Rewriting Marx: Emancipation and Restoration in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*

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In Victorian tradition, John Fowles begins *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* with an epigraph: “Every emancipation is restoration of the human world and of human relationships to man himself,” from *Zur Judenfrage* by Karl Marx. Marxist considerations, especially ones that touch on the subject of human emancipation, are, by this technique, imported into the text as qualifying ideas affecting the reader’s interpretation. The emancipations in the novel, however, do not take the form of rescue or revolutionary triumph, the ideas typically associated with Marxist emancipation. In *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, emancipation appears as dissolution, and this dissolution/emancipation pattern continues throughout the novel. As certainties crumble one after another, restoration and emancipation occur in a pattern that eventually extends from the characters in the novel to the author, the reader, and the text itself. Incessant shifting from one center to another, followed by the dislocation of each newly established center, gives the novel much of its rhetorical energy and provides it with a unifying thematic dimension that substitutes for a formulaic thesis. As this strategy unfolds, the meta-narrative of Marxism is affirmed in its recognition of the need for emancipation and restoration; but it is also subverted in relation to the substance and nature of the emancipations required to truly restore human relationships.

The plot of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is constructed primarily around the developing relationship of Charles Smithson and Sarah Woodruff, and most of the critical attention the novel has been paid
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focuses upon this phase of the story. But it is in the secondary plot concerning Sam Farrow and Charles Smithson that aspects of class struggle, a phenomenon Marx proposed as the key to understanding human history, are a primary focus. Some class considerations are seen in the development of the main plot: Sarah Woodruff must compromise her personal freedom by working, out of economic necessity, for the tyrannical Mrs. Poulteney; Sarah’s father is obsessed with the supposed gentility of his family and eventually is financially ruined and goes mad with this preoccupation; and Sarah’s economic marginality is often emphasized. It is the parallel plot, however, dealing with Charles and Ernestina, and Sam and Mary, that more closely focuses on class conflict and illustrates the tensions that arise from social stratification. Charles Smithson is from a landed family and looks to inherit the title of baronet. He is characteristic of the leisured, monied class. He has never worked, occupies his time with paleontology and travel, and waits to inherit substantial wealth from an unmarried uncle. Ernestina Freeman is daughter to a man who represents the rising entrepreneurial class in England (her father operates a drapery and cloth sales store). Their impending marriage is indicative of the alliance of old money and new that was occurring in industrial England at that time.

Charles and Ernestina are each connected with a servant specific to their sex, socially inferior, and separated by the barriers of education, language (both Sam and Mary speak in dialect), money, manners, sexual mores, privilege—all the indexes of social stratification. As the novel develops, antipathy between the servants and their superiors grows, especially between Sam and Charles.

The importance of classical Marxism for the novel, and especially for the Sam/Charles phase of the plot, is emphasized early in the text (having been seen already in epigraphs). After discussing the economic dynamics that touch Charles Smithson and English society in general, the narrator adds:

Needless to say, Charles knows nothing of the beavered German Jew quietly working, as it so happened, that very afternoon in the British Museum library; and whose work in those somber walls was to bear such bright red fruit. Had you described that fruit, or the subsequent effects of its later indiscriminate consumption, Charles would almost certainly not have believed you—and, even though, in only six months from this March of 1867, the first volume of Kapital was to appear in Hamburg. (12)

The narrator adds, however, that decades of prosperity in England had
made the possibility of revolution recede . . . almost out of mind" (12). The reader has not yet been introduced to the character of Sam, but Sam is soon brought into the story along with a framing text that points to the conflicts experienced by Sam the servant and Charles his master. And despite Fowles's earlier disclaimer about revolution being unlikely, the entire episode in which Sam first appears is laced with direct and indirect allusions to class struggle and violent revolution. Also, an epigraph by Marx looms as the qualifying quotation in the chapter that describes Charles's and Sam's relationship.

Fowles places this epigraph at the beginning of the chapter introducing and describing Sam. From Capital, it is designed to bear on the reader's assessment of Sam's economic and social status:

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. (38)

Fowles intends the chapter epigraphs to have particular bearing on the content of the chapters they begin. In Chapter Five, a section that discusses among other things Ernestina's somewhat misguided ideas on sexuality, a footnote reads, "The stanzas from In Memoriam [quoted as epigraphs at the beginning] are very relevant here" (29). Fowles makes it clear that he intends this quotation to have a direct bearing upon a specific section of the text, in this case Ernestina's sexual musings. In a similar fashion, the reader's interpretation of Sam is colored by the quote from Capital, and as a corollary the chapter hints at revolution when it speaks of Sam, who is in a bad mood that morning, testing the blade of the "cutthroat razor." The narrator assures the reader that Charles is a benevolent master to his servant, that he feels a certain amount of fond affection for him, does not exploit and mistreat him; yet his condescending attitude toward Sam is distressing. He uses his superior education to benignly bully his servant, quoting Latin to him, accuses him of being drunk, reminds him that he was "born in a gin palace" (40), calls him a Cockney, and, after declaring he is being too "fast" with Mary, tells him, "if you're not doubly fast with my breakfast, I shall fasten my boot onto the posterior portion of your miserable anatomy" (40, author's italics). Charles's attitude is glib, condescending, shallow, smugly superior. Later in the chapter it is revealed that Sam detests his job. Despite disclaimers outlining Charles's benevolence, and apologies for his
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fatuous manner, it is apparent that his relationship with Sam is less than ideal. Some sort of emancipation is necessary, but since both individuals are deeply embedded each in his own social stratum, exterior forces must bring this emancipation about.

The name Fowles chose for his character brings another subtext to bear on the relationship of Sam and Charles. He notes, “to us any Cockney servant called Sam evokes immediately the immortal Weller” (41), and this name is not unrelated to considerations of emancipations and class struggle. Sam Weller, Mr. Pickwick’s servant in Pickwick Papers, is a character who rather starkly illustrated to Victorian readers the suffering of the Victorian underclass. When he first appears in the Pickwick Papers he is frustrated in his employment as lackey and bootblack at the White Hart Inn, and in the episode that introduces him we glimpse the demanding impenitence of his social superiors and Sam’s resentment at this. After he comes into Pickwick’s service, the following exchange gave Dickens’s audience a somewhat harrowing glimpse of the lives of London poor, as Sam describes how he lived for a week under Waterloo bridge with “young beggars, male and female, as hasn’t made a rise in their profession,” and also “worn-out, starving, houseless creeturs as rolls themselves in dark corners o’ them lonesome places” (242). Sam is rescued from this penury by the benevolent Pickwick, and his eventual loyalty to his master, his willingness to follow him even to jail, is probably a romantic accommodation of an unpleasant social actuality. Sam Farrow’s situation with Charles is not romanticized. Fowles comments, “the difference between Sam Weller and Sam Farrow (that is, between 1836 and 1867) was this: the first was happy with his role, the second suffered it” (43). The solution of the benevolent and innocent master who wins the undying loyalty of his servant is not workable in the case of Sam and Charles. Their antipathy grows as the novel progresses.

Similar factors are at work in the relations of Ernestina and Mary. Mary is actually a servant of Mrs. Tranter but is made subject to Ernestina during the latter’s stay at Lyme Regis. Ernestina tyrannizes Mary, bullying her and ordering her about, using the language and position to intimidate. Mary senses oppression, but in a different manner from the way Sam reacts to Charles. She is envious of Ernestina’s economic superiority and is chagrined by the “trunkfuls of the latest London and Paris fashions” that arrived with the visitor she must serve. She also feels attracted to Charles, thinks he is handsome and desirable and “a good deal too good for a pallid creature like
Ernestina” (76). Mary is also sexually free in contrast to Ernestina’s sexual repression: the former was dismissed from Mrs. Poulteney’s for kissing a groom there and becomes sexually involved with Sam not too long after they meet. Although Mary’s dissatisfaction takes a different form from Sam’s, it is none the less profound, and the relationship of the servant girl to her mistress even more repressive than that of his servant to Charles.

Mary does not attempt to break out of the repressive relationship with Ernestina (partially because Mrs. Tranter is a genuinely benevolent employer who shows her disregard for class distinctions by occasionally dining—in private—with Mary). Sam, on the other hand, is defiantly determined to find a way out of his situation, to be liberated from the social bonds that hold him in a subserviant position.

The only path of liberation open to Sam is that of economic advancement. Revolution does not seem to be an option, since Fowles has told us earlier that government reforms and economic prosperity had at that time dulled the revolutionary edge almost out of existence. Fowles mentions early on that Sam is attracted to clothes, is called a “snob,” a term then designating “artisans and would-be superior domestics” who liked to dress well; Sam spends most of his money on clothing (42). His plan is to eventually go into business for himself as a haberdasher:

His ambition was very simple: He wanted to be a haberdasher. He had never been able to pass such shops without stopping and staring in the windows; criticizing or admiring them, as the case might require. He believed he had a flair for knowing the latest fashions. He had traveled abroad with Charles and had picked up some foreign ideas in the haberdashery field . . . (132)

The thing that is keeping him back is, simply, “no money, no education.” As his affection toward Mary grows, so does his determination to break free from Charles and create the space necessary for personal fulfillment, for emancipation.

In keeping with the epigraph from Zur Judenfrage, 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, and in this revolutionary impulse is a sexual dynamic, since more than mere economic codes separated social elements within Victorian society. True to social/sexual mores of that day, Charles is sexually experienced, but his experiences are clandestine and are kept secret; Ernestina follows upper-class conventions and remains a virgin. Sam and Mary begin a liaison early, and the nature of
their relationship is certainly more attractive than that of Charles and Ernestina. Whereas Charles and Ernestina are bound by elaborate convention, social ritual, and legal considerations in their engagement, Sam and Mary can be direct, honest, open with one another. The barriers to genuine mutuality are not present in their relationship: there is communication that soon grows into a love based on respect and that is innocent and sincere, in sharp contrast to the conventional, artificial relationship carried on by Charles and Ernestina.

This point is well illustrated by the language each couple uses. Sam and Mary are willing to be transparent in their desires, as is seen when Sam is revealing his plans for the future to Mary. Despite awkwardness in expressing himself, Sam speaks at length of his hope to be free from Charles and to open his own shop. He is willing to speak, communicate, make himself vulnerable to mockery from Mary (who does not mock). This communicative bent reveals that love, personal desire, the prospect of marriage, have become a vision of emancipation for Sam. Charles and Ernestina, on the other hand, do not genuinely communicate. From Charles's first remark to her, "'My dear Tina, we have paid our homage to Neptune' . . ." there is a sterility, an affectatious quality to their speech that betokens a sheltering of personhood. Whereas Sam and Mary progressively reveal their souls to one another, Charles and Ernestina hide and conceal their inner selves. The quality of their communication is symbolic of the lack of genuineness in their relationship. The halting attempts of Sam, however, to communicate, and Mary's non-judgmental encouragement of his talk, are in sharp contrast to conversations of their social and economic superiors. This factor is paralleled by the lack of physical expression between Charles and Ernestina and the presence of it with Sam and Mary.

As Sam and Mary develop their relationship, Charles grows increasingly enamored of Sarah Woodruff, the French Lieutenant's woman. He sees her as a way out of the delimiting and sterile relationship he is developing with Ernestina Freeman. Moreover, he begins dimly to realize in his experience with Sarah the possibilities for human freedom and liberation. She is "alien, enigmatic, and touched with a hint of forbidden sexuality," representing an unbounded otherness that is foreign and fascinating (Booker 181). Her assumed madness, the title her supposed illicit love affair has gained her, her bitterly won freedom from the conventions of Lyme Bay village, convey to Charles a sense of remoteness from the world he lives in, the world of carefully wrought formulae, prescribed behavior, elaborate social convention. In Sarah Woodruff he begins to see the possibilities of
personal liberation, emancipation from all that he finds so restrictive. The possibility of sexual expression is also something that seizes Charles and draws him from the repressed and conventionalized engagement with Ernestina to increasing involvement with the outsider, Sarah.

It is at this point that the sexual liaison developing, though not yet consummated, between Charles and Sarah begins to form the path to emancipation for Sam and Mary. Sam and Mary stumble upon Charles and Sara at an abandoned cottage in the undercliff. Sam begins to imagine that he can blackmail Charles into giving him the money to begin his haberdashery shop. As it turns out, he is not able to execute his plan of blackmail. When this fails he betrays Charles to Mr. Freeman, enabling Freeman to force Charles into signing an admission of guilt for breaking the engagement.

The entire sordid affair can be tallied up as a liberation for Sam. Freeman gives him a job at which he excels. When we see Sam and Mary again, they are living in comfortable quarters in London, have a child, and also employ a maid. Yet they have succeeded not by revolutionary zeal or by striking out at the oppressive system that economically exploited them. Rather, they have been co-opted into that system. They are emancipated through the available resources of the capitalistic system. Freeman rewards Sam’s incrimination of Charles by giving him a position in his store. Sam’s innovative abilities gain his employer’s approval; he is promoted and soon makes a good salary and lives comfortably. Their grafting into the middle class is a liberation done up in conventional capitalistic terms:

... these two [Sam and Mary] were rising in the world; and knew it. To Mary, it was all like a dream. To be married to a man earning over thirty shillings a week! When her own father, the carter, had never risen above ten! To live in a house that cost £19 a year to rent! (424)

Freeman, the pompous industrialist, the quintessence of capitalistic Victorian propriety, is the facilitator for this liberation. Though their plight has been characterized in Marxist terms by the epigraph referring to servants, slaves, and lackeys, 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.

It is in this way that Fowles’s novel undertakes a re-reading of Marx. Marxism as a prescriptive and determining ideology is challenged, just as many other grande recits are subjected to Fowles’s postmodern critique. The idea of progress, for example—a notion that
informed much Victorian thinking, from sociological theories to the ideas of Darwin and other evolutionists—is questioned, especially in the section of the novel when Charles realizes “that evolution was not vertical, ascending to a perfection, but horizontal.” In a moment of crisis he comes to see that the conceptual frameworks by which society deals with the bewildering flux and mutability of the outward universe are “painted screens erected by man to shut out reality—history, religion, duty, social position, all were illusions, mere opium fantasies” (206). Other frameworks, modern as well as Victorian, are also questioned.

It is in this context that Marxism comes in for critique, for Marxism is an interpretation of history, one that attempts to project an ethic upon historical processes and so systemize them. All history, Marx wrote in the Communist Manifesto, is understood in terms of class struggle (335). Yet he also noted that genuine liberation is a restoration of relationships. The French Lieutenant’s Woman tends to contravene any attempt at delimiting and circumscribing life and challenges all meta-narratives that would prescribe, and so delimit, the possibilities of human freedom. So it comes about that the supra-text, the epigraph from Zur Judenfrage which is a determining quotation for the entire novel, tends to deconstruct traditional ideas of what Marxist liberation constitutes, and also to contradict the other Marxian writings quoted as subtextual epigraphs beginning individual chapters.

In the description of Marx working in a London library, quoted earlier, the reader is given a hint of Fowles’s ambivalence toward the subject of Marxist revolution. He mentions not only Marx and his writing but also the “bright red fruit” it would bear and “the subsequent effects of its later indiscriminate consumption” (12). “Bright red fruit” refers to the red chosen as a symbol of revolution by many communist nations, but also suggests blood and violence. Fowles seems censorious as well of the “indiscriminate consumption” of Marxist ideology, hinting at the excesses of certain zealots who applied Marx’s revolutionary theories with extreme brutality.

At the same time, however, The French Lieutenant’s Woman endorses the idea that restoration of human relationships is the nature of true emancipation. The Marxist texts within the body of the novel illustrate the tension of interpretation that exists within a group of short texts (epigraphs) emanating from the same author. Fowles uses quotations from Zur Judenfrage, Capital, Economic and Political Manuscripts, German Ideology, The Communist Manifesto, De Heilige Familie, all written by Marx, but quite diverse in their approach to the idea of human revolution. On
the one side are texts that suggest economics is the only dynamic operative in experience and imply that liberation may come from an economic restructuring alone. These texts tend to emphasize the negative, oppressive side of capitalism with such phrases as “unproductive employment . . . of the working class,” “reproduction . . . of the ancient domestic slaves” (36), “alienation of labor” (72), or with accusatory jibes such as this one:

The bourgeoisie . . . compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, that is, to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image. (280)

The rather strident rhetoric of this passage (which appears late in the novel) exhibits a tendency Fowles has opposed throughout The French Lieutenant’s Woman. The passage indiscriminately categorizes individuals as “the bourgeois,” yet the body of the novel has demonstrated in persons such as Charles, Mrs. Tranter, Charles’s uncle, even Mrs. Poulteney to a degree, that individuals are not so easily categorized under neat headings; further, he suggests that labeling to vilify is a damaging practice, as Sarah’s experience when she is branded with the title, “the French Lieutenant’s whore,” will bear out. This strand in the Marxist epigraphs is ideological and constitutes an attempt to impose a single interpretation upon history.

Other epigraphs, however, suggest a contrary viewpoint, for they recognize human factors. The last Marxist epigraph quoted in the novel, like the main epigraph from Zur Judenfrage, suggests an indeterminate and human aspect to the interpretation of history: “History is not like some individual person, which uses men to achieve its ends. History is nothing but the actions of men in pursuit of their ends” (322). To a degree, the quotation from Die Heilige Familie admits the indeterminacy of history. History is the actions of individuals as they attempt to construct their lives. The ideological vituperation that sometimes seems to drown out the human factor in Marx’s pronouncements is here set aside and the infinite possibilities inherent in human freedom are recognized.

Even in the more inflammatory, accusatory quotations Fowles chose for the novel, however, there is a current that always suggests the human side of revolution. The quotation from Capital (38) contains references to very real individuals: “men-servants, women-servants, lackeys.” This description is brought to life when the reader becomes familiar with two such characters, Sam and Mary, who are attractive
individuals and whose story constitutes a complete emancipation, victory over class restrictions, and economic advancement. Hidden away in phrases such as “alienation of labor,” and descriptions of disaffected workers (72), is the human element. Economic and class factors do come into play as strong determining factors for people. All the same, Sam’s angry rejoinder to Charles when he later pretends to interfere with his relationship with Mary is, “We’re not ‘orses. We’re ’ooman beings” (110). He is aware of the dehumanizing element in the class structure of his day which treats servants as horses and not human beings. It is the human factor that makes revolution (emancipation) justifiable.

Sam is able to achieve emancipation, but the price he pays for it is a high one. His betrayal of Charles to Freeman certainly lands him all he had hoped for: a secure job that pays well, the possibility that he will be able to accrue enough capital to open a haberdashery shop, the means to support Mary and even to hire a servant. But emancipation, Fowles has suggested, is a restoration of human relationships, and Sam has enabled one relationship, his own with Mary, by destroying his relationship with Charles. Charles Smithson’s importunity was Sam’s bridge to a better life, but Sam suffers from a great deal of guilt over what he has done.

His feelings of guilt are exacerbated when Mary reports that she has seen Sarah Woodruff. Mary knows nothing of what Sam has done; it is one of the few things he has kept back from her and so is inconsistent with the openness that characterizes their marriage. Her emancipation is complete. Her economic gain has involved no disruption of relationships. Sam, by contrast, grows even more morose and guilt-ridden after receiving the news. His conscience torments him as he sits and drinks gin after gin in a local pub and broods over his treatment of Charles. Eventually his remorse drives him to respond to the advertisement Montague has placed in the London newspapers. Montague assumes that Sarah herself has sent the letter notifying him of her whereabouts, but earlier narrative passages make it clear that the “sheet of paper containing nothing beyond the name and address” (438) is from Sam, who has sent it as an atonement of sorts, a device to put his conscience at rest for what he deems to have been unethical behavior toward Charles. It is this that facilitates Charles’s final meeting with Sarah at the home of Dante Gabriel Rosetti as told in the alternate endings of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. Sam’s belated and anonymous attempt to restore a relationship is lost on Charles and Montague, but we assume it at least removes the obstruction to Sam’s emancipation,
which cannot be merely economic but must also encompass the human connections that define life.

Fowles critiques Marxism by juxtaposing, as epigraphs, some apparently contradictory statements Marx made. Simultaneously, however, he “opens up” these texts and, by illustrating them with a dramatic framework (the Sam/Charles plot of the novel), is able strongly to assert the truths they contain. So it is that the epigraphs at first bear on the text of the novel, but soon the text of the novel begins to have some bearing upon how the epigraphs are understood. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, human emancipation is accomplished not by any authoritative impositions, but by the uncovering of possibility and by a dissolution of certainties that permits genuine liberation to come about.

**WORKS CITED**


