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**“Fiction is woven into all” –  
The Deconstruction of the Binary Opposition  
Fiction/Reality in John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s  
Woman***

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## Introduction

*The French Lieutenant's Woman*, first published in 1969, is probably John Fowles's best known novel and has received a lot of attention from literary critics. It takes place in Victorian England, yet the story is told by a twentieth-century narrator. On the surface it appears to be a typical Victorian love story where Charles, the protagonist, falls in love with a mysterious woman, Sarah Woodruff, known to the town's people as the French Lieutenant's woman, or even the French Lieutenant's whore. The problem is that Charles is engaged to Ernestina, but realizes that he cannot be with her after meeting Sarah whom he describes as "unforgettable" (Fowles 16), and with whom he has an affair. However, the parts of the novel that have received most attention are Chapter 13 and the dual ending. It is here it becomes obvious that this narrative is not a typical Victorian love story. In Chapter 13 the narrator intervenes in the story and tells the reader that everything in the story is all fiction and that the characters only exist in his own mind. He then moves on with the story in the next chapter as if nothing has happened. In the dual ending the narrator provides the reader with two simultaneous endings by turning back his watch and decides which ending to have first by tossing a coin. One ending describes the typical Victorian happy ending where Charles and Sarah live together happily ever after, whereas in the other, many times referred to as the existential ending, they never meet again yet appear free.

Literary critics have tried many different approaches when trying to interpret this novel. William Stephenson gives a brief overview of some of these approaches, for instance Marxism (52), Postmodernism (82), Feminist Criticism, Queer Theory and eco-criticism (86-89). He remarks that the novel is "close to being a classic already, as its widely varying critical interpretations over nearly 40 years show" (77). This suggests not only that the novel is open for interpretation, but also that it is complex and difficult to interpret. In regards to this, Gwen

Raaberg points out that it “resists mastery” (523), and Katherine Tarbox claims that it has the “power to disturb” (88).

Yet it is possible to distinguish some key subjects; Darwinism, Christianity, the relationship between reader and narrator, the relationship between narrator and characters, and past and present are some. These subjects will be dealt with within this essay. More exactly, this essay will analyze the deconstruction of fiction/reality by analyzing, and interpreting the above subjects and their relationship to fiction and reality. It will be suggested that the opposition fiction/reality is deconstructed since the binary oppositions narrator/reader, Christianity/Darwinism and past/present are deconstructed. This will be done with a poststructuralist approach. Peter Barry claims that what is characteristic of a poststructuralist reading is reading the text against itself where meanings “directly contrary to the surface meaning” (73) are exposed, as well as searching for disunity rather than unity, and focusing on single passages (73). This essay will focus on passages and the use of language in the novel and it will be shown that quotes from the novel can have multiple meanings that sometimes are contrary to the surface meaning. Moreover, this essay will deal with Derrida’s concept that binary oppositions are “hierarchal” and that one of the terms is “dominant, the other subordinate” (Raaberg 522). For instance, in the commonly used binary oppositions man/woman and white/black the first term is dominant over the other and regarded as “more desirable” (Barry 74), and in poststructuralism one tries to deconstruct this relationship by making the second term more desirable and powerful, and by showing contradiction or paradoxes (Barry 75).

When it comes to *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, critic M. Keith Booker argues that this novel “does not propose the dissolution of all boundaries”, but rather that it “depends for its effectiveness upon the interrogation of those boundaries, an interrogating that cannot occur unless boundaries exist” (196). This essay springs from this conclusion; indeed the novel depends on the

binary opposition fiction/reality for its effectiveness, however this essay will propose that deconstruction of these boundaries occurs in the novel.

## **Narrator/Reader**

To show that the binary opposition fiction/reality is deconstructed it is necessary to examine the relationship between the narrator and the reader. Usually, the narrator is inevitably part of fiction whereas the reader is part of reality. Kelley Griffith, literary critic, refers to Suzanne Keen and states that “we should see all narrators, even ones that refer to themselves as the work’s creator, as fictional. They are as much ‘characters’ in the story as the other characters” (41)<sup>1</sup>. As a result, the deconstruction of the opposition reader/narrator can be seen as a metaphor for the deconstruction of reality/fiction. The following paragraphs will show that the relationship between reader and narrator is deconstructed, since, on the one hand, the narrator shows control and power over the text and identifies with the reader, but, on the other hand, the narration and interpretation of the text are to a great extent left to the reader. In this way a tie is created not only between the narrator and the reader, but also one that deconstructs reality and fiction.

The narrator appears to be omniscient and to dominate the story. Early on in the story, the narrator tries to present himself as trustworthy to the reader. He describes Lyme Bay, the setting of the story, in detail and he makes it clear that he describes a different time than the one he lives in which is another indicator that lets him appear objective and trustworthy. After a couple of paragraphs where he portrays the Cobb as “[p]rimitive yet complex, elephantine but delicate; as full of subtle curves and volumes as a Henry Moore or a Michelangelo” he asks the reader: “I

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<sup>1</sup> Rimmon-Kenan argues further that there always is a narrator, but also an implied author in a text, but that they are never the same: “the narrator can only be defined circularly as the ‘narrative voice’ or ‘speaker’ of a text, the implied author is- in opposition and by definition- voiceless and silent” (88).

exaggerate? Perhaps, but I can be put to the test,” and then a bit later in the description he states: “there too I can be put to proof” (Fowles 10). It appears as if the narrator is having a dialogue with the reader about whether or not he is trustworthy by claiming that he can be put to the test and that he can provide the reader with proof. In this way the narrator almost proposes to write a scientific text. At least he visibly shows that he finds evidence of importance and thereby also demonstrates to the reader that he is trustworthy.

He also identifies with the reader and expects the reader to identify with him. The narrator often uses the pronoun “we” when describing what happens in the story. For instance, when Charles searches for samples in the forest and thinks about Darwinism, the narrator comments “after all, he was a Victorian. *We* could not expect him to see what *we* are only just beginning- and with so much more knowledge and the lessons of existentialist philosophy at *our* disposal- to realize *ourselves*” (Fowles 72, emphasis mine). This comment creates a clear distance to Charles, a Victorian, which the narrator evidently is not. Instead, the narrator identifies with the reader when stating that “we could not” and “our disposal,” suggesting that the reader and the narrator have to share the same culture whereas Charles belongs to a completely different one. Due to the fact Charles is a Victorian we [the narrator and the reader] are *not*. He is part of the fiction whereas we are *not*. The gap between “him” and “we”, and thus between reality and fiction is truly wide.

Apart from establishing an alliance with the reader to create a distance to the characters, the narrator also shows his power over the text in chapter 13, to demonstrate that he is the master of the text. He starts the chapter by claiming that his story is “all imagination” and further that “these characters I create never existed outside my own mind” (Fowles 97) to remind the reader not to be fooled by the story. It is nothing but imagination and thus fiction. By letting the reader know that it is *his* story and the characters are in *his* head, the narrator describes himself as a real

person, not a fictional character. The reader seems to have influence on the story and only knows what the narrator chooses to say. This distances him from the reader. He also identifies himself as “a novelist” (Fowles 97) and claims “I know in the context of my book’s reality” (Fowles 97). By positioning himself as the novelist the narrator illustrates his power, dominance, and control.

Furthermore, by claiming to “live in one of the houses [he has] brought into the fiction” (Fowles 97) the narrator also appears to be reliable since he makes connections to the real world. The house he refers to in the above quote is an item that is “brought into” fiction, that is, something that did not previously belong to fiction but to reality. Reality is therefore of great importance when making the story credible, something that Stephenson agrees with. He claims that chapter 13 is the narrator’s “biggest scene, where he intrudes to address the reader directly, breaking the flow of the plot and thus vividly demonstrating his authority of the text” (18). Clearly, the power lies within the narrator and his ability to create characters and fiction, although he is part of fiction, and by doing this the narrator blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction.

The narrator also demonstrates his power when he explicitly tells the reader that he consciously decides what is to be in the story and what is not. Raaberg argues that the reader has to take an active part in narrating the story, yet also claims that “the reader... is positioned by the narrator to view the undertaking through the perspective of Charles Smithson and to focus on his quest” (527). As Raaberg claims, the reader is given a passive role in the process. This passive role of the reader is often explicitly stated by the narrator and he frequently takes a step away from the text and claims, for instance, when describing Sarah: “I risk making Sarah sound like a bigot [...] I cannot say what she might have been in our age; in a much earlier one I believe she would have been either a saint or an emperor’s mistress” (Fowles 62). The statements “I risk,”

and “I cannot say,” is a way for the narrator to distance himself from the fiction he describes, which is a manner of demonstrating his power over the text and making the reader passive.

The narrator’s power and the reader’s passivity is further demonstrated when the narrator shows that he is the one who decides what should be part of the story and not his characters. At one time he describes Sarah’s lonely walks in the woods and states: “If she [Sarah] went down Cockmiol she would most often turn into the parish church, and pray for a few minutes (a fact that Mrs Fairley never considered worth mentioning)” (Fowles 66). However, this fact is something the narrator decides is important enough to reveal to the reader. The narrator here informs the reader that he has a different perception about what is important enough to tell than his character Mrs Fairley does. She wants to keep secret the fact that Sarah goes to church during her walks, whereas the narrator does not. This is also a way of demonstrating *his* power and to emphasize that this is *his* fiction and that the characters are in *his* power. This becomes even clearer when the narrator describes Sarah performing “the first truly feminine gesture [he has] permitted her” (Fowles 269). The use of the verb “permit” indicates the narrator’s power and control since the characters are not allowed to do anything without his permission. Here the narrator shows to what extent he controls the characters and their actions.

On the surface the narrator appears to control the story, yet, at the same time, the reader is forced to be active in narrating the story and to become part of the fiction. The narrator’s repeated use of the pronoun “we” also gives the reader the right to interpret. Since “we” includes the reader just as much as it includes the narrator, they ought to be in the same position for possible interpretations. Nevertheless, it is impossible for the reader to have a dialogue with the narrator which gives the reader more room and authority for interpretation. The fact that the reader has more power than the narrator to interpret is reinforced by Derrida’s notion “*there is nothing outside of the text*” (Derrida 158), a statement that Barry interprets as “critical reading must

*produce* the text, since there is nothing behind it for us to reconstruct” (69). Drawing on this concept then, the reader has more power and authority for interpretation than the narrator. Nevertheless, the narrator is part of fiction whereas the reader is part of reality, and since the narrator and reader are joined in this manner, the reader is both part of fiction as well as reality. In other words, the reality in which the reader is part of is fictionalized since the reader is the one who interprets and in a way also narrates the text. Thus, what “we” know and is taken for granted in the text is open to the reader and is also varies from reader to reader, which weakens the narrator’s power and increases the reader’s. Raaberg finds that the reader has an active role in the narrating process and states that “when conclusions depend as obviously as they do in this novel on the reader’s construction, the problematic activity of reading is exposed, driving the reader back on his or her own responses and interpretive processes” (540). Stephenson goes even further by claiming that “[a]s we cannot trust Fowles’s narrator, we are led, in existentialist<sup>2</sup> fashion, to trust ourselves” (31). Paradoxically, even though the narrator tries to show how much he controls the text, in the end, it is the reader who controls as well as narrates the story. The reader has to take an active part in the novel, and is a kind of narrator and is brought into the story, into fiction.

Chapter 13 is also the chapter where the narrator shows that he is, in fact, not in control of the story, which urges the reader to suspect him. This chapter actually provides the reader with a paradox: the narrator claims to be in control, but then, he merely concludes that he “cannot control his characters” (Stephenson 18). If he cannot control them, it also means that he does not have full authority over the story. The narrator also explicitly points out that he is powerless by referring to superstition and states that if the reader finds “all this unlucky” the chapter at hand “*is Chapter Thirteen*” (Fowles 99). Here one can see a direct relationship between this chapter and

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<sup>2</sup> Existentialism puts great responsibility on the individual to make decisions and choices independent of others and of society, thus existential freedom means freedom to make choices independent of external influence (Lynch 51).

superstition, which is based on stories and fiction and is not linked to reality. This is another indicator that this chapter points at a paradox where the narrator tries to show control yet at the same time explains that he is not. Moreover, he explicitly maintains that his characters “still exist” in a “new reality” since “fiction is woven into all” (Fowles 99). Here the narrator shows that even though the characters are all in his own mind, they still exist since fiction is everywhere. He then starts to taunt the reader and asks if “[a] character is either ‘real’ or ‘imaginary’?” and responds “[i]f you think that, *hypocrite lecteur*, I can only smile” (Fowles 99). His imaginary dialogue with the reader elucidates that he tries to establish a different relationship with the reader. He breaks the earlier established alliance with the reader and creates a distance to the reader instead. From this moment on, the reader is suspected and taunted by the narrator. This also means that the reader cannot trust the narrator, and is, in a way, expected to suspect the narrator, which forces the reader to take an active part in the story.

There are many other instances, perhaps not as obvious, which illustrate that the narrator is not trustworthy. For instance, when the narrator claims that Sarah performs the “first truly feminine gesture [he has] permitted her” (Fowles 269) it is interesting to analyze the use of the word “truly”. The use of “truly” suggests that Sarah has performed feminine gestures in the story before, yet not as “true” as *this* feminine gesture. The use of the word “truly” here opens up for an interesting reading. True is closely connected to words such as proof, which is also a word the narrator uses in the beginning of the story when saying that he can be “put to proof”. But due to the narrator’s use of “truly”, and his evident need to show that he can be “put to proof” and “put to the test” (Fowles 10)<sup>3</sup>, one can sense that he feels the need to convince the reader that he tells the truth and that he is trustworthy. His excessive eagerness to point this out may suggest that he

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<sup>3</sup> See further discussion about this on page 4.

has something to hide, or simply put, that he is lying. The binary opposition of “true” is “false”, a word that is strongly connected to the word “lie” as well as “lying”. Lying is a kind of fiction or fiction making, and since Sarah performs her “first truly feminine gesture”, this means that up to this point everything she has done has been the opposite, i.e. false and wrong: a lie. Yet, the one who has been telling the lies is not Sarah, it is the narrator, since as previously discussed: it is the narrator who decides what to include in the story. This again emphasizes the fact that the narrator simply provides the reader with lies and is not trustworthy.

Not only is the narrator not trustworthy, he also poses a threat to his characters when he enters the story and goes on the same train as Charles, and blurs the boundaries between himself and his fictional characters, which blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality. In this part the narrator becomes a character which links him more to fiction than to reality. When he comes into the story the narrator describes himself as a man “in a hurry”, a “latecomer” (Fowles 387) and a person considered “unpleasant” (Fowles 388) by Charles who also thinks that there is “something rather aggressively secure about [the narrator]” (Fowles 387). Since he is described as “*aggressively* secure,” Charles may perceive the narrator as a threat and, therefore, one could also argue that he poses a threat to the story itself. Moreover, given that he is “in a hurry”, the narrator might very well do something to the story and his characters that are not thought through. The description of the narrator as “unpleasant” further enhances the fact that the narrator’s presence in the story is disagreeable. His presence is also threatening when he places himself near the sleeping Charles. The narrator stares at him and ponders: “could I use you? Now what could I do with you?” He goes on to describe this particular stare as “the look an omnipotent God- if there were such an absurd thing- should be shown to have” (Fowles 389). By describing himself in this way and in particular by comparing himself to an “omnipotent God”, the narrator shows his control over Charles. According to Raaberg, this episode “exposes the

fictional process and the reader's complicity in constructing the text" (530). Stephenson also discusses this episode and argues that the fact that an authorial figure (the narrator) is placed in the novel invites the reader "to examine it as a text, and the narrator as part of the fiction, rather than to seek a psychologically transparent, readily analyzable author situated conveniently above it" (62). This part of the novel, according to these critics then, shows that the narrator is more closely linked to that of a character, thus also more closely linked to fiction, rather than to the author of the novel or to reality. However, since he can be seen as a threat and an unpleasant part of the novel he does not really belong within the fiction either, which blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction.

The relationship between reader and narrator is deconstructed since the boundaries between reality and fiction is blurred. At first glance it appears as if the narrator controls the narrative and its characters which leave the reader in a passive position. He further demonstrates his power over the text in chapter 13 by explicitly stating that what he is writing is fiction created in his own mind. He shows his control by making it clear to the reader that he consciously decides what should be part of the story and what should not. However, at the same time, the reader very much narrates the story since many events are up to the reader to interpret and the reader is forced to be active in the narrating process which diminishes the narrator's power. Moreover, the narrator shows that he is not trustworthy and more or less explicitly provides the reader with lies even though he, at other times, makes a point of showing that he is telling the truth. Here, one could see lies as part of fiction and truth as part of reality, and in a way the narrator does both. When the narrator places himself as a character, yet shows that he does not belong there, it becomes difficult to determine where to place him. In this way the binary opposition narrator/reader is deconstructed, and therefore also reality/fiction.

## **Darwinism/Christianity**

Another way of demonstrating that the binary opposition fiction/reality is deconstructed is to show the deconstruction of the binary opposition Christianity/Darwinism. Both Christianity and Darwinism are crucial in the novel, something which has been pointed out by many critics. Critic Tony Jackson warns us not to “miss the significance of Darwin of our own time, which is equally important in the novel” (221), and Stephenson recognizes Darwinism and religion to be “two of the novel’s central ideas” (34). To analyze these subjects and their relationship to reality and fiction is of importance for this essay, since it is possible to link Darwinism to reality and Christianity to fiction. Darwinism is to be based on “scientific arguments” (Fowles 13), and hence, it can be regarded to represent science and truth. Accordingly, it is also connected to reality. Christianity, on the other hand, is based on an old text, the Bible, which consists of stories that, supposedly, happened a long time ago. From a poststructuralist point of view any text has multiple meanings and it is not possible to reconstruct the “pre-existing, non-textual reality”, and the reading of a text must “produce the text, since there is nothing behind it for us to reconstruct” (Barry 69). This implies that it is not possible to find the reality behind the stories in the Bible. The reality they allegedly describe has been distorted through the use of a text, and there are several ways of interpreting it, which makes it impossible to state that the Bible represents truth. Thus, one could argue that the Bible is fiction, and so is Christianity. Therefore, it is not only interesting to deconstruct the binary opposition Christianity/Darwinism since they are important subjects but it is also one way of showing how fiction/reality is deconstructed.

The deconstruction of this binary opposition can be achieved by focusing on Charles, who, on the surface has great confidence in Darwinism, which makes it appear as if the text is in favor of Darwinism. Very early on in the novel Charles declares his conviction that Darwinism is the

truth. He tells Ernestina, his fiancé, that he “had a small philosophical disagreement” with her father about Darwin, where he tried to “explain some of the scientific arguments behind the Darwinian position” (Fowles 13). The scientific issue in this novel surfaces again, and is explicitly taken up by Ernestina when she teases Charles by calling him “the scientist, the despiser of novels” (Fowles 16). Here it becomes evident that Charles sees himself as a scientific man<sup>4</sup>, something which also Jackson points out when he calls Charles “the earnest Darwinist” (225). He might be earnest, yet the narrator warns the reader not to laugh at Charles since “it was men not unlike Charles...who laid the foundations of all our modern science” (Fowles 52). Charles remains a follower of Darwinism throughout the novel. His belief in Darwinism and that he, in that way, has found the truth can be seen in the manner he regards himself “free as a God, one with the unslumbering stars and understanding all” (Fowles 159). This can be interpreted as a metaphor for Charles being free from Christianity. Apparently, by letting go of Christianity, Charles has found the key to understand reality. The extent to which Charles is influenced by Darwinism can be seen in the following statement by the narrator: “But underlying all, at least in Charles, was the doctrine of the survival of the fittest” (Fowles 286). Charles is a true follower of this doctrine. Consequently, since the protagonist of the novel is a Darwinist, and since he represents the founders of modern science it appears as if the text prefers Darwinism over Christianity. Furthermore, Darwinism is presented as the key to liberating oneself from the ties of religion.

However, this liberation is merely an illusion since Charles is not free from religion and is to a great extent affected by the ties of Christianity. His view of Sarah and their relationship illustrate this clearly. Charles identifies Sarah alternately as Madonna or a prostitute, a virgin or a

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<sup>4</sup> See earlier discussion on this on page: 3-4

whore, something that causes him to be “most fearful when most aware of her difference” (Raaberg 531). These images are biblical and symbolical and in Christianity they are incompatible which raises fear in Charles. After his sexual encounter with Sarah, Charles insists on marrying her and says that he “must” and “wish[es]” (Fowles 339) it so, which suggests that the Christian values are very strong in Charles. In Darwinism, sex is considered something natural, whereas it is something tied to marriage within Christianity. This strong tie between marriage and sex can be found within Charles as well since this is the first thing he thinks about afterwards.

Charles’s way of using Christian symbols to interpret the world around him can be found in several other instances as well. After breaking his engagement to Ernestina, Charles refers to himself as “a Judas” (Fowles 371) and he also admits to himself that he has “sinned” (Fowles 348). He even imagines himself crucified on a cross in the church: “he saw himself hanging there... not, to be sure, with any of the nobility and universality of Jesus, but crucified” (Fowles 349). In this way his sexual affair with Sarah causes him to refer to many biblical symbols, not Darwinian, which indicates that Charles is rooted in Christianity. It provides him with a stable ground and something to turn to something which Darwinism is unable to provide. This use of Christian symbols can also be found in Charles’s imaginary ending where he and Ernestina marry and live together, and where he imagines that the vicious character Mrs Poulteney goes to Hell, which clearly carries a biblical symbolic meaning. These symbols that Charles uses indicate that it is not as simple as Stephenson argues when he states that Charles is “prepared to forget those parts of *The Origin of Species* that are inconvenient to him” (63), or when Lynch calls Charles’s belief in Darwinism a “pseudo-Darwinism, which allows him to see himself as an advanced thinker, in opposition to the narrow-minded views of his time” (58). These are too simple explanations. Not only does Charles “forget” those parts in Darwinism that he does not wish to

see, but it also becomes clear that he actually is not a true Darwinist. Darwinism is merely the way he has been raised and nothing Charles has taken to his heart. Deep in his heart he still believes more in Christianity. It is what he turns to when he cannot control the situation and it is the narrative context he puts himself into when he wants to look at himself from an outside point of view. Thus he is more connected to Christianity than to Darwinism.

Even though Charles is strongly rooted in Christianity he has lost the power to communicate with God by becoming a Darwinist which is the cause of his misery. After being intimate with Sarah, Charles walks by a church and feels the immediate “need for sanctuary” (Fowles 344). He needs guidance and support and hopes to find it by praying. Here his devotion to Christianity can be found. He finds the Church about to close, but is let in by the curate. However, Charles is unable to pray:

deep in his heart Charles did not wish to be an agnostic. Because he had never needed faith, he had quite happily learnt to do without it; and his reason, his knowledge of Lyell and Darwin, had told him he was right to do without its dogma. Yet here he was, not weeping for Sarah, but for his own inability to speak to God. (Fowles 346)

In this quote it becomes evident that Charles is only a Darwinist on the surface since “deep in his heart” he did not wish it to be so. Jackson proposes that this episode in the church causes Charles to go through a “great existential realization” (235) where he realizes that “true freedom implies a kind of ongoing self-crucifixion, an ongoing requirement to make the choice to be authentically free” (235). Thus, Jackson sees Charles as here taking a step forward in his beliefs where he makes progress even further away from religion and more towards the Darwinism of today, and what Jackson refers to as postmodern Darwinism (227). However, what Jackson does not appear

to recognize is the fact that Charles, deep in his heart, *wants to* have faith in God, not in Darwin. He wishes to have his ability to talk to God back, and he wants to choose God, not freedom. At this point, Charles is afraid since he cannot connect to God even though he sits alone in the church and tries very hard to pray. In fact this causes him to weep, and one could argue that in this scene, he is portrayed as the victim of new times where Darwinism replaces Christianity. He has been raised to be a Darwinist, not a believer in God, so he is unable to manage the situation that he is in. The very fact that he is unable to speak to God indicates that there actually is a God and that Charles is incapable of something he would need to know how to do; thus he is handicapped since he has chosen to have faith in Darwin and not God.

This handicap can be traced to his youth where Charles was forced to choose Darwinism over Christianity. When Charles was younger he “wished to take Holy Orders” (Fowles 20), but was instead sent away to Paris. This trip results in the conclusion that “what little God he managed to derive from existence, he found in Nature, not the Bible” (Fowles 20). It should be noted, however, that Charles used to feel truly devoted to Christianity since taking Holy Orders would have meant spending his entire life in God’s hands and service. This indicates a serious connection and devotion to Christianity. The fact that he did not do this was not his own decision since he was *sent* to Paris. Consequently, that he abandoned the Bible for Darwin was something forced upon him. Accordingly, Christianity can be interpreted to be more dependable than Darwinism and something that helps one to survive and cope with life, something which Darwinism is unable to provide. Science is not designed to help someone deal with life. Thus, by depending on science, and in this case Darwinism, instead of Christianity, Charles is unable to handle situations, to connect with his inner thoughts and feelings and to have relationships with other people. In this way Darwinism and science in general are presented as obstacles in an individual’s life, whereas Christianity provides safety and help.

This is further enhanced with the example of Sarah who symbolizes true Christianity in the text. At first glance, it appears as if evil Mrs Poulteney, who hires Sarah as a charity project, represents Christianity in the novel. She treats her employees very cruelly and forces them to work very hard. The narrator, describes her as an “incipient sadist” (Fowles 25), and he remarks that “there would have been a place in the Gestapo for the lady” (Fowles 26). These comments imply that this particular woman has hardly any human traits at all. At the same time she considers herself to be a Christian. She reads from the Bible every day and takes God’s wishes into consideration (Fowles 27). It might be tempting to draw the conclusion that Mrs Poulteney symbolizes Christianity in the novel and thus that Christianity is as false and inhuman as Mrs Poulteney. This, however, is not the case since Sarah represents true Christianity. In contrast to Charles, Sarah is not interested in Darwinism at all, or as Jackson puts it, it is “out of her ken altogether” (233), and instead she has faith in Christianity. As is mentioned earlier, Sarah goes to Church to pray when she is on her walks in the woods. This shows her devotion to Christianity, mostly since this is something she does during her own free time, and not something she does because she has to. Furthermore, when she reads from the Bible for Mrs Poulteney for the first time, her voice is “firm, rather deep”, and her voice is compared to that of Mrs Fairley’s, which is described as “uninspired stumbling” (Fowles 41). This suggests that Sarah’s is the opposite, revealing her religious devotion when she reads from the Bible. Mrs Poulteney tries to detect if there is “any fatal sign that the words of the psalmist were not being taken very much to the reader’s [Sarah’s] heart” (Fowles 41) yet fails to find any sign of this. Tarbox goes further and claims that Sarah “allies herself patently with Christ, pricking herself with a thorn, reading His words aloud from the Bible” (96). Sarah, then, does not only have faith in the Bible she even goes as far as “allying” herself with Christ. This indicates that Sarah, not Mrs Poulteney, is a symbol for Christianity in the novel.

In this way Christianity is presented as something good, yet at the same time Darwinism can be interpreted to be a mere replacement of Christianity. This is noticeable when Charles discusses Sarah's wish to tell her life story to him with Dr Grogan, and Dr Grogan swears that no secrets will leave the room: "He sat before him across the fire; then with a small smile and a look at Charles over his glasses, he laid his hand as if swearing on a Bible, on *The Origin of Species*" (Fowles 215). Here the Bible and *The Origin of Species* are put together almost as similes, where *The Origin of Species* is the book to swear on when one tells the truth, only the name of the book has changed. Thus *The Origin of Species* is seen as the latest symbol for truth, and consequently reality, whereas the Bible comes second and is connected to what used to be seen as a symbol for truth. However, since the Bible has been replaced with *The Origin of Species*, the Bible is the original and thereby closer to the original truth, and original reality, than *The Origin of Species*. After all *The Origin of Species* would be a replacement, hence not as close to reality and truth. The original is also something usually considered more valuable. As a consequence, even though it appears as if *The Origin of Species* is here favored, it is actually the Bible that is seen to be most connected to truth. This implies that Darwinism is merely a substitute for Christianity, not a better alternative.

Darwinism and Christianity are thus closely linked together and the binary opposition Christianity/Darwinism is deconstructed in this text. On the surface it appears as if Darwinism is privileged and this view is supported by most critics who argue that Darwinism, rather than Christianity, is preferential and dominant in the novel. One reason is the fact that the protagonist, Charles, is a Darwinist and represents the founders of modern science. Yet Charles has a contradictory relationship to Darwinism and Christianity. First of all he suffers from his inability to speak to God which is due to the fact that he was forced to give up his Christian faith in his youth. Secondly, what he chooses to do in life is only shallowly affected by Darwinism but

deeply so by Christianity. Taking this argument further, one can argue that since Charles is one of the founders of modern science and modern society, and his actions are strongly affected by Christianity, then that implies that modern science and modern society are equally or even more based on Christianity than on Darwinism which turns Christianity from the subordinate term to the dominant one. Darwinism is put forth as something that causes the characters, Charles in particular, to lose their ability to make moral judgments and act as human beings, since science is not able to provide the same safety and help as religion can. Thus, by turning to science and turning away from religion humanity loses something of importance and thereby the text shows that Darwinism cannot replace religion yet religion is still not science. At the same time, Christianity is presented to be the original, thus closer to reality and truth since Darwinism can be seen as a mere replacement of Christianity. This would turn Darwinism into the subordinate term and Christianity to the dominant one. Stephenson claims that the “picture of Darwin is not permitted to remain stable” (63), and that it thus is “left to the reader to decide how to make Darwin signify, and how to interpret the text’s re-enactment of *The Origin of Species*” (64). In this way neither the picture of Darwinism nor the picture of Christianity remains stable throughout the text and this binary opposition is deconstructed. This essay will analyze the deconstruction of yet another binary opposition, past/present, that can also be seen as a metaphor for the deconstruction of fiction/reality.

### **Past/Present**

Another way of demonstrating that the binary opposition fiction/reality is deconstructed is to show the deconstruction of the binary opposition past/present. Both the present and the past are inevitably part of the novel because the narrator places himself in the present, while his story

takes place in the past<sup>5</sup>. The fact that the past can be seen as fiction is explicitly stated in the novel when the narrator tells the reader: “you do not even think of your own past as quite real; you dress it up, you gild it or blacken it, censor it, tinker with it...fictionalize it” (Fowles 99). In this sentence the narrator states that everyone fictionalizes their past and that no one thinks of their past as real; the past is more part of fiction than reality. This view is also supported by critics; for instance, Stephenson argues that history is only “a working interpretation” (37), and that even history books fictionalize the past and there is no way of presenting the past without putting some kind of value into it. This goes very well together with Derrida’s claim that there is nothing outside of the text, i.e. that it is impossible to communicate the past through the use of a text. The present, on the other hand, is something happening at the time and therefore also something that can be seen as reality. Rimmon Kenan argues that “[t]ime is one of the most basic categories of human experience. Doubts have been cast as to validity of considering time a constituent of the physical world, but individuals and societies continue to experience time and to regulate their lives by it” (43). Time, and the present in particular, therefore constitutes reality since it belongs to the “most basic categories” in life, and since it is experienced by everyone on a daily basis. As opposed to the past, the present does not have to be communicated, and thereby distorted, through the use of a text, but is instead experienced by people first handedly, which makes the present part of reality. Thus the past can be argued to be a metaphor for fiction whereas the present is a metaphor for reality. The deconstruction of the opposition past/present is a means to demonstrate the deconstruction of reality/fiction.

The past is, on the surface, presented as secondary to the present. The narrator ridicules the past by making ironic comments about it, and in this way he has an advantage since he can

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<sup>5</sup> The opposition past/present has received a lot of attention from the critics. Raaberg observes that: “[c]riticism of the novel has often focused on this confrontation of the present with the past” (523).

comment on something that the people who lived at that time cannot argue against. Stephenson goes as far as claiming that the novel presents “history as a problem, rather than a source of truth” (37). When it comes to the narrator, he takes a clear stand from the past in the novel, or as Stephenson puts it: he “distances himself from the past” (28). Literary critic Marie-Claire Simonetti argues that this “reflects the novel’s concern with time- its restrictions in real life as well as the possibility to manipulate it in fictional works” (301), which demonstrates the fact that the past is presented as problematic and as something one can manipulate, thus something to mistrust. There seems to be a strong tie between present and past in the novel where the past is regarded as fiction and there is no way of finding the truth about what has happened in the past since all that is known and that can be put down into words will be fictionalized in some way. It appears as if the present is stronger and more trustworthy than the past.

Yet, the fact that the story is set in a different time than the narrator does not necessarily create a distance between the past and the present, but instead opens up “a dialogue between present and past” (Stephenson 28). The narrator often allows this dialogue to take place, for instance, when he refers to physical items. One example is the teapot that Sarah buys, and that the narrator claims to have in his possession. He describes that the Toby “was cracked, and was to be re-cracked in the course of time, as I can testify, having bought it myself a year or two ago for a good deal more than the three pennies Sarah was charged. But unlike her, I fell for the Ralph Wood part of it. She fell for the smile” (Fowles 268). The teapot is a physical object that connects Sarah, placed in the past, and the narrator, in the present, to each other. It is a symbolic item that shows that the past and the present are inevitably connected to one another and that they influence each other. Furthermore, the dialogue between the past and the present occurs when the narrator comments on Mary’s great-great-granddaughter by saying that she “resembles her ancestor” and is “one of the more celebrated younger English film actresses” (Fowles 78). This is

a way of connecting one of the characters in the past with a real person in the present. Simonetti sees this as a blurring of time since the narrator here “offers readers information that was not available at the time of the story” (301), and moreover that the narrator, by doing this, “transcends time by drawing parallels between the story’s present, past and future” (302). Again, this shows a connection between past and present. Thus the present can never exist without the past since the present is built on it, and likewise the past is unable to exist without the present.

The dialogue between the past and the present becomes final in the dual ending where time is made circular. Rimmon Kenan states that “[o]ur civilization tends to think of time as an unidirectional and irreversible flow, a sort of one-way street” (44). At the same time Jackson argues that “[a]s with so many postmodern concepts, the linearity of time no longer holds in any straightforward sense” (240). Still Rimmon Kenan claims that the concept of time in a text is “inescapably linear, and therefore cannot correspond to the multilinearity of ‘real’ story time” (45). Yet in this narrative the narrator tries to escape the linearity of time by making two endings happen at the same time. He describes that he does not know which ending to choose, and he decides to provide the reader with two endings. He has, however, trouble deciding which ending to put first, and while pondering on how to solve this he states: “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 390). This quote suggests a criticism of the linear way of thinking about time: that the event that happens last (the present) is more real than what has happened before (the past), but in this quote he wants to show that this is not necessarily the case. He then moves on to say: “I take my purse from the pocket of my frock-coat, I extract a florin, I rest it on my right thumbnail, I flick it, spinning, two feet into the air and catch it in my left hand” (Fowles 390). It is pure chance that determines which ending to put first. After giving the first ending the narrator “makes a small adjustment to the time” (Fowles 441), and turns his watch back. By

doing this he shows the reader that the two provided endings are to be seen as happening at the same time, or as Simmonetti claims: “Fowles does approximate the notion of ‘circular time’” (302). Tarbox states that “we are to understand that time has folded back upon itself and that two contrary realities occupy the same time and space” (100). Time is made circular, not linear, and the distinction between past and present is blurred.

This blurring causes the binary opposition past/present to be deconstructed. On the surface it appears as if the past is subordinate in this text and that the present dominates. Yet at the same time, this text provides a dialogue between past and present since objects, like the teapot, and characters, link the past with the present. This text shows how past and present are inevitably linked together and that past is the very foundation of the present. The dual ending is the greatest example how time is made circular in this text, thus that it escapes the linear time aspect in narratives and blurs the boundaries between past and present. In this way this binary opposition is deconstructed.

## **Conclusion**

The opposition fiction/reality is of great importance in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, not least since it is deconstructed in several ways. As this essay has shown, the binary opposition reality/fiction is deconstructed through the way the binary oppositions narrator/reader, Darwinism/Christianity and past/present are deconstructed since they constitute metaphors for reality/fiction.

Firstly, this essay shows that the binary opposition narrator/reader is deconstructed. Usually, the narrator is considered fictional and a symbol for fiction, whereas the reader is placed in reality and thus symbolizes reality. This opposition is deconstructed since the narrator creates a relationship with the reader and appears to control him/her as well as the text, yet at the same

time it is clear that he does not. The reader narrates the story, perhaps even more than the narrator himself does. The narrator shows that he is in fact not trustworthy since he lies and distorts the truth at several points, which leaves the reader with more responsibility to interpret. This in turn connects the narrator even further with fiction and the reader even more with reality, something which is even more evident when the narrator enters the story as a character in the text. The line between narrator and reader, as well as reality and fiction, is therefore difficult to make out. On the one hand, the narrator claims to be part of reality and to be connected to the reader, but on the other he distances himself from the reader and from reality by entering fiction, by lying, and by showing that he in fact cannot control the characters or the text itself. The opposition reality/fiction is thereby deconstructed.

Secondly, this essay shows that the binary opposition Darwinism/Christianity is deconstructed. This text appears to be strongly in favor of Darwinism, which is a theory that can be considered a symbol for reality, not least since connections between Darwinism and modern science are made explicit in the text, but also since Charles claims himself a Darwinist. It also seems that Christianity is put forth as judgmental. Yet, on the other hand, Christianity influences Charles to a great extent and he uses many Christian symbols to interpret what happens around him. The fact that he was forced to choose Darwinism over Christianity disconnects him from Christianity which makes him unable to handle the situation he is in with Sarah. Darwinism appears to be unable to provide the same safety as Christianity, but it can also be interpreted as a mere replacement of Christianity where Christianity is the original and a metaphor for truth. Therefore, this opposition is deconstructed. The opposition reality/fiction is also deconstructed since if Darwinism is science and Darwinism is merely a replacement of Christianity, then Darwinism is as much fiction as Christianity. Moreover, if Christianity is the original and a

symbol for truth then Christianity would symbolize reality, as well as fiction. The deconstruction of Darwinism/Christianity is therefore a powerful way of deconstructing reality/fiction.

Lastly, the opposition of past/present is deconstructed. The past symbolizes fiction because past can never be real but will always be fictionalized by the use of a text. The present symbolizes reality as the present does not have to be communicated by a text. While it appears as if the past is subordinate to the present, this is not the case since instead, a dialogue occurs between the past and the present. The opposition is deconstructed while time is made circular in the way two endings are provided at the same time, and since past and present are strongly connected by characters and items. The deconstruction also implies the deconstruction of the opposition reality/fiction.

To conclude, even though it appears as if reality is the part of the binary opposition that is hierarchal to fiction in the novel, this opposition is effectively deconstructed. The boundaries between reality and fiction are blurred and at times the boundaries collapse. The dominating part of the opposition varies and is difficult, or even impossible to determine. Therefore, it might be accurate that fiction is woven into all, and that no reality exists. But if this is true, it implies that all reality is fiction.

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