt 227).

The answer is provided by Randolph's next letter, which is namely a love declaration. From his words, it is evident that there has been another meeting in the park, when there has also been a hug. Despite recognising that the whole matter is inconvenient, Randolph cannot end their affair because 'it goes against nature […] Dame Nature herself −who this morning smiles at me in and through you' (Byatt 229). He therefore admits 'I am happy – as I have never been happy' (Byatt 229), because he feels himself in love.

> I am lost. I shall see you −as you were the moment before the madness− until the day I die. […] Never have I felt such a concentration of my whole Being− on one object, in one place, at one time− a blessed eternity of momentariness that went on forever, it seemed. (Byatt 228)

He feels the urgent need to express his deepest feelings to her and continues:

> I must say to you what is in my mind. The unforgivable embrace was no sudden impulse −no momentary excitation− but came from what is deepest in me, and I think also what is best. I must tell you- ever since that first meeting, I have known you were in my fate, however from time to time I may have disguised that knowledge from myself. I have dreamed nightly of your face and walked the streets of my daily life with the rhythms of your writing singing in my silent brain (Byatt 228).

As a consequence, he admits: ‘I have called you my Muse […] I could call you, with even greater truth −my Love− […] for I most certainly love you and in all ways possible to man and most fiercely’ (Byatt 228). However, being ‘rational nineteenth-century beings’ he also expresses the dark side of the situation, that is the impossibility which this love implies. In fact, he realizes that ‘it is a love for which there is no place in this world −a love my diminished reason tells me can and will do neither of us any good, a love I tried to hide cunningly from, to protect you from’ (Byatt 229). Despite this, he pleads her for another encounter, ‘a small place, for a limited time− in which to marvel that we have found each other?’ (Byatt 229).

Christabel has a migraine as a consequence of this love declaration and tries to resist to her feelings by writing in response that ‘I cannot let you burn me up. I cannot’ (Byatt 231). In other words, she cannot surrender to this love, because the most important thing for her is her solitude, which she affirms ‘is threatened, that you threaten, without which I am nothing’ (Byatt 231). Randolph, however, attempts to reassure her that he does not threaten her solitude, and that he would accept her ‘blessed desire to be alone [which is] the only thing which makes possible what would else in very truth harm someone‘ (Byatt 232).

Therefore, he associates her with the mythological figure of the phoenix and implores her to concede him another encounter, as the time still consent it. Progressing with the letters, it is clear that his request has been satisfied and that he has also been invited to visit Christabel in order to have tea. Although he blames himself for visiting her, because it is not suitable for a married gentleman to visit a lady alone at her place, he clarifies that his love for Christabel is different from the love he feels for his wife and for this reason,

this cannot hurt Ellen. Nevertheless, he declares that 'everything I do these days, or think, or breathe, or see is to do with you' (Byatt 235). Christabel, who has not yet clearly expressed her feelings for the poet, reveals her whole heart in this letter, and her desperate voice affirms:

> I am so sad […] It is that you take me out of myself and give me back −diminished− I am wet eyes−and touched hands− and lips am I too− a very present- famished-fragment of a woman− who has not her desire in truth− and yet has desire superabundantly −ah− this is painful− […] I was once something else −something alone and better. (Byatt 236,237).

She therefore longs for her former self, made out of solitude and individuality. She feels diminished because of the fact that she feels only a material desire of a man, deprived of her individuality and of her independent spirit. She also wonders whether the society and the world allowed them to be together, would they have gained freedom? Ash's romantic answer aims to reassure the poetess that he does not love her for her physical aspect or her beauty, but he affirms 'I love your soul and with that your poetry […] while all lips hands and eyes resemble each other somewhat […] your thought clothed with your words is uniquely you, came with you, would vanish if you vanished' (Byatt 238). This connotates a love that is spiritual and intellectual before than physical.

Nevertheless, the physical issue is not absent, but it will be introduced in the development of the story. In fact, in the last two letters found by Roland and Maud, there is an interruption of the usual love declaration carried along for the whole correspondence. This happens because they talk about a journey, in which Ash is undecided whether to leave or not, for the reason that he does

not want to abandon Christabel. However, he hints at ‘a small chance’ (Byatt 239), which will do in his opinion irreparable damage to her life. From this letter can be understood that he possibly requests her to leave with him, and apparently, she accepts. In fact, in her last letter she affirms that ‘it is done […] no more Harm can be done by this than has already been done’ (Byatt 239). What is going to happen at this point? What is the harmful situation they are arguing about?

To answer to these questions, it is worth firstly to observe that if until this moment the focus of this Victorian relationship has been spiritual and intellectual, from this moment it will also become physical. This happens because, through their careful research, the two scholars discover that Christabel has left with Randolph to North Yorkshire, where they spend the summer in his household near the sea as husband and wife. The chapter narrating this sort of honeymoon is chapter fifteen and opens by portraying a scene of two passengers travelling in a train coach. This scene is ambiguous, because the reader cannot fully understand if the couple is made by the two the Victorians poets or by the modern scholars. This mystery is solved once the narrator describes Christabel’s clothes, which are typical examples of Victorian fashion. The two passengers are reading, and their first interaction occurs when the coach is empty. At this moment Randolph ‘leaned forward and possessed himself of one of the little gloved hands, which lay still and then clasped his’ (Byatt 327) and attempts to make a clumsy proposal. He wonders ‘whether you would wish […] to lodge and manage yourself separately from me after this point− or whether− or whether− you would wish to travel as my wife’ (Byatt 327). Christabel accepts to continue their journey as his wife and

accepts the ring he offers her as a symbol of their love and of their unofficial wedding.

Randolph feels as possessed by her, especially by her sharpness, harshness, fierceness and absolutism so that 'he had known immediately that she was for him, she was to do with him, as she really was or could be, or in freedom might have been' (Byatt 330). However, Christabel does not seem to be equally involved, as her attitude towards Randolph appears quite cold. For example, she does not take care of him as a wife, she stares at him but with no affection, and she does not hold his arm while walking. Randolph associates this inner coldness and apparent lack of affection with the fear of losing her independence. As a result, his aim is to make her realise that 'she was not his possession, he would show her she was free, he would see her flash her wings' (Byatt 332).

Despite this superficial distance, during the first night of this so-called honeymoon, their first sexual intercourse occurs. The whole situation appears to the reader very embarrassing and especially clumsy. In fact, when Randolph asks Christabel to prepare herself for the night, she consents though 'not at all submissively, but with some amusement' (Byatt 334). Although she is a virgin, she seems to possess 'such delicate skills, such informed desire' (Byatt 338), and therefore 'she met him with passion, fierce as his own, and knowing too, for she exacted her pleasure for him, opened herself to it, clutched for it, with short animal cries' (Byatt 336). Nevertheless, her attitude can be seen as both egoistic and elusive. This is also because she is not interested in making something specific to pleasure him. In fact, Randolph juxtaposes her with something liquid, difficult to clutch and 'moving through his grasping fingers, as thought she was waves of the sea rising all round him' (Byatt 336).

Byatt starts from the description of the sexual intercourse to provide a portrait of Christabel's inner personality as someone ungrasping, elusive and difficult to understand. As a result, the reader continues wondering whether she really loves Randolph or whether she is regretting her choice. However, a possible answer can be provided by her never-leaving fear of suffering. In fact, it can be perceived that she is afraid of offering her whole self to him because in her heart, she already knows their fate, especially that their time is limited and that their happiness together cannot last forever. Therefore, everything is lived with a mixture of love, anguish and suffering, and an example of this can be seen in the first night of love when she wakes up and embraces him wondering 'how can we bear it? […] for so short a time. How can we sleep this time away? […] everyday we shall have less. And then none' (Byatt 337). Her love, indeed, is expressed in her sentence 'I am not at all safe, with you. But I have no desire to be elsewhere' (Byatt 338).

Randolph loves her fortitude, her harshness, her authoritative attitude but especially her art and her wit. As far as Christabel is concerned, there is something else she appreciates in Ash beside his poetic genius and his gallant manners. She explains 'you are in love with all the human race, Randolph Ash. […] it is you who are the life of things. You stand there and draw them into you. You turn your gaze on the dull and insipid to make them shine. […] I love that in you. Also I fear it. I need quiet and nothingness. I tell myself I should fade and glimmer if long in your hot light' (Byatt 338,339). The last manifestation of their brief affair is the last day in Boggle Hole where he observes her, and in seeing her slim waist he recalls 'her nakedness as he knew it, and his hands around that narrowing' (Byatt 340). They coldly discuss about time and tiredness, and they realize the imminent and forced end of their

relationship, both bitterly but also peacefully in their resignation. Nevertheless, Randolph promises that he will never get tired of her and portrays one last image of her as an hourglass because 'she held his time, she contained his past and his future, both now cramped together' (Byatt 340). This could be perceived as an anticipation of their fate, especially of the fact that they will be inevitably linked for life.

Once returned to London, Christabel painfully discovers the suicide of her friend −and possible lover− Blanche Glover, who both depressed and jealous of the relationship between the two and feeling a 'superfluous creature' (Byatt 365) thrusts herself in the River Thames, where she drowns with stones sewn inside the pockets of her clothes. However, from Ellen Ash's diary, which is handed to Maud by the scholar Beatrice Nest, it is discovered that before her suicide, Blanche visited Randolph's wife in order to tell her the whole matter of the correspondence and subsequent relationship between the two. However, once returned from his trip, Randolph decides to be honest with Ellen and confesses his affair with Christabel.

The poetess Christabel completely disappears. From the Journal of Sabine de Kercoz, who is Christabel's French cousin living in Brittany, it is known that she finds refuge in France. After a silent pregnancy− nearly as if ignoring her condition− she delivers her baby in a near Convent, although she returns as a revenant without him/her among her shocked relatives. Everyone believes the child dead, and Christabel at the end returns to England.

The two poets meet one last time in a spirit-summoning séance held by the medium Mrs Lees, where Ash interrupts Christabel's interaction with a spirit, who is supposed to be Blanche, in order to be told about the destiny of his

child. Christabel as a result, accuses him to have made a murderess of her, which − she will later explain− is referred to Blanche and not to their daughter.

In a draft of an unfinished letter found by Ellen, Randolph expresses all his disappointment for Christabel's attitude and requires information on his son, who was told by Sabine −as he went to France to look for Christabel− to be dead. He wonders 'why did you turn away from me? Out of pride, out of fear, out of independence, out of sudden hatred, at the injustice of the different fates of men and women?' (Byatt 544). His words describe fully Christabel's personality, for whom, according to Sabine 'normal acts of friendliness are a deadly intrusion' (Byatt 411). However, hearing that Randolph was ultimately dying, Christabel decides to write an explanatory letter, enclosing it in a letter addressed to Ellen Ash. She asks for her forgiveness and appeals to her sense of justice in her decision to hand Randolph her letter or not. At the end, Ellen decides not to give him the letter and buries it with him, together with the love letters between husband and wife.

However, the last sentence Randolph utters before dying is 'I saw her. I should have -looked after her. How could I? I could only − hurt her− […] in my watch. Her hair. Tell her.' (Byatt 539). However, Ellen cannot understand what he is talking about. This mystery is revealed by Christabel's unopened last letter buried with Randolph, after the profanation of his grave by the American scholar Mortimer Cropper. She thus reveals the whole truth. She writes

> you have a daughter, who is well, and married, and the mother of a beautiful boy. I send you her picture. You will see −she is beautiful and resembles, I like to think, both her parents, neither of whom she knows to be her parent. […] when we two parted […] we agreed −on the last

> black day− to leave, to leave each other and never for a moment look back. […] I found a place to go […] where I should make no one but myself responsible for our fate −hers and mine− And then I consulted the one possible helper −my sister Sophie− who arranged to help me in a lie more appropriate to a Romance than to my previous quiet life. […] so our daughter was born in Brittany, in the Convent, and carried to England, where Sophie took her and brought her up as her own (Byatt 593)

Moreover, she adds that she feels like an 'old witch in a turret' (Byatt 594), and that Maia, their daughter, does not love her because she sees her as the old and crazy spinster aunt. Christabel is firmly convinced that this treatment is her punishment for keeping Maia far from him, despite providing him with her reasons. She admits 'I was afraid, you see, that you would wish to take her, you and your wife, for your very own− and she was mine, I bore her− I could not let her go− and so I hid her from you− and you from her' (Byatt 594).

However, whether the mystery of the fruit of their relationship is finally revealed, what is still to be clarified is their love. On the one hand, Randolph writes to Christabel in his unfinished letter found by Ellen 'I loved you entirely then; I will not say now, I love you, for that would indeed be romance' (Byatt 544), comparing love with a candle, which goes out in absence of air. The reasons of his extinguished love for her are both the large amount of time passed since their relationship and also the ill-treatment and the sudden ceasing of whichever kind of contact by Christabel.

On the other hand, Christabel in her letter asks for forgiveness and regrets the past time. Especially, she does not regret 'the few sharp sweet days of passion […] for all passions run the same course to the same end' (Byatt 594,595) and are bound to end. What she actually regrets are 'our old letters, of poetry and other things, our trusting minds that recognised each the other' (Byatt 595). In fact, she feels satisfied about the result of their love, that is their daughter Maia. She further explains that she has been very angry with everyone for many years, but now in her maturity and in her calmness of mind 'I think of you again with clear love' (Byatt 596). Moreover, she is finally able to overcome the limits she used to impose on herself during their relationship, such as the need for solitude and independence. In fact, she admits that 'I would rather have lived alone, so, if you would have the truth. But since that might not be […] I thank God for you' (Byatt 597).

In the postscript set in 1868, Ash is wandering in the English countryside apparently looking for Christabel, and meets a little girl, who is revealed to be his daughter Maia. The two have a conversation about her family and he pleads the girl to tell her poetess aunt about their meeting and sends her his compliments. The message is never delivered but Randolph is able to obtain from her a lock of her hair, which he will guard forever in his watch.

As a consequence, the last question is answered, and the reader is finally able to understand to whom Randolph refers in his last sentence uttered to his wife Ellen. His last will was to inform Christabel of his meeting with their daughter. Nevertheless, they will both die unknowing. Indeed, they both are acquainted with the truth about the existence of their daughter, however, Randolph will not know about Christabel attempt to inform him of the truth as her letter will

never be handed to him, whereas Christabel will die unaware of the fact that he has actually met their daughter.

To conclude, their love starts as spiritual and intellectual. They are able to understand each other's thoughts, and they fall in love with their art and wit through an epistolary correspondence. Their love finds realization in the summer they spend together in the North Yorkshire as lovers, where they pretend to live another life as husband and wife. The liaison culminates in the physical act of sex, thanks to whom Christabel is able to give birth to their unknowing daughter, and she will pretend later to be her spinster aunt. Despite Randolph's love and his attempts to take care of them both, Christabel is resolute to respect their agreement and abruptly ends every kind of relationship and contact with them. However, in her maturity she decides to confess the whole truth to the ill Randolph who never reads her letter but who already knows the reality of things.

Their brief and intense relationship extinguishes like a flame for merely two reasons. Firstly, due to the social rules and convention of Victorian society, which do not allow them the freedom of having a life together. Secondly, because of Christabel's unnatural need for solitude, a refusal of any other human creature, gesture or love. The reader cannot avoid wondering whether they could have been happily together if they had lived in another century, and especially whether she had not been an antisocial and unconventional human being.

III.2. Possession and Obsession: The Relationship between Roland and Maud

The second sentimental relationship which the novel *Possession* deals with, is the love story between the two scholars Roland Mitchell and Maud Bailey. According to the initial description, it can be said that Roland is quite dull, not handsome and not altogether successful. In fact, he is a postgraduate with a precarious job in the Ash Factory, working as the assistant of Professor Blackadder. Moreover, he is poor and shares a flat in bad conditions with his girlfriend Val. She is a frustrated woman, who dislikes her job as a lawyer, and for this reason she is unsatisfied. She would have liked to develop a career as an academic, however she had no success. As a result, she is the breadwinner and her relationship with Roland does not work anymore due majorly to the reciprocal lack of respect and of love.

One day, while he is doing research in the library, Roland finds the two unfinished letters and decides to steal them because in his opinion they would represent an important discovery in his field, both capable to grant him prestige over his fellow scholars, and to provide a new vision of the Victorian poet Randolph Henry Ash, different from the one already known. After some research on the participants of this breakfast party at Crabb's house, Roland discovers that among the visitors there is a minor poetess who could be the addressee of his letters, namely Miss Christabel LaMotte.

For this reason, he decides to consult Maud Bailey, the scholar expert in feminism, and particularly in LaMotte. He inquires about possible connections between Ash and LaMotte; however, he decides initially to hide the issue of the found drafts. Maud provides him the Journal of Blanche Glover, where

there are hints at a possible lover for Christabel and at a great deal of letters. In order to understand better the whole matter, he dares to share with Maud the discovery of the two unfinished letters. Her first reaction is reproachful. This is because she does not fully understand his theft of a public document, and Roland explains that 'it was an impulse. Quick as a flash. […] I wanted them to be a secret. Private. And to do the work' (Byatt 56, 57). However, they both agree that it would represent a huge and intriguing discovery for both the scholarships. In fact, Maud invites Roland to spend the night at her place, in order to continue their investigation the day after.

Maud is a beautiful and brilliant woman. She is described as a successful academic, however a pretty insecure person. Although she is generally considered beautiful, being gifted with perfect features, white skin, green eyes and very fair hair, 'the doll-mask […] had nothing to do with her, nothing.' (Byatt 65). As regards her hair, once she has been hissed at a meeting, accused by feminists to dye her hair that fair blond colour only to attract men's attention. From that moment she wore it shaved, until her ex-boyfriend Fergus convinced her to grow it. At the moment of the narration, it is said that the affaire with Fergus has concluded, however, 'for pride, she would not crop it, […] but instead wore it always inside some sort of covering, hidden away' (Byatt 65). Her suppressed fascination is blended with an excessive elegance and a rigorous countenance as demonstrated throughout the narration that, however, are not sufficient to hide her femininity. Her elegance is displayed by mostly everything surrounding her, starting from her modern flat, to her glassy-green bathroom and her attitude towards people. As far as the personal relationships are concerned, she appears to be an insecure woman. Her silent and solitary mood induces the reader to understand that she is still

suffering from her previous relationship with Fergus, who now both attracts and repels her. As a result, the two scholars Roland and Maud can be perceived as two opposites in every aspect of life, nevertheless, they appear very similar in matter of love relationships, where they both seem to feel displaced, abandoned and insecure.

The two scholars visit the heirs of Christabel in Seal Court, where they are able to find – thanks to a hint found by Maud in a LaMotte's old poem– two bundles of papers, constituting the two-sided correspondence between the Victorian poets. Some time later they obtain the consensus to read and study the correspondence in Seal Court, where 'there was a frostiness between the two of them' (Byatt 151) and consequently they cannot agree on which method to adopt for their study. Maud proposes to proceed separately but Roland objects 'partly because he had a vision, which he now saw was ridiculous and romantic, of their two heads bent together over the manuscripts, following the story, sharing, he supposed, the emotion' (Byatt 151,152).

Moreover, Roland's romantic spirit is already so possessed with the story, that he cannot avoid feeling as the Victorian poet, and consequently he enjoys that love correspondence. This is the reason which will drive him to follow the same path of his Victorian predecessor. In fact, he feels stressed and 'this was primarily because the writer of the letters was himself under stress, confused by the object and recipient of his attentions. He found it difficult to fix this creature in his scheme of things' (Byatt 152). Ultimately, in seeing Maud's detached and silent attitude he realizes that he is not Ash and that 'these busy passionate letters, had never been written for him to read- […] they have been written for Christabel LaMotte' (Byatt 153). In the same way, Maud's neat categorization and her self-security are only a covering she uses to hide the

fact that she ‘had not found Christabel an easy companion all day’ (Byatt 159), and she realizes her unpleasant attitude to Roland, towards whom she has been impolite and bossy.

That same night they find themselves entrapped by a snowstorm and, as a consequence, they both spend the night at Seal Court. At this point, an embarrassing moment occurs in the bathroom, when Roland notices for the first time Maud’s hair, claiming that it was ‘running all over her shoulders and neck, swinging across her face’ (Byatt 172). As a result, he further realizes the difference between themselves, comparing Maud’s perfection to his imperfection using the metaphor of the mirror, who reflects her perfection, whereas ‘his own furry darkness was only a shadow on it’ (Byatt 174). During the night he experiences an uncanny dream ‘of his Melusinian meeting with Maud in her dragon kimono’ (Hennelly 463), dealing with both his concealed passion and castration anxiety.

The day after, they progress with the study of the correspondence, and they end with the belief that Christabel could have accompanied Randolph in Yorkshire for his natural expedition in 1859. As a consequence, the two scholars decide to repeat the same journey in Yorkshire in order to follow the path of the two poets. This has been Maud’s proposal, who now, differently from the beginning, feels much involved in the issue and shares with Roland the desire to solve this intriguing mystery. In fact, she claims

> I want to- to- follow the path. I feel taken over by this. I want to know what happened, and I want it to be me that finds out. I thought you were mad, when you came to Lincoln with your piece of stolen letter.

> Now I feel the same. It isn't professional greed. It's something more primitive (Byatt 284)

During this journey Roland and Maud become closer not only as concerns their work and their view on the matter, but also on the personal field. Firstly, they begin to discover some similarities between them, and it is very astonishing, as they appeared to be at the antipodes. The narrator claims that they both feel an urgent need for solitude, which they are able to find in the white beds of their respective hotel rooms. In fact, it is explained that

> the sheets were white and felt slightly starched; he imagined that they smelled of fresh air and even sea-salt. He moved down into their clean whiteness, scissoring his legs like a swimmer, abandoning himself to them, floating free. His unaccustomed muscles relaxed. He slept. (Byatt 294)

Moreover, in the other room Maud 'got into bed, and, with the same scissoring movement as Roland next door, swam down under the white sheets' (Byatt 300). This metaphor of the bed emerges again in one of their dialogues some days later, when they are confessing their idea of freedom. Surprisingly, they have the same image in mind, that is 'an empty bed in an empty room. White' (Byatt 319). Furthermore, Maud adds the adjective 'clean' (Byatt 319) in order to set it in opposition with the previous image of the 'huge, unmade, stained and rumpled bed, its sheets pulled into standing peaks here and there, like the surface of whipped egg-white' (Byatt 64), which reminds her of Fergus. In fact, the aim of the author is to set the two images of the bed in contrast.

The white and clean bed represents Roland and the idea of calmness, freedom and peace and constitutes their 'repeated criterion for desirable difference or self-autonomy' (Hennelly 448). Whereas, the dirty and peaked bed, symbolizes Fergus and consequently the harm and anxiety caused by their disappointing relationship. This symbolization can be seen as a good omen for Roland, suggesting that his union with Maud can prove beneficial.

Secondly, during these days Roland takes notice of her beauty, and he develops a reflection mostly upon her hair. In fact, when she firstly uncovers it at the brooches' shop, her hair is set in fine braids wounded tightly around her head, and he consequently sees her face 'changed, simply fragile and even vulnerable. He wanted to loosen the tightness and let the hair go. He felt a kind of sympathetic pain on his own skull-skin, so dragged and ruthlessly hair-pinned was hers' (Byatt 310). As a consequence, while they are sitting on the beach, he convinces her to uncover it and set it free because he was 'moved-not exactly with desire, but with an obscure emotion that was partly pity, for the rigorous constriction all that mass had undergone, to be so structured into repeating patterns' (Byatt 324).

What is worth to highlight is that Byatt uses hair as symbol for Maud, tightly tied, constraint and covered, and these adjectives also perfectly portray her personality. As a result, the hair is the perfect reflection of her constrained, solitary and reserved self, who lives according to constructed patterns settled by society. Furthermore, Roland sympathizes with her hair, and so with herself, demonstrating a kind of pity for her lack of freedom. In fact, when she unpins it, he is able to see 'the light rush towards it and glitter on it. […] Roland felt as though something had been loosed in himself, that had been gripping

him' (Byatt 324). His relief has to do with sympathy, which is developing from this moment into some different feeling, though still unclear.

They return home, aware of the fact that these days have grown an undefined affection within them, and a demonstration of this is Maud, who finds herself entrapped among people who do not understand her, and 'she tried to think whom she wanted to speak to, and came up with Roland Mitchell, that other devotee of white and solitary beds' (Byatt 375) though unconsciously. As a result, she attempts to reach him, but it seems as if he has disappeared. This is because his professor Blackadder, has nearly discovered his theft and the whole consequent matter, and as a result, Roland is avoiding both him and Val, with whom he is attempting to silently break up.

Finally, he contacts Maud and apparently their conversation has a paramount importance for the development of their relationship. In fact, the desperate Maud admits 'I keep thinking of what we said to each other, about empty beds, at the Foss, […] we should just disappear. Like Christabel' (Byatt 387, 388), and consequently they decide to flee to Brittany, exactly as Christabel did to spend her pregnancy days. Therefore, they spend the night in a cabin of the Prince of Brittany, 'with clean narrow white beds' (Byatt 392). They are both 'faint with over-excitement' (Byatt 391), however their attitude continues to be detached, despite the hug in London in which they were driven by 'obscure emotions' (Byatt 391). It seems as if they want to clarify that the reason for their escape is not love but something else, however still unknown, but similar to a huge quest for freedom. In fact, they paradoxically affirm that 'if we were obsessed with each other, no one would think we were mad' (Byatt 392). Despite the clarification, they have departed willingly and as

‘they had run away together, [they] were sharply aware of the usual connotation of this act’ (Byatt 503).

Thence, they spend three weeks in Brittany, investigating on the journal of Sabine de Kercoz, Christabel’s cousin, who hosted her during her pregnancy. The two scholars find themselves on a kind of holiday, due to the closure of libraries. As a result, the narrator affirms that despite having separate rooms, ‘there was no doubt that there was a marital, or honeymooning aspect […] both of them were profoundly confused and very ambivalent about this’ (Byatt 503). For example, they hold hands, they speak with the ‘we’, they touch each other chastely, they fall asleep together. ‘They felt that in some way this stately peacefulness of unacknowledged contact gave back their sense of their separate lives inside their separate skins’ however, ‘neither was quite sure how much, or what, all this meant to the other. Neither dared ask’ (Byatt 507). Actually, this represents the real turning point of their relationship, because they start being aware of the existence of some feelings, despite the fact that they cannot still name them. Roland is well aware of the difference between them, and that

> there was little real connection between them. Maud was a beautiful woman such as he had not claim to possess. She had a secure job and an international reputation. Moreover, in some dark and outdated social system of class, which he did not believe in, […] Maud was County, and he was urban lower-middle-class (Byatt 507).

As a consequence, they appear to be ‘in almost all incompatible’ (Byatt 508). Nevertheless, they feel a great attraction and they wonder ‘what their mutual

pleasure in each other might lead to, anything or nothing, would it just go, as it had come, or would it change, could it change?' (Byatt 507).

When they return, Roland goes to live to Maud's home, where despite feeling pleasure in the fact of living together, he feels marginal and lurking. The plot develops with the other scholars as Blackadder, Leonora and Beatrice discovering the hidden matter and attempting to stop the American Mortimer Cropper, whose aim is to violate Ash's grave in order to steal the lost letters buried with him. He reaches his purpose; however, he is struck in the cemetery by the Great Tempest. Meanwhile, the other scholars find him and as a result, he is forced to consign them the letters.

After discovering that Maud is the direct descendant of both Christabel LaMotte and Roland Ash and consequently the legal owner of the whole correspondence, the situation is solved. Therefore, she proposes Roland to edit the letters together. He refuses the proposal as he has received a large amount of job offers around the world. At this point, Maud decides to declare herself to Roland. She is blocked in her fear, 'her face was like carved marble in the candlelight. Icily regular, splendidly null […] cool and a little contemptuous' (Byatt 600). She finally explains herself

> I'm –not good at relationships. […] people treat you as a kind of possession if you have a certain sort of good looks […]. I don't want that. It kept happening […] I keep my defences up because I must go on doing my work. I know how she felt […] her self-possession, her autonomy. […] I love you. I think I'd rather I didn't (Byatt 600, 601).

By this declaration, she identifies herself with Christabel, and admits sharing her fears and insecurity, her quest for freedom and for autonomy. Roland

admits ‘I love you. It isn’t convenient […] total obsession, night and day. When I see you, you look alive and everything else-fades’ (Byatt 601). Despite the difficulties, he tries to reassure her and promises not to threaten her autonomy and to take care of her. Consequently, they have the first sexual intercourse, obviously described in Victorian terms as ‘he took possession of all her white coolness that grew warm against him, so there seemed to be no boundaries’ (Byatt 602). It appears as if the morning after a new life begins, represented by that ‘fresh, lively and hopeful’ smell (Byatt 602).

III.3. Repeating Patterns: Victorian Love and Modern Love.

Possession is considered both a romance and a work of metafiction. Firstly, it is important to observe that the subtitle of the novel *Possession* is *A Romance.* The first reason for the use of this term is provided by its aim ‘to connect a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us’ (Byatt, introduction), through the exploration of romantic love, possession and the recesses of human mind (Sunstein 687).

In fact, the modern plot of the love story between Maud and Roland, so as the quarrel between scholars for the ownership of the letters are only possible thanks to the plot of the past, which is repeated and further developed. According to Robert Heilman the term ‘romance’, in Byatt’s work of fiction, is threefold.

Firstly, it concerns the romance of the research self, regarding the discovery of the letters. Secondly, it deals with the romance provided by the quarrel and rivalry between the researchers, both for professional and personal aims.

Thirdly, the romance lies in the lives of the Victorian Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, in their love story and in the changes which this matter will bring to both scholarships, providing a new vision of them (605, 606). Moreover, in the novel Roland and Maud discuss Romantic love and modern love. In their opinions, the conception of love has changed dramatically from Romantic love driven by sentiments, to modern love driven merely by sex and desire, and consequently they admit that

> we never say the word Love, do we- we know it's a suspect ideological construct− especially Romantic Love − so that we have to make a real effort of imagination to know what it felt like to be them, here, believing these things − Love− themselves− that what they did mattered− (Byatt 318).

Nevertheless, at the end they find themselves in love with each other, trusting in 'all the things we− we grew up not believing in' (Byatt 601), in a way which makes Roland believe that 'he was in a Romance, a vulgar and high Romance simultaneously, a Romance was one of the systems that controlled him' (Byatt 508). The reader thus, is able to agree with Roland's belief that his life is only the plot of a Romance, as this is one of the metafictional devices Byatt employs in her narration.

Secondly, what mostly defines this work as a piece of historical metafiction is its structure. In fact, the key explanation resides in the 'repeating-pattern' concept. In other words, the concept of repeating pattern 'provide an endless series of textual metonymies: patterns themselves suggest previous repetitions even before repeating repeats them again' (Hennelly 443). Examples of repeating patterns are for example Christabel and Maud's hair,

very fair and very similar, or the fact that both Blanche and Val – Roland's unsatisfied girlfriend− define themselves as 'superfluous' (Byatt 365). Moreover, the image of the bed is an example of a repeating pattern, as it is repeated several times either as an unclean and peaked bed, which recollects Fergus, or as a clean empty bed, which symbolizes Roland and his quest for independence.

According to Mark Hennelly, a visible example of a repeating pattern is Ash's theft of the letters from Vico's book, because it recollects an Edenic myth −which Ash represents is his Garden of Proserpina− in which Hercules steals the golden fruit, thus anticipating the happening of the story (449). Furthermore, in this pastiche the whole intertext provides mainly poems offering clues which will anticipate the happenings of the main plot and create in this way repetitions. Moreover, Blanche's concealment of Ash's poem *Swammerdam* and Ellen concealing last Christabel's letter to Randolph appear as a repeating pattern. However, it can be highlighted that the whole story seems to be a repeated pattern since the Victorian love story is reiterated by the modern scholars who 'must sacrifice the purely cognitive pleasure of armchair detection, [of mere reading], and enter the messy arena of life and love' (Hennelly 466).

In order to observe the repeating structure of *Possession*, it is necessary to notice that the modern story follows the path of the Victorian story although with some changes and a different ending. Firstly, the fundamental factor to take into consideration is that of love and sentimentality. As it has been said, Randolph and Christabel start a relationship based on an epistolary correspondence. At the beginning the topic deals with art and poetry, however after some walks together, they both declare true love and affection

to each other. This leads them to flee together in Yorkshire. In the same way, Roland and Maud start a kind of business relationship, based on the pursuit of truth, as concerns the hidden love story between the two Victorian poets. Therefore, they are initially connected by the same purpose and by the same passion, that is literature and especially poetry. Consequently, poetry appears to be a common ground for both the couples.

Roland and Maud in their research are led to Yorkshire, in order to find traces of Randolph and Christabel's permanence, and unwarily visiting the same places, however not with the same emotions. On the one hand, the Victorians have at this point a well-developed feeling −though obscured by Christabel's quest for independence− which leads them to the consummation of their pseudo-marriage. On the other hand, the two scholars don't feel love, but only a kind of sympathy at the end of their journey to Yorkshire. Nevertheless, this appears to be the starting point of their relationship.

Secondly, at the end of their love escape the two poets agree on concluding their relationship, and as a result Christabel – who suspects to be pregnant− decides to cease every communication with Randolph and she flees to Brittany. The two researchers, on the contrary, after a period of distance due to their living in different cities and their respective jobs, decide to escape together from their lives and their problems to Brittany, exactly as Christabel did. However, a great difference can be found here as Christabel lives her pregnancy with anguish, she gives birth to a child in a convent and then she disappears. Roland and Maud, instead, spend three weeks of holiday. They unexpectedly find a mutual pleasure in each other, and they feel a kind of affection increasing between them, however they are not completely aware of their feelings yet.

Thirdly, the huge difference is in the epilogue, especially after the return from Brittany. On the one side, Christabel goes to live with his sister Sophie and hides the truth about her daughter Maia, who is instead grown up as her sister's child. She has no more contacts with Randolph except from one last letter, where she explains to him the whole truth, although it will never be opened. On the other side, Roland and Maud, return together from Brittany and continue to live together at Maud's place, feeling a deep sentiment of great affection and pleasure given to the company of each other. When the whole issue of the ownership of the letter is solved, their relationship arrives at the climax, in which they confess true love for each other.

Actually, the only point of similarity with Christabel, is the explanation that Maud provides for her fear of loving. Maud identifies herself with the Victorian poetess, claiming 'I know how she felt […] her self-possession, her autonomy' (Byatt 601) to justify her coldness and icily attitude in terms of relationships. In fact, similarly to Christabel she needs her autonomy and does not accept to be treated like a possession. Despite the difficulties and the anxieties, Roland is an optimist and he is willing to find a solution which would permit them to be together.

As a result, although the beginning of the love stories is similar −dealing with poetry and literature− and they follow the same path, the epilogue is completely different. In fact, the modern happy ending of Maud and Roland, contrasts with the sad ending of two lovers, Christabel and Randolph, who are not able to be together. However, if on the one hand the society is guilty of the impossibility of their relationship, because of its strict rules and conventions, on the other hand the only person to blame for the outcome appears to be Christabel. This happens because the decision to close every

communication is hers, and moreover she decides to take a step back from their relationship in order to preserve her independence and her freedom.

The ending of the Victorian story between Christabel and Randolph can be defined an existentialist epilogue, similar to the last ending of Th*e French Lieutenant's Woman*. In fact, both Sarah and Christabel decide to privilege their individuality, freedom and self-possession, over love and sentimental relationships. The similarities between these two characters are several. They both are two unconventional women living in a Victorian society. Sarah has chosen to be an outcast in order not to be subjected to the bias of the people and not to be forced to adhere to the conventions of society. Christabel, at the beginning is afraid of society, fearing what would be thought of her if she was discovered writing letters to a married man. However, she lives as an unconventional woman, with Blanche, who is her supposed lover. She loves her solitude and her freedom, and she pursues a continuous quest for independence. Ultimately, she decides to defy the society, fleeing with Randolph.

Moreover, Sarah is described in the whole story mainly through her eyes and her gaze, able to reflect her true personality and her inner self, in fact 'she had eyes a man could drown in' (Fowles 226). The same happens to the modern scholar Maud, who is continuously described through her unconventional hair, able to reflect her rigorous and reserved character, as it is tightly braided into 'repeating patterns', wounded round the head in a 'rigorous constriction' (Byatt 324), and covered by a scarf.

The constant topic is the role to which women are relegated by the Victorian society. For example, Sarah is aware of her lack of possibility to climb the social

ladder neither through richness nor through a convenient marriage, due to her birth social class. Consequently, she chooses to create herself a possibility by defying the rules of society. In the same way, Christabel is aware of the limitations she has both in the personal and professional sphere. As concerns herself as a woman, she is obliged to follow certain rules, avoiding inconvenient behaviours −as the correspondence with Randolph− in order to preserve a respectable reputation inside the society. Furthermore, as a poetess she is aware of the limits the Victorian society imposes on her. In fact, in one of her letters to Randolph she claims that 'there are Subjects we may not treat− things we may not know. […] there must be− and is− some essential difference between the Scope and Power of men and our own limited consciousness and possibly weaker apprehension' (Byatt 213). Despite being aware of these differences, she decides to refuse this limited condition of living and clearly affirms: 'I do maintain, as stoutly, that the delimitations are at present, all wrongly drawn – we are not mere candle− holders to virtuous thoughts− mere chalices of Purity− we think and feel, aye and read' (Byatt 213). As a result, starting from her modern belief of equality between genders, she portrays the figure of the modern woman not allowing the society to label her according to what she is supposed to do or not.

Furthermore, in this comparison the character of Ellen Ash, Randolph's wife, can be juxtaposed to that of Ernestina in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. This is explained by the fact that they are both conventional women, living as a part of Victorian society and respecting its conventions. Especially, their main purpose is to represent the Victorian angel in the house as the figure of the perfect wife, who takes care of the house and the family and accomplishes every act for her husband's sake.

Their attitude towards sex constitutes another important similarity. It has been demonstrated that Ernestina cannot stand the violence involved in the sexual act, even on behalf of her husband. She 'wanted Charles to be that husband, wanted children; but the payment […] seemed excessive' (Fowles 30), and the only thought of it seems to ruin and deny all the gentleness she loves in Charles. In the same way, in *Possession*, from the journal of Ellen Ash emerges that she has a complicated attitude towards sex. In fact, she reports that her conventional wedding with Randolph did not bring them heirs, nor delighted them through sexual intercourses as she 'disrupts […] phallocentric order when she refuses sexual penetration' (Schiffman 101). However, she claims that 'they had always been happy, sitting close, saying little, looking at the same things, together' (Byatt 535). She then recalls their honeymoon in which she describes herself as 'a running creature, crouching and cowering in the corner of the room, its teeth chattering, its veins clamped in spasm, its breath shallow and fluttering' (Byatt 547), refusing her husband's approaches. In fact, their wedding has never been consummated and she reminds 'the eagerness, the terrible love, with which she had made up to him, his abstinence, making him a thousand small comforts, cakes and tidbits' (Byatt 548). As a result, 'she became his slave. Quivering at every word. He had accepted her love. She had loved him for it. He had loved her' (Byatt 548). Moreover, according to Schiffman the form she uses, that is the genre of the diary, subverts the male-centred writing tradition, and hides a certain cleverness. In fact, 'her "private" journal writing is regarded merely as an extension of her "private" domestic role' (Schiffman 102) reflecting her ideal image of the Victorian woman and acquiring thus, the status of a public text (103).

To sum up, *Possession* is considered a work of historical metafiction written in response to the *French Lieutenant's Woman*. For this reason, it repeats its fundamental themes of love and sentimentality concerning unconventional and modern characters in the Victorian conventional society –which is driven by a strict conformism to its rules and conventions– and portrays them from a postmodern perspective. Through a delicate storyline these characters are able to reach their purposes, stated in a multiplicity of epilogues, where the Victorian happy ending, contrast with the coexistence of a postmodern existentialist ending.

IV. Fingersmith

IV.1. A New Dimension of Victorian Love

In Victorian Age love was perceived as a convention of the society, mostly regarding the sentimental field. In other words, the conventional love, accepted by the Victorian society, is conceived as a relationship based on abstract feelings and respect of the rules. For example, chastity has a paramount importance between the upper classes. However, after marriage, which is often considered as a business agreement between families in order to enrich or achieve a higher social status, the situation changes. In fact, the relationship between wife and husband can become physical, in order to consent the creation of their offspring.

In fact, to accomplish every desire of man is the main task, which the perfect Victorian wife has to perform. According to the conventions of the society, women are willingly withheld in ignorance of sexuality and physicality. On the contrary, are not only men allowed to have sexual desires, but also to vent them in brothels or with lower class girls, considered as outcasts in society. However, sometimes the Victorian man can develop an unconventional relationship, either with a scarlet-woman, as Sarah is defined in the *French Lieutenant's Woman*, or with a woman of man's same social status as happens in *Possession* between Christabel and Randolph. Why are these relationships defined unconventional?

The answer depends on two reasons. Firstly, because of the fact that these women are considered unconventional for their ideas, their social status their way of living, their quest for freedom and finally their existential aim.

Secondly, these liaisons are considered unconventional because created outside the rules of the society and often by people involved in marriages or other official relationships. In fact, Charles is engaged to Ernestina, who is suitable to him both in terms of value and richness; and Randolph is already married to Ellen, although they have never consummated their marriage. The aim of this discussion is to set in opposition to what we have seen so far, the relationship represented in *Fingersmith*. This novel portrays a kind of unconventional relationship, though different from the precedent ones. In fact, it deals with homosexual love, between the two girls, Sue and Maud.

There seems to be two main differences between these two types of relationship. The first one, which is also obvious, is the sex of the lovers. The second reason is that these relationships start in completely different ways. On the one hand, the relationship between Sarah and Charles develops from sympathy and attraction; similarly, the liaison between the poets Randolph and Christabel develops from an overwhelming intellectual attraction. As a consequence, these initial feelings of attraction are able to create other feelings of affection and love, which only at the end transform themselves into passion and physical experiences. On the other hand, in *Fingersmith* the relationship between the two girls does not develop from a deep feeling, but directly from passion. It is true that after a while they feel a reciprocal affection, however, in this novel the first expression of attraction emerges in the sexual intercourse they have, which is described two times, as if the aim of the author was to highlight its importance in the story. In fact, the love declaration, although unspoken, is presented only after this physical experience. Therefore, in *Fingersmith*, the element of difference is that love develops directly from attraction and from a consequent physical intercourse.

From the beginning there are several hints at the development of this attraction, as for example the moment of the undressing or of the bath, in which Sue admires Maud's nakedness, or the episode of the pointed teeth[9], causing a flush of emotions in both.

Differently, in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and in *Possession*, the two relationships start from feelings and emotions −though different− and develop the physical aspect only later in the story.

IV.2. Plot and Gender Issue

Fingersmith is a novel written by Sarah Waters (2002), who is one of the major exponents of the LGBTQ writings in the new century. Despite being more recent than *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Possession*, its analysis is important for two main reasons. Firstly, it is a work of historical fiction because it is set in the Victorian Age, more specifically in 1862. Secondly, the theme of the novel, although regarding love and sentimentality, highlights an aspect different from the novels already analysed, that is homosexual love. In order to provide an overview of this theme in Victorian Society, it is necessary to present briefly the plot of the novel.

The novel is set in London in 1862. It is important to underline that the story is told by two perspectives. More specifically, two versions of the same story are provided, which correspond with the point of view of the two

[9] In this episode Sue smooths Maud's pointed teeth in her mouth with a thimble. The happening awakens some emotions in both the girls and foresees a turning point in their relationship.

protagonists. They are two girls: Sue, whose narration opens the novel, and Maud, who will appear later in the chapter, and whose point of view is provided in the second part of the novel.

Sue Trinder is a girl raised in a poor house in London, a den of thieves, which can be considered similar to a family. In fact, Mrs Sucksby plays the role of the mother, who adopts and raises many orphans. Mr Ibbs plays the role of the father, he manages the shop under their flat and helps Mrs Sucksby with the family's business, although he is not her husband. However, the shop is only a coverage because the main income of the family is granted by the thefts, which are considered ordinary routine. In fact, the children were taught from early childhood the tricks and the art of stealing. As a consequence, Susan is very clever and able in the manipulation and in the pick pocketing.

One night, they receive a visit from an old orphan raised by Mrs Sucksby, whose name is Mr River, however, called by everyone in the family Gentleman. He is used to helping the little gang with money, robbery and thefts, and he advances a proposal. He has discovered a profitable occasion, which will allow everyone to enrich. He claims that there is a rich heiress, called Maud Lilly, living in a big mansion in the countryside and believes her very innocent and shy. His aim is to marry her, in order to inherit all her patrimony, which according to the English Victorian Law, is granted to the husband. In his opinion, Sue would be the perfect accessory to this crime, disguised as Maud's servant. He offers her a great amount of money for her collaboration once he would become the only heir. Despite being contrary to the whole deceit, defining it 'mean and shabby' (Waters 47), Sue is convinced by Mrs Sucksby to surrender and follow the plan. As a consequence, she is

taught how to behave like a lady, her manners and expressive abilities are polished, and she is given a false referential letter to consign to Maud.

Some days later she is carried to Briar, an old, 'dark, and draughty, and mortgaged to the roof' place (Waters 24). Sue's first approach is not totally positive, as she longs for her home and her adoptive mother and claims that 'a gaol would have been livelier. Here, there was only an awful silence: you listened, and it troubled your ears' (Waters 61). The day after, she has the first meeting with her mistress, Miss Maud Lilly, who she describes as a commonplace girl with a commonplace beauty and gaze. She considers Maud as a 'pigeon that knew nothing' (Waters 66), and whose 'pale cheek fired up crimson' (Waters 66) in seeing Susan. This can be seen as a sign of anticipation of what will happen in the plot.

At the beginning, the relationship of mistress/maid is respected, and Sue is treated mainly as Maud's employee and her task is performing ordinary business as washing or undressing her. Sue is struck in seeing her nakedness and particularly by her appearance, in fact, she claims 'I saw her bosom, her bottom, her feather and everything […] she was as pale as a statue on a pillar in a park. So pale she was, she seemed to shine' (Waters 83). Further in the story, however, the two girls develop a sort of kinship despite the difference in social status. In fact, the relationship between them begins to change and reveals the rising of a kind of affection. This can be demonstrated by the fact that, they are used to sleeping together in Maud's bed, sometimes embraced, due to Maud's nightmares and insomnia. Sue's narration reports these nights reminding their sleeping closer 'quite like sisters' (Waters 89).

Furthermore, a clear example of this intimacy can be noticed in the episode portraying Sue smoothing a tooth in Maud's mouth with a thimble. The situation leaves some feelings in both the girls. Sue finds that 'my hand grew wet, from the damp of her breaths' (Waters 97), and she is distracted by her pink lips. Maud continues swallowing, she has 'her cheek with a flush upon it' (Waters 97), and after some time 'her eyelids fluttered' (Waters 97). This situation apparently hides the development of some passions between the two. This can be demonstrated by the further step of their relationship.

Maud is undecided whether to accept Mr Rivers's marriage proposal because she is not aware of the duties of a wife. As a consequence, one night in bed she requests Sue to show her how she must act during her wedding night. Sue consequently, embraces her and kisses her. However, unexpectedly this kiss arises an overwhelming passion

> it was like kissing the darkness. As if the darkness had life, had a shape, had taste, was warm and glib. […] I lay with my mouth on hers and felt, starting up in me, everything I had said would start in her, when Gentleman kissed her. It made me giddy. It made me blush, worse than before. It was like liquor. It made me drunk (Waters 141).

The passionate description of their kiss is immediately followed by a sexual intercourse between the two, due to the impossibility to stop their flow of passion. As a result, their relationship has changed, however, they cannot be considered lovers, because Victorian society does not provide a concept to explain and define the love between two women.

Nevertheless, Maud accepts Mr Rivers's plan to escape with him from Briar in order to get married. However, she becomes everyday paler, frail and very

sad. It seems as if she was sick or if she was mentally suffering from her decision to betray her uncle and escape. At least, this is Sue's point of view. What Maud apparently does not know is Sue and Gentleman's plan. He aims to deprive Maud of all her inheritance by marrying her, and to abandon her in a madhouse, in which the doctors in seeing her so pale and sick would declare her insane and close her up forever. Sue begins to feel guilty and reflects upon revealing to Maud the whole plan. Nevertheless, at the end she lacks the courage to tell the whole truth and supports Gentleman in his deceit.

They manage to escape at night and Maud and Gentleman consequently get married. One day they receive an inspection of the asylum's doctors visiting Maud and requesting to talk to Susan too. In the morning of their planned deceit of Maud, the mistress begs Sue to wear her own silk dress as a present, and they depart for the madhouse. Once arrived, there is a plot twist. In fact, Sue is caught and enclosed instead of Maud, who pretends −and also seems− to be her maid and reveals in this way her counterplot with Gentleman. She looks at Sue with tears in her eyes which were however 'hard as marble, hard as brass. Hard as a pearl' (Waters 175).

At this point of the novel Maud's narration follows, it presents the happening from her point of view, and reveals in this way part of the mystery hidden in the novel. She says she was born in an asylum due to the mental insanity of her mother and then after her death she has been carried to Briar to her uncle. They used to treat her very badly and beat her because she was unwilling to adapt to the strict rules of her old and bigot uncle.

Actually, Maud is neither innocent nor unaware. She is very clever and educated, and she is aware also of matters usually forbidden to children and

woman. Since her childhood, she has been educated to be her uncle's secretary in his act of writing. In fact, he is a sort of pornographer, because he writes books of pornography dedicated to other men. Moreover, he employs her niece as a reader in the meetings he holds with his visitors −other old men− to whom she is forced to loudly read his pornographic tales. As a result, she has never had that innocence that children possess, and this is reflected by her wild personality, which although has been tamed, feels entrapped and cannot stand to live in Briar like a prisoner.

One of the visitors she is used to entertaining with her reading sessions is the young and handsome Mr River, who, observing her situation of imprisonment, proposes her a deal. According to his plan he could bring a girl from London, not particularly clever, in order to be her maid, offer her a large amount of money and convince her to cheat Maud closing her in a madhouse. Actually, it is her who will be enclosed in the madhouse, believed the lunatic Mrs Rivers. Maud in this way can change her life, by switching their identities. She is promised that the success of this plan 'will pluck from your shoulders the weight of your life' (Waters 227). Consequently, he will grant her the freedom, asking for payment she says, 'my trust, my promise, my future silence; and one half of my fortune' (Waters 227).

In this way her deceit of Sue begins. Maud knows she thinks her a fool and an innocent girl, in the same way in which she believes his uncle is writing a dictionary, instead of pornography. For this reason, she strains to demonstrate herself 'good, and kind, and simple' (Waters 249), aiming to polish Sue's manners and her shabby appearance, to transform her in order to be similar to herself. Maud perceives her like a stranger 'but part of it all' (Waters 249), part of the attempt to gain freedom and her new life.

Nevertheless, despite this initial coolness and calculation, from a certain point she feels the affection for Sue rising and she finds herself thinking about her during her secretary work, in his uncle's library.

One of the reasons for this change are the sensations risen from the episode of the pointed tooth. Maud affirms that she has felt 'a queer mix of sensations […] I can look nowhere but her face […] feeling the blood rushing awkwardly into my cheek' (Waters 255, 256). The revelation is evident from the fact that Maud at this moment forgets about Mr Rivers and the whole plan, paying attention only to her emotions. From this moment, Maud begins to consider Sue as a friend, in fact she affirms that 'I have grown used to her, to the life, the warmth, the particularity of her, she has become, not the gullible girl of a villainous plot […] but a girl with a history, with hates and likings' (Waters 259). This is a demonstration that she is growing attached to her and provides Sue with human and personal features, which have the effect of increasing both the reader sympathy and Maud's pity and guilt, because she finds for the first time 'afraid of what my future may cost me' (Water 259). In fact, she is often enchanted in watching Sue sleeping, desiring to touch her, and claims that 'I would like to touch her, to be sure that she is there. I dare not. But I cannot leave her' (Waters 272).

Nevertheless, this demonstrates only a great affection that can be translated in need to have Sue with her. Furthermore, she reflects upon the impossibility to betray her by saying 'she held my head against her breast, when I woke bewildered […] she warmed my foot with her breath, once […] she ground my pointed tooth with a silver thimble […] she brought me soup −clear soup− instead of an egg, and smiled to see me drink it' (Waters 275). Maud notices that something has been stirred up in her, and that everything seems livelier

thanks to Sue. In addition, she notices that everything has changed from her arrival, also her uncle's pornographic books because 'I have supposed them dead. Now the words −like the figures in the walls− start up, are filled with meaning' (Waters 279). However, what actually changes the whole consideration of their relationship, is the night in which the clever Maud requests Sue to show her how to behave during her wedding night. The scene, is described with particulars, starting from the kiss and processing with the passionate sexual intercourse, at the end of which they surrender to tenderness and Maud realizes that 'everything […] is changed. I was dead before. Now she has touched the life of me' (Waters 283).

For this reason, Maud plans to tell the whole truth to Sue in order to cheat Mr Rivers and escape together with all the money. However, she lacks the courage to do so and realizes that she can achieve freedom only without Sue 'and so you see it is love− not scorn, not malice; only love− that makes me harm her, in the end' (Waters 285). In other words, her recognition of love towards Sue is accompanied by the awareness of the impossibility of their relationship. Consequently, she progresses with the plan set with Mr River, although full of guilt and pity. She grows thinner and paler, in order to seem insane due to the sense of guilt for her choice, and starts neglecting her appearance to seems more like a poor maid. On the contrary, she states the importance for Sue to take care of her appearance and wear her own rich dresses. Sue falls undoubtedly into the trap. In the day of the entrapment in the madhouse, she stares at Maud while murmuring 'Oh! Oh! My heart is breaking!' (Waters 304).

Consequently, Maud demonstrates herself very resentful towards Richard, who leads her to Lant Street to Mrs Sucksby, where she is enclosed as a

prisoner, in order for them to steal all the money from her dowry. She feels guilty about Sue's betrayal, and she is ashamed of the lack of sympathy of her foster mother and her so-called family. Maud is constantly supervised, however once she manages to escape. She then loses her way in London and is taken back to Lant Street.

Meanwhile, Susan is abused by the nurses of the madhouse, who believe her a lady. The more she opposes, the more violent her punishments are. As a consequence, after some time she begins to be submissive, due also to the drugs they force her to swallow. Nevertheless, in her months of reclusion she plans her evasion. One night, helped by the young groom of Briar, she manages to escape and she comes back to Lant Street, where during a quarrel Gentleman is stabbed by Maud and consequently dies. Mrs Sucksby is believed guilty of the crime and sacrifices herself on behalf of Maud −who appears to be her daughter− and is arrested and ultimately hanged. What Susan does not know yet is that actually the real mind responsible for the whole plot is Mrs Sucksby self. She planned the whole thing since the beginning, aiming to cheat both Sue and Maud for a simple reason: she hides a shocking truth about their past.

Actually, the two girls are linked since their earliest days. The whole explanation is provided to Susan through a letter found in Mrs Sucksby's dress after her execution. It appears to be a sort of testament of Miss Marianne Lilly, who claims to have exchanged her new-born daughter Susan Lilly with Mrs Sucksby's own daughter named Maud, in order to protect her from the barbarism of her bigot family. Moreover, she chooses to destine both the infants with half of her inheritance. The revelation this letter carries with itself is astonishing. Susan feels sick and realizes that her whole life has been a

fiction and that she was destined to the life Maud lived until her eighteenth birthday. For this reason, she realizes her error in being resentful with the poor Maud, who has been cheated in the same way.

She travels to Briar in order to find her and explain the truth. Apparently, she discovers that Maud is aware of this change of identity, because it has been revealed to her during her so-called imprisonment in Lant Street. Therefore, Susan declares her love for Maud and claims 'I only want you' (Waters 544). However, Maud is hesitant, because of the fact that 'you don't know me […] you thought me good. Didn't you? I was never that' (Waters 544). And explains this concept by reading her uncle's books she was committed to copy in her employment as assistant. At the beginning, Susan does not fully understand her intention and pities her for his uncle's abuses on her. As a result, Maud decides to be utterly sincere to her, in describing her present job. She has taken the place of her uncle, and so she writes pornography, because she affirms that 'I am still what he made me. I shall always be that' (Waters 546). Finally, Maud enacts what she has written in her papers, as they contain 'all the words for how I want you' (Waters 547). This conclusion clearly demonstrates Susan acceptance of both Maud real personality, and of the obscure world she is part.

IV.3. Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century.

The Victorian Age represents the symbol of the patriarchal society and of women's oppression. Women were relegated mostly to two categories. On the one hand, they were considered only as wives and mothers, who lived and acted only in the interests of their families through the care of the children and the accomplishment of their husbands' desires. As a result, they annihilated themselves and resulted as beings with no desires or wills. On the other hand, women were confined into the category of the 'objects'. In fact, they were used only to satisfy men's sexual desires, and this is especially the role of women which is portrayed in Victorian pornography.

Fingersmith portrays this aspect of Victorian society, which is pornography written by men for other men. An example of this can be seen in the pornographic books Maud cites throughout the novel, which are titles of real Victorian pornographic tales. However, feminist criticism started only in the last decades of the twentieth century to be interested in the matter of Victorian pornography and of the consequent attitude of the patriarchal society towards sex and gender. According to Cora Kaplan, the study started in the 1960s and reinforced in the 1970s (43). In fact, the feminist critic attempts to 'put the heteronormativity of the Victorian period into question' (Kaplan 47) and moreover it leads to two main approaches.

On the one side, pro-censorship feminists' aim was to criticise 'pornography's role in relation to women's oppression' (O'Callaghan 560). They associated pornography with male violence against women and gender oppression. According to this approach, pornography enhances the objectification of the

woman, who is seen only as a way to satisfy man's need. Thus, her submission under male supremacy is justified.

On the other side, anti-censorship approach states that in order to eliminate the female sexual objectification, the way to follow 'is not to censor explicit materials but to challenge the central assumptions about sexuality that shape sexual ideology in contemporary culture' (O'Callaghan 561). In fact, this discourse has been further developed by the second-wave feminists, who discovered a new conception of pornography which was not directly linked with sexuality and gender.

However, these approaches created a double-sided conception of the matter of pornography, which implied the pro-pornography side or the against-pornography side. This opposition dissatisfied late-nineteenth-century feminist scholars and critics, who started to feel the necessity to create an approach between the two, in order to transcend this 'polarized dichotomy' (O'Callaghan 561). Sarah Waters can indeed be collocated among these dissatisfied feminists, and through her novels she attempts to provide another vision of pornography, because she both 'explores pornography's relationship to gender and to sexuality separately, but also reimagines their connectivity' (O'Callaghan 561). In *Fingersmith* she portrays a homosexual hidden relationship between Maud and Sue, which is covered by a heterosexual conventional relationship between Maud and Mr Rivers. In fact, also the sexual intercourse between the two ladies is justified because it is presented as a heterosexual intercourse, in which Sue enacts the role of the man in order to show the supposed innocent Maud how she would act in her wedding night.

Waters firstly portrays the vision of pro-censorship feminists. In fact, she represents pornography as a sign of oppression, embodied by the weak character of the old Mr Lilly. According to her vision, the background feature of the novel is violence, which is also triggered by Mr Lilly's pornography. This is because he is the most evident exponent of violence for the physical and psychological abuses on his niece Maud, who as a child was constantly beaten by him and by the servants for not being submissive. Until the arrival of Mr Rivers, she has lived a life under the supremacy both of his uncle and also of male pornography written for men. Sue, however, is submitted to the supremacy of Mr Rivers, who manipulates her in order to profit from the whole situation.

However, both the girls are able to transform themselves from victims into subjects. In fact, Maud chooses to escape from Briar, and thus she acquires the freedom to act according to her will. Although she is further imprisoned by Mrs Sucksby and can appear as she is re-enacting the role of the victim, she has in reality acquired a subjectivity which allows her to act, for example she tries to escape and she murders Mr Rivers. Sue, however, plays the role of the victim because she is deceived both by Maud and Mr Rivers and enclosed in a madhouse. Nevertheless, her transformation from victim to subject occurs at the moment in which she manages to escape from the asylum and comes back home in Lant Street.

Secondly, Waters attempts to provide the 'pro-censorship vision' through this concept of acquired subjectivity. Actually, it is not correct to claim that Waters is favourable to censorship, because she does not want to censor pornography. In fact, her aim is to criticise and challenge the conventional conception of male-centred pornography, which is seen as the source of

violence and of male supremacy, and she acts the role of the 'moral pornographer' a concept introduced by Angela Carter in *The Sadeian Woman*. In fact, Waters argues that in Victorian pornography sex 'replicates and endorses a subject/object dynamic in which men are (only ever) the subject and women are the object' (O'Callaghan 568). In *Fingersmith*, she provides a new kind of pornography through the relationship between Sue and Maud, and aims at a 'revision of women in pornography from a position of victim-feminism to power-feminism' (O'Callaghan 568). In other words, by providing subjectivity to her female protagonists, Waters is able to create and represent a new version of pornography, written by women for women. This is represented by the last scene of the book, in which Maud has replaced her uncle as a pornographer, and especially when she demonstrates Sue what she has written, it is clear that her tales deal with lesbian pornography.

Nevertheless, Waters highlights the fact that a women-ruled society is not intrinsically good. In fact, she portrays examples of female violence on women, as for example Mrs Stiles violence against Maud and the nurses' violence and abuses on Sue in the asylum. Even Mrs Sucksby's manipulation represents a great psychological violence against the two protagonists. In fact, according to Cora Kaplan:

> Waters is too complex and too clever a writer to make female betrayal or even violence a simple result of women's oppression by men, or, more generally and systemically, by patriarchy and the Victorian state. In Waters one feels that violence is understood – and even accepted – as a quotidian element of the human imaginary, male or female, even if its particular form and practices in her novels are shaped by the power relations and hierarchies of nineteenth-century society (Kaplan 52).

As a result, through Maud's understanding of the difference between pornography, sex and love, Waters aims to separate the two spheres, but at the same time, she makes them converge in something new. In fact, O'Callaghan claims that 'through *Fingersmith*, Waters reinvents Victorian pornography for women and, specifically lesbians' (569), paving thus the way to the queer and gender studies.

Before *Fingersmith*, some writers had already discussed the homosexual topic, although not so openly. In fact, both in Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and in Byatt's *Possession* are present hints at lesbianism.

In *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in chapter 19, the narrator describes Sarah and Millie, the servant, who are sleeping together very close to each other. However, the narrator makes a first hint at homosexuality, addressing to the reader and he says: 'a thought has swept into your mind; but you forget we are in the year 1867' (Fowles 158). He later affirms that if Mrs Poultney had seen the scene, she would not got angry, but she would have walked away, as 'some vices were then so unnatural that they did not exist. I doubt if Mrs Poultney had ever heard of the word "lesbian"; and if she had, it would have commenced with a capital, and referred to an island in Greece' (Fowles 158). The same happens to Sarah. In fact, she started to sleep with Millie to comfort her, because she used to spend nights weeping. However, the narrator claims that 'as regards lesbianism, she was as ignorant as her mistress' (Fowles 159) although she was not ignorant of passion, pleasure and carnal love. Thence the narrator wonders whether 'there must have been something sexual in their feelings?' (Fowles 160) and answers:

> perhaps; but they never went beyond the bounds that two sisters would. [however] no doubt here and there in another milieu, in the most brutish of the human poor, in the most emancipated of the aristocracy, a truly orgiastic lesbianism existed then; but we may ascribe this very common Victorian phenomenon of women sleeping together far more to the desolating arrogance of contemporary man than to a more suspect motive (Fowles 160).

Consequently, although the narrator describes this fact as 'closer to humanity than perversity' (Fowles 160), he suggests that the majority of the Victorian society was unaware of the existence of homosexual love, because it was considered so unnatural that there was no need even to give it a name. On the one hand, he admits the possible existence of lesbian relationships in poor or aristocratic contexts, on the other hand, however, he argues that more than homosexual love, this sleeping together could be perceived as a need to comfort from men's arrogant abuses and supremacy over women. Nevertheless, it is especially in the second case that the lesbian relationship between Maud and Sue occurs. In fact, they develop their hidden affaire on an aristocratic background, in which this kind of desires were still largely unknown but not impossible.

In *Possession*, Byatt hints at lesbianism in two ways. She employs two characters, Blanche and Leonora in order to portray two opposite visions of lesbianism, one Victorian and the other modern.

Firstly, she uses the artist Blanche Glover as a symbol of lesbianism, although she never states it clearly. Actually, Blanche and Christabel live together freely,

they love and understand each other, and they appear to be in a 'Boston Marriage'. According to Samantha Carroll

> during the latter part of the eighteenth century, the platonic "romantic friendships" between women were tolerated as useful practice for their eventual heterosexual unions; whereas the nineteenth-century Boston marriage, on the other hand, was a "long-term monogamous relationship between two otherwise unmarried women" that often endured for the course of their lives (360).

However, once Christabel and Randolph's correspondence starts, Blanche feels threatened by him and jealous of Christabel. For this reason, she attempts to intercept part of their letters and hides them, and she manages in this way to stop the correspondence for a while. However, once she is discovered by Christabel, they have a terrible fight as it is reported in her diary. During Christabel's journey with Randolph to Yorkshire, Blanche is driven by anger and jealously and so she decides to confess the whole truth about their adulterous relationship to Ellen, who is Randolph's wife. Nevertheless, she cannot stand Christabel's absence and driven by passions, she suicides. She throws herself in the Thames, with rocks sewn into the pockets of her coat, in order to drown and to have no chance of survival. Moreover, she leaves a last letter, which Christabel will find at the return of her journey. In this letter Blanche tries to provide an explanation for her drastic decision, and she claims that one of the reasons is the

> failure of ideals. I have tried, initially with Miss LaMotte, and also alone in this little house, to live according to certain beliefs about the possibility, for independent single women, of living useful and fully

> human's lives, in each other's company, and without recourse to help from the outside world, or men. We believed it was possible […] regrettably, it was not (Byatt 363).

Therefore, Blanche feels 'a superfluous creature' (Byatt 365) and explains how she will quit her life, leaving their house, where apparently they have been 'so happy' (Byatt 365). Although Blanche is dead, her spirit meets Christabel again at a spirit-summoning session, in which Christabel, who feels guilty about her friend's suicide, blames Randolph for transforming herself into a murderess.

As a result, by declaring the impossibility of the relationship between Blanche and Christabel, Byatt is 'discrediting the viability of lesbian romance in favor of its heterosexual superior. This erasure of lesbian possibility proves necessary to restore the heterosexual trajectory of Byatt's traditional romance' (Carrol 359).

Secondly, Byatt attempts to give a chance of survival to lesbianism through the character of Leonora Stern. On the one hand, she is considered Blanche doppelgänger. According to this thought, she represents the 'dangerous homosexual', in opposition to the 'good homosexual', who is embodied by the 'silenced and sexual Glover' (Carrol 359). Leonora is considered the obscure part of this double because of her uncontained sexual appetite and her easiness.

On the other hand, Leonora's character portrays the revenge of lesbianism. Her unbounded sexual appetite and her proud homosexuality free from prejudices, constitute the worthy revenge of a lesbianism which is accepted by the modern society in which *Possession*'s scholars are living. However, in the Victorian Age it neither was accepted, nor people were properly aware of

its existence. Moreover, not only is Leonora homosexual, but she is also a successful feminist scholar, and for this reason she also embodies the revenge of women in a highly patriarchal society.

Finally, it can be highlighted that each of the three novels analysed portrays the homosexual love in the Victorian age. It can be resumed by saying that in the nineteenth century, it was a normal practice for women to sleep together. As a result, there was no malice, especially because most of the nineteenth-century society was not aware of the existence of lesbianism. However, in some contexts, as in the lowest or in the higher social classes, as in *Fingersmith*, some lesbian relationships and consequent sexual intercourse occurred, especially to comfort for the abuses of men.

Conclusion

This thesis has provided a journey into twentieth-century historical fiction dealing with the nineteenth century, highlighting especially the conception of Victorian love.

Through the study of the postmodern technical devices, it has been possible to analyse in detail the structure of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, which tries consistently to imitate a Victorian novel. However, due to the metafictional features as the intruding narrator and its three endings, the novel transforms itself into a postmodern work. Moreover, the explanation of the background makes the reader aware of the historical truthfulness of the work, with multiple hints at Darwinism, Marxism and Victorianism. The analysis of its content underlined the two important sides concerning love in this novel. On the one hand, there is the conventional relationship between Charles and the chaste Ernestina. This fully conventional union is destined to culminate in a wedding, which is conceived as a business agreement. The lack of passion is visible in this relationship, which is the symbol of the Victorian society, and which strictly adheres to its rules.

On the other hand, the relationship between Charles and Sarah develops gradually from sympathy and pity to passion and love. This affair is the symbol of the unconventionality and of the protest against the Puritan Victorian society. Therefore, thanks to this unconventional relationship and likewise unconventional character of Sarah, the novel becomes a path from Victorian

conventionality and conformism to nineteenth-century existentialism, which allows characters to make choices and exercise their freedom.

In the same way, *Possession* portrays and confronts two Victorian relationships, one conventional and inside the marriage, between Randolph and his wife Ellen, and an illegitimate and unconventional one between Randolph and the poetess Christabel LaMotte. The plainness and boredom of Randolph and Ellen's marriage, lead Randolph to the instauration of a wit kinship and literary friendship through an epistolary correspondence with Christabel. They fall in love primarily thanks to the genius and the art which each of them finds in the other. This Platonic love led by poetry and admiration soon transforms itself into a physical relationship during their love escape in North Yorkshire. However, although the characters seem to have a modern attitude and way of thinking, they live in the nineteenth century, and the Victorian society cannot tolerate certain kinds of behaviour or situations. As a result, they interrupt their relationship on behalf of their respectability. They spend the rest of their lives separated; however, they are and will always be linked by the daughter born from their brief but intense relationship. Byatt presents thus the triumph of Victorian conventionality over modernity and unconventionality through a twentieth-century perspective, in order to revenge Christabel and Randolph's story.

In fact, she portrays the story of two modern twentieth-century scholars of the two poets, who repeat the same story, walking on the same path of the Victorians. Their relationship starts with a kind of strange attraction thanks to the calmness the two find in each other, and it continues until at the end it becomes love. Consequently, Byatt's aim is to legitimate the Victorian unconventional relationship, through the modern relationship between Maud

and Roland's. In fact, she wants to demonstrate how much the contest influenced the result of the story, because if the scholars' relationship reaches a happy ending it is thanks to the modern background, which is constructed by a modern society, which is able to accept what in the Victorian Age was considered too modern and shocking to accept.

This discourse leads to the novel *Fingersmith*. Although the theme of love is different from the way in which it is represented in the two previous works, they all provide the same message. *Fingersmith* portrays an unconventional relationship in the Victorian Age, though unconventional in a different way from Sarah and Charles's or Christabel and Randolph's relationships, because it deals with homosexual love.

However, the topic is the same that is the Victorian society's incapability to accept a love which is different and unconventional. Nevertheless, Waters provides a sparkle of hope by giving the novel a happy ending. In fact, in her modern version of this nineteenth-century story, at the end the protagonists choose to live their relationship together and freely; however, they are far away in Briar and isolated from the rest of the society, which is not ready to accept them yet.

Finally, this journey through Victorian love and sentimentality, seen through the eyes of the postmodern authors, triggers a reflection about how strict and intolerant the nineteenth-century society was toward unconventional love, and consequently leaves the reader with a question: is our contemporary society as intolerant, strict and narrow-minded as the Victorian society? Is the contemporary man unwarily behaving like the Victorian? The answer depends on each one's opinion, however times passes and conventions change, and it

is the duty of society to demonstrate that there is no model to adhere to and no convention to follow, because everyone is unique in its essence and deserves freedom, the same that ‘allows other freedoms to exist’ (Fowles 97).

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