



The Pathology of Freedom: Narcissism and Histrionics in Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

Dr. Denny Joseph¹, Dr. Sini Jose²

¹Associate Professor, Department of English, Government College Mananthavady, Kerala.

Email: denniesjos@gmail.com.

²Associate Professor, Department of English, Government College Kasaragod, Kerala.

Email: sinijose2@gmail.com

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.2.136](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.2.136)



Article info

Article Received: 05/04/2025

Article Accepted: 12/05/2025

Published online: 16/05/2025

Abstract

John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* has long been addressed as a classic example of postmodernism and an existential examination of the idea of freedom through the breaking of narrative illusions. Structurally the novel is a metafiction, and is celebrated as a parody of Victorian narrative conventions. The idea of freedom that the novel espouses is reflected not only in the narrative techniques, but also is an important thematic concern. But the central character Sarah is not only just an embodiment of the existential freedom discussed in the novel, but also a personality evincing narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) and Histrionic Personality Disorder (HPD). Sarah is successful in hiding these traits from Charles, whom she uses for the fulfilment of her desires under the guise of liberating him existentially. Sarah cooks up a fiction not just to trap Charles alone, but she herself lives as a character of her own fiction, evincing fictophilic inclinations. By diagnosing Sarah's NPD and HPD, this study reframes her 'liberation' as a performative act of control, complicating the novel's existential themes. Through this lens, Sarah emerges not as a mere symbol of existential rebellion, but as a complex psychological study in manipulation and self-mythologization, challenging the traditional readings of the novel. It is questionable whether her celebrated freedom is genuine autonomy or a narcissistic performance, forcing a reassessment of Fowles' project.

Keywords: existentialism, freedom, metafiction, histrionic personality disorder, narcissistic personality disorder, fictophilia.

Introduction

John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1967) has long been celebrated as a postmodern masterpiece, a novel that parodies Victorian narrative conventions while interrogating the existential freedom of its enigmatic protagonist, Sarah Woodruff. Critics have predominantly framed Sarah as a symbol of liberation; a woman who defies societal constraints through self-invention. Yet this reading overlooks the darker psychological dimensions of her character. By applying clinical frameworks of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) and Histrionic Personality Disorder (HPD) to Sarah's behaviour, this article interrogates the prevailing existential interpretation, revealing how her purported "freedom" masks a pattern of manipulation, performative victimhood, and emotional exploitation.

Fowles' metafictional techniques, which famously expose the artifice of storytelling, ironically mirror Sarah's own fictive self-construction. Where the novel's postmodern playfulness invites readers to question the boundaries of reality and fiction, Sarah's psychological profile compels us to inquire whether her rebellion against Victorian mores is a genuine pursuit of autonomy, or a pathological performance designed to control others. Through close analysis of her interactions with Charles Smithson and the novel's self-reflexive structure, this study argues that Sarah's actions align diagnostically with NPD and HPD; traits that reframe her not as a feminist icon but as a complex antiheroine whose pathologies critique the very notion of freedom Fowles' work ostensibly champions.

By bridging literary analysis with clinical psychology, a reassessment of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is attempted, demonstrating how Sarah's disorders serve as narrative devices that destabilize the novel's existential ideals. In doing so, it illuminates the tensions between Fowles' metafictional

experimentation and the psychological realism of his protagonist, inviting a reconsideration of the character of Sarah. Drawing on DSM-5 criteria and contemporary psychopathology studies, this analysis traces Sarah's exaggerated emotional displays, lack of empathy, and instrumental use of others which are hallmarks of HPD and NPD. to reveal how Fowles' narrative techniques amplify her disordered self-fashioning.

Thematic Analysis

Lyme Bay in the year 1867, exactly a century before Fowles records his narrative, represents a microcosm of Victorian Society where Sarah, dubbed 'poor tragedy', becomes a canvas for the author's exploration of ideas like freedom, deception and psychological complexity. Her habit of looking fixedly at the sea; a performative gesture of longing for the French lieutenant who left her behind; sets the tone for the novel's central tension, the confrontation between societal expectations and individual agency. This gesture which is initially reckoned as melancholic obsession later turns out to be a calculated fiction, betraying Sarah's skill at self-mythologizing.

Sarah's employment as a governess under Mrs. Poultney, a paragon of Victorian hypocrisy, emphasises the novel's critique of institutionalized repression. Dr. Grogan's diagnosis of her as a victim of melancholia, and consequent prescription of walks as palliative care, afford her opportunity to make excursions to Ware Commons which symbolize her rejection of prescribed narratives. The forest, dismissed by others as a place noted for immodest behaviour and immoral practices, becomes her stage for subversion. Fowles draws a parallel between Sarah's fabricated identity and the novel's metafictional structure, both of which challenge the boundaries of truth.

Charles Smithson's fascination with Sarah transcends mere sexual attraction. It reflects a Victorian intellectual's yearning for the exotic 'other.' Charles' engagement to Ernestina

Freeman, a symbol of bourgeois conformity, adds to this tension. Sarah's constructed tale of Varguennes is a lie that mirrors Fowles' own authorial fabrications. Charles is lured into her narrative web. Her confession that she knew that the French lieutenant would not return is quite revelatory; that it admits the lie while asserting her agency in crafting it. This particular instance epitomizes the novel's thematic core, that freedom is not merely liberation from society but also the power to manipulate its narratives.

Strained financial prospects of Charles further aggravate the situations. Charles' disinheritance and subsequent dependence on Mr. Freeman's business empire reduce his stature in the capitalist patriarchy. Sarah's dismissal from Mrs. Poultney's service which is precipitated by her liaison with Charles, mirrors his own fall from grace. But where Charles flounders, Sarah thrives. Her acceptance of his ten sovereigns; a transaction masked as charity; exposes her instrumental use of Victorian chivalry. Their sexual encounter, where Charles discovers her virginity, inverts the 'fallen woman' trope. Sarah's purity, like her lies, is a tool.

The novel's dual conclusions crystallize its interrogation of freedom. In the first conclusion, Sarah's embrace of Charles suggests reconciliation; in the second, her ambiguous tears and the unidentified child hint at perpetual performance. Readers are denied a closure, which reflects Sarah's refusal to be 'contained' by Victorian ideals. Her final incarnation as 'Roughwood', a model and muse to Rossetti the painter, positions her as both artist and artifice, a living critique of male gaze.

The French Lieutenant's Woman as a Historiographic Metafiction

John Fowles' novel is well crafted historiographic metafiction simultaneously embracing and subverting Victorian narrative conventions while foregrounding its own constructed nature. It characteristically

questions the distinction between history and fiction, and articulates historiographical issues in narrative form. It is "a successful blending of a traditional narrative, presented with documentary realism, and self-conscious devices which disrupts the illusion of reality in order to permit an investigation of its status as a fiction;" comments Fredrick M. Holmes (*Metafiction* 206). Holmes quotes Patrick Brantlinger: "As an experimental work, it paradoxically assumes the form of a Victorian novel but remains postmodern in sensibility. Fowles goes crab-backwards to join the avant-garde, imitating George Eliot as a way to emulate Alain Robbe Gillet and Roland Barthes" (207). It is both an application and a criticism of the French New Novelists as Holmes continues to argue.

Patricia Waugh holds that the name 'metafiction' originated in an essay by the American critic and self-conscious novelist William H. Gass in 1970. Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique in their own methods of construction, such writing not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary text (*Metafiction* 40). This is what creates the narcissistic narrative paradox; that a text demands belief while constantly reminding readers of its falseness.

Lynda Hutcheon in the introduction to her work *Narcissistic Narratives* (1985) presents the various labels metafiction has acquired: introspective, introverted, self-conscious, narcissistic, self-reflexive, self-informing, self-reflective, auto referential and auto representational (1). She also holds that metafiction is today recognized as a manifestation of postmodernism. But Mark Currie in his introduction to *Metafiction* (1995) writes: "Metafiction is not the only kind of postmodernist fiction, nor is it an exclusively

postmodern kind of fiction. It is neither a paradigm nor a subset of postmodernism" (15).

Readers of metafiction are at the same time made mindful of their active role in reading, in participating in making the text mean. The textual autonomy of fiction is challenged paradoxically by self referentiality itself. Metafiction constitutes its own first critical commentary. It has two major focuses; one is on its linguistic and narrative structures, and the second, on the role of the reader (*Narcissistic* 6). In metafiction, the reader lives in a world which he is forced to acknowledge as fictional. Paradoxically the text also demands that he participate, that he engage himself intellectually, imaginatively and affectionately in its cocreation. It internalizes the relationship between author and reader, fiction and criticism or art and life. It is a borderline discourse.

Fowles employs several tools for enhancing the narrative's self-reflexive potential such as temporal collisions through contrasting different historical periods, intertextual references via invoking past and contemporary writers, Victorian parody in terms of characterisation and themes, and directly addressing the reader. The self-reflective 13th chapter of the novel illustrates the metafictional aura of the novel. The 12th chapter end with a question: "Who is Sarah? Out of what shadows does she come?" (96) and the 13th chapter opens with an answer to it: "I don't know" (*French* 97). In contrast to the conventional Victorian narratives in which the flow of the story of the fictional world is uninterrupted, in Fowles' novel we find each fictional construct breaking one after the other. The art of fiction writing is made transparent for the readers. "The story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create, never existed outside my own mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters' minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in (just as I have assumed some of the vocabulary and the voice of) a convention universally accepted at the time of

my story, that the novelist stands next to God" (*French* 97).

Fowles dramatizes the boundary between fiction and criticism, which is achieved through illusion breaking authorial intervention, or as integrated dramatization of the external communication between author and reader. Mark Currie's opinion that metafiction also depends upon intertextuality for its self-consciousness is right as we find in Fowles' novel references to Cervantes, Proust, Brecht, Ronsard, Flaubert, Milton, Radcliffe hall, Catullus, Jane Ausin, Arnold, Goethe, Dana, Tennison, Hardy, Dickens etc.

Along with them we also find other Victorian parodic elements. The story itself is a parody. Mr. Freeman, Ernestina, Mrs. Poultney etc... are Victorian clichés. Fowles never permits the readers to dwell at length in the fictional territory. He brings in a sense of space which hampers uninterrupted enjoyment of art. The past and the present are always held together. "This remarkable event had taken place in the spring of 1866, exactly a year before the time of which I write" (*French* 26). On another occasion we read: "Five uneventful days passed after the last phase I have described" (112). The fictitiousness of fiction is conspicuously unravelled.

In parodying the omniscient author of the Victorian era, the narrator employs the word 'perhaps' half a dozen times in a single paragraph in the 13th chapter (II para, *French* 97). In describing the character of Dr. Grogan Fowles moves a century forward: "not unlike someone who had been a communist in the 1930s" (146). Sometimes there occurs a direct communication with the reader: "Well. You would be quite wrong. Incomprehensible?" (*French* 172). we also find linguistic self-consciousness in the work: "Well. I am mixing metaphors, but that was how Charles' mind worked" (184), and "I am overdoing the exclamation marks" (202), and "You may have noted a certain lack of

Ernestina's normal dryness in this touching paragraph" (246).

The narrator's own self-consciousness is not to be ignored. "I have come under the shadow; the very relevant shadow of the great novelist who towers over this part of England which I write. When we remember that Hardy was the first to try to break the Victorian middleclass zeal over the supposed Pandora's box of sex" (262), and "It may have struck you as curious. That a sensible girl like Mary should break into tears at the mere few days' absence" (244). Giving ideas in parathesis again proves the self-consciousness of the narrator. "A bust to Marcus Aurelius. (Or was it Lord Palmerston in his bath?)" (272).

Besides all these metafictional overtones, the thematic concept of 'freedom' also falls in line with the tradition of metafiction. One of the central themes of the novel is freedom. "There is only one good definition of God: that freedom which allows other freedoms to exist" (99). The author like a God lets the freedom of readers to exist and demands it for the completion of the work. The readers should choose the conclusion that seems apt to them, and so the author has given us more than one choice conclusions to the work. Fiction itself becomes an agency of liberation.

As each illusion breaks out in the novel, along with the characters, the readers are also liberated. It seems the purpose of Sarah to bestow freedom on Charles. He is freed from the bourgeois life offered by Mr. Freeman and Ernestina. Sarah initiates him into freedom. But Charles is infatuated by Sarah. He wants to possess her. But Sarah knows that sexual possession like any other possession, is negative and freedom denying. So she tells Charles: "You shall not marry me". She prefers to walk alone. She is the embodiment of freedom. "I wish to be what I am. Not what a husband, however kind, however indulgent must expect me to become in marriage". What Charles feels is an 'anxiety of freedom' (341). As he comes out of the house of

Rossetti's, he looks back – it suggests that he is not free. "he had not the benefit of the existentialist terminology" (340). He is really incapable of enjoying the sort of an existential freedom that Sarah enjoys. Besides, the concept of freedom Fowles conceptualizes is a highly debatable one.

Metafiction and the idea of freedom are inseparably intertwined. It is the best form that gives the reader the greatest freedom. Sarah constructs an identity for herself through forming illusions, and breaking them she resists the containing force of labels and becomes free. The novel exhibits the features of a historiographic metafiction and best illustrates the characteristics of the genre. But Just as Sarah resists societal labels through performance and deception, the narrative resists generic classifications through its formal hybridity.

Structural and Thematic Parallels

John Fowles, establishes a thematic parallel to the narrative strategy by way of creating an illusion and breaking it to drive home the fictional nature of narrative reality. The illusion breaking authorial intervention which aims at liberation from the Victorian novelistic conventions has its thematic counterpart in Sarah who constructs a fiction and then breaks it to celebrate liberation from the bourgeois Victorian prudery.

Besides, another parallel operates in the narrative. The novel is a metafiction, as it self-consciously reflects back on itself, and is addressed as a narcissistic narrative. The novel has a narcissistic parallel in the character of Sarah. Just as the novelist creates and breaks illusions in the narrative, Sarah constructs and breaks her 'stories' and embraces existential freedom. It is this narcissistic personality and fictophilic tendency that the central character possesses that attracts critical attention. Sarah's strategic self-fashioning, her calculated performances and deceptive narratives, finds its textual counterpart in the novel's refusal of stable generic conventions. This mirroring

extends to their shared methods: just as Sarah employs histrionic deception to evade Victorian categorization, the text employs metafictional hybridity to disrupt literary classification.

Sarah's Narcissistic and Histrionic Disposition

Sarah's psychological profile, far from being incidental, serves as Fowles' narrative instrument that her HPD/NPD traits mirror the novel's metafictional fracturing of identity and truth. HPD was formerly designated as hysteria, and the term acquired notoriety in being biased against women. It has been "used pejoratively to describe hyperexcitable female clients who are difficult to treat. The concept of hysteria has been strongly rejected by feminists who view it as a sexist label due to the denigrating use of the term "hysterical" to discount the problems presented by female clients. Perhaps as an attempt to reduce the confusion regarding the use of the term "hysteria," the American Psychiatric Association did not include it in either *DSM-III-R* (1987) or *DSM-IV-TR* (2000)" (Freeman). HPD is now recognized as a standard terminology and is widely used in medical and literary discourses.

Torricco et al. observe that "Histrionic personality disorder (HPD) is a chronic, enduring psychiatric condition characterized by a consistent pattern of pervasive attention-seeking behaviours and exaggerated emotional displays. The condition is usually life-long and treatment-resistant, with onset typically in late adolescence or early adulthood. Individuals with HPD are often described as seductive, self-indulgent, flirtatious, dramatic, extroverted, and animated. They may feel underappreciated or disregarded when they are not the centre of attention. Individuals with HPD can be vibrant, enchanting, overly seductive, or inappropriately sexual. They may typically demonstrate rapidly shifting and shallow emotions that others may perceive as insincere." Ashley Olivine lists key characteristics of a person with HPD as follows: "Seeks attention, regardless of type, willing to

be viewed as fragile or dependent to get attention, capable of empathy, though it can be performative; rapidly shifting and shallow emotionality; uses sexuality to gain attention; and it is more common in women." Sarah perfectly fits into this paradigm.

The Hare Psychopathy Checklist – Revised (PCL-R) Screening Version outlines a collection of behavioural, interpersonal, and affective traits, such as egocentricity; manipulation; insensitivity to others; irresponsibility; unstable relationships; impulsivity; lack of empathy, remorse, or guilt; and poor behavioural control as indicators of psychopathy (30). Sanz-García observes that psychopaths often exhibit "the presence of a series of personality traits, generally related to a lack of emotion (e.g., lack of nervousness, absence of remorse or shame, inability to love, shallow affective reactions) and the presence of an outward appearance of normality (e.g., lack of delusions and other signs of irrational thought, superficial charm, and good 'intelligence').".

The characteristics of NPD and HPD detailed here are evident in Sarah to varying extents, yet they evade the audience's scrutiny because she conceals them beneath her victimized persona, blaming the French lieutenant she calls Varguennes. Like all psychopaths, "the observer is confronted with a convincing mask of sanity. All the outward features of this mask are intact" (Cleckley 368). Sarah's calculated interactions with Charles and her understated seduction align precisely with Jerome Englebert's remark:

[F]or psychopaths, other people are a means of gaining power and pursuing their goals in a cold, insidious way. Their instrumentalization of others has a reflective, well-thought-out component, which is somewhat "Machiavellian." They may well use imagination and "theory of mind" in order to deceive, lie, and misuse others to achieve their own ends. (875)

Sarah is presented as an existential character. She has no belief in the institution of marriage, nor in selfless love. She craves the attention of Charles and persistently gains it by subtle mannerisms and the 'instinctual profundity of insight' that she demonstrates. She knows that Charles is engaged to Tina, but seduces him in such a way that Charles, given to the Victorian value systems, cannot but violate the promise of marriage made to Tina in order to marry Sarah. The 'story' that Sarah narrates to Charles is a fiction. There is no French Lieutenant, nor was there a love affair. She is a virgin, but cooks up story so that the world would call her a whore, and laugh inside scorning the society's inclination to be judgemental. Sarah's seduction of Charles is calculated: she withholds her virginity reveal until after their encounter, exploiting his guilt to solidify control. This reflects HPD's 'instrumental use of sexuality' (Torricco) and subverts the Victorian 'fallen woman' trope. She allures Charles into lovemaking and says: "Today I have thought of my own happiness" (365). She prioritises her own desires and wants and is incapable of putting herself fin the shoes of Charles. She manipulates him into lovemaking and discards him after her desire is satiated, weaponizing Victorian tropes of female fragility.

Conclusion

Sarah, the central character of Fowles' novel, evinces narcissistic and histrionic characteristics. She does not empathise with Charles for the unhappiness she caused in his life. Nor is she mindful of the heartbreak that Tina suffers. She questions the value system of Mrs. Poultney, and seeks out her own way of life. The authorial suggestion is that Sarah is literally liberating Charles from the Victorian bourgeois morality and value system in an existential fashion. But the narrative clearly establishes that Charles is incapable of being existentially free, as he hid not have the benefit of the existential terminology. Sarah has no compunctions in forcibly thrusting this existential freedom on a

totally unprepared Charles and ruin him for the rest of his life. This is lack of empathy. Sarah's behaviour transcends mere rebellion; her pathological traits actively perpetuate harm, complicating any celebratory reading.

Sarah's narcissism is not grandiose but insidious. It is a quiet dismantling of Victorian norms through deception. She embodies Fowles' central paradox: a character whose 'freedom' is both liberation and pathology, mirroring the novel's unresolved tension between artifice and authenticity. Sarah's chilling lack of empathy, which is a core NPD trait, emerges when she abandons Charles after their sexual encounter, leaving him to face social ruin. Where existentialists might interpret this as 'liberation,' her actions align with Englebert's psychopaths who 'instrumentalize others'. She crafts Charles' crisis not to free him, but to assert control. Fowles underscores this by contrasting Charles' genuine distress with Sarah's serene detachment in London, exposing her pathology.

Works Cited

- [1]. Cleckley, Hervey. *The Mask of Sanity*. 5th ed., Mosby, 1976. (Original work published 1941).
- [2]. Currie, Mark, editor. *Metafiction*. Longman Group Ltd, 1995.
- [3]. Englebert, Jérôme. "The Psychopathology of Psychopaths." *The Oxford Handbook of Phenomenological Psychopathology*, Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 868–881.
- [4]. Fowles, John. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1970.
- [5]. Freeman, Arthur, et al. "Histrionic and Narcissistic Personality Disorders." *Clinical Applications of Cognitive Therapy*, Springer, 2004, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-8905-5_9.
- [6]. Hart, Stephen D., et al. *The Hare Psychopathy Checklist – Revised Manual*

- (Screening Version). 2nd ed., Multi-Health Systems, 2003.
- [7]. Hutcheon, Lynda. *Narcissistic Narratives: The Metafictional Paradox*. Methuen, 1985.
- [8]. Olivine, Ashley. "Histrionic vs. Narcissistic Disorders: Key Traits and Differences." *Verywell Health*, 11 Sept. 2024, www.verywellhealth.com/histrionic-vs-narcissistic-personality-disorder-5215359.
- [9]. Sanz-García, Ana, et al. "Prevalence of Psychopathy in the General Adult Population: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 12, 2021, p. 661044, doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2021.661044.
- [10]. Torrico, Teodoro J., et al. "Histrionic Personality Disorder." *StatPearls*, StatPearls Publishing, 20 June 2024, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK542325/.