

An Analysis of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* from the Perspective of Existentialism

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Abstract: *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is the most influential novel of John Fowles. Fowles is deeply influenced by existentialism so this article analyses the novel from the perspective of existentialism.

Key words: *The French Lieutenant's Woman*; existentialism

John Fowles was considered as a philosophical novelist who was influenced by the strong philosophical atmosphere during his college years from 1947 to 1950. He holds the view that existentialism is not a rigid kind of philosophy but a practical philosophy aiming to help people get survived in a certain environment.

Existentialism is fully described in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Literally, the author refers to existentialism in the novel, such as "the knowledge we own now is far more than him in his time, and we also have existentialism to use in our life." "the fear of existentialism has attacked him again...perhaps he has already known it..." If novels are pictorial philosophy, then, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a graphic image of existentialism. The author tells people to lead an independent life to fulfill the individual's free will.

In this novel Sarah is indeed the mysterious and lonely individual from her showing up in Fowles' mind. At the beginning of this novel, the author takes Thomas Hardy's poem *The Riddle* as a quotation, implying the mystery of Sarah. Sarah is coming out in this novel as a mysterious and lonely image. And with the development of the plots of the story, Sarah is described as a person who is isolated from the world. She is considered as an outsider in Lyme because all the people in Lyme don't want to be close to her and try to separate her from the world on the spirit level. To people's surprise, Sarah seems to be deeply immersed in this isolation, enjoying being alone. She lives in Lyme freely, not concerning others and affairs in the town. Once she says that "I live in a lonely life. There is a destiny that I cannot make friends with others in the town. I can never live in my own home. I am isolated with the whole world..." More importantly, the image of Sarah is reflected in pieces with the development of the story. The whole image of Sarah cannot be shown in a broken mirror, that is to say, she is surrounded by the mysterious atmosphere. People in Lyme take Sarah as a slut of the French lieutenant's woman and she herself does not deny it. All the rumors are made up randomly and Sarah has no defense for herself. In her mind, this is the only way to live in the world in that social background and this is her way to get freedom.

In essence, the philosophy of existentialism is a philosophy of individualism. This individualism is different from the traditional one because it puts the lonely individual as the point.

Kierkegaard thinks that "individual is not one person's self but a social and civic self. He is in the process of interacting with others and things around him. In *Existence and Time*, he points out that when one is living the world he will be stuck in troubles. Being in the world is equal to living with troubles, which is the opinion of Heidegger. Sartre believes that the other is in the process of self-conflicting and self-saving in order to find the authentic self. According to the statements above, it is clear that existential

philosophers have a common thinking about the relationship between individual and the other. They can be interdependent with each other but sometimes they are dependent and conflicting.

Now let us come to the novel, the relationship between Sarah and the other is kind of the image of the hell. She met the French sailor by incident and she thought she found true love. But unfortunately, she was trapped in the hell that the sailor set for her. The sailor had a family and never came back after his leg cured, so Sarah had to end her love. What's worse, after that she was live in the curse and sarcasm in Lyme. No one treated her as a dignified person. She worked in Mrs Bohr Tenny's home as a governess in order to make a living. Mrs Bohr Tenny was imperious and arrogant. She thought Sarah was sinful, hoping to hear the confession of Sarah. As a result, they didn't get along well with each other. Their relationship can be described as repression and struggle. Mrs Bohr Tenny was fear to be in hell but she set a hell in the real world for Sarah.

The meet of Charles and Sarah was a reflection of the relationship of individual and the other. Sarah's face gave deep impression to Charles at their first meet. Then she got Charles' sympathy and took control of him. Charles was so attracted by Sarah that he broke up with Ernestina (his fiancée), giving up the great fortune and high social status. Then he was considered as a jerk with no responsibility and dignity. He finally found his authentic being through these experiences while Sarah disappeared which made Charles puzzled and miserable.

Freedom is the basic concept of the existentialism philosophy of Sartre and he holds the view that existentialism is a philosophy of freedom. In this novel, freedom is what Fowles longs for and he puts his emphasis on individual independence. An ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus regards sages as people who have independent thinking and ability of judgement, pursuing the inner wisdom and knowledge. They can keep their independent characters to achieve self-realization. Fowles makes the pursuit of freedom and independence rooted in his writings. When Sarah lived in Lyme, she was cursed and separated by others. But she didn't care what others thought or talked about her. She lived with solitary to awaken her awareness of freedom. She enjoys freedom in loneliness, which is in accordance with Sartre's opinion that when someone ravages another one, he cannot deprive the other of the right of freedom. Otherwise, he offers the other a choice of freedom. Sarah changes from the French lieutenant's woman to the lover of Charles. She makes herself free to follow her heart and falls in love with Charles. To some extent, she is lucky for meeting Charles. They both have opportunity to pursue freedom and true love.

Sarah's leaving Charles is a overturn of the male-female relationship and moral tradition in the Victorian age. In Victorian age, man is dominant while woman is submissive; man is powerful while woman is weak. Woman must be in the dominant of man; women are restricted to their behaviors; women are highly controlled not only by their husbands but also by the stereotype images instilled in everyone's head. Nonetheless in this novel, in the relationship of Charles and Sarah, it seems that Sarah needs Charles' sympathy but it is Sarah

that takes control of the development of their relationship. It is a reverse of the traditional image of the relationship between woman and man. Based on Sartre, people always take others as the other. But in readers' eye, Sarah is the master of action while Charles is in the position of the other. From this point it is seen that Sarah is the heroine embodying the free will in existentialism.

In this novel, the author shows existentialism with the intrusion in the literature in terms of the relationship of the author and the reader as well as the author and the characters in the novel. Fowles is for the opinion that the world is an organic body not a machine. The true world must be independent with its creator, a planned world is a world of death. The characters in this novel are out of control of the author in terms of their choices of their lives. There is no doubt that Fowles is a wonderful philosophical existentialist enjoying great reputation in the world. His novel describes existentialism in both themes and writing style. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a masterpiece of Fowles and it is considered as the most influential work in the 20th century.

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