

## *The French Lieutenant's Woman & the Victorian Era*

- One needs to remember that the portrayals of the [Victorian Age](#) we find in this novel are first and foremost imaginary reconstructions of that Age and not actually what that Age was. But this novel is not [a historical novel](#) as such; but it has historical elements in it. These historical elements are culled from Victorian poetry<sup>1</sup> and fiction<sup>2</sup>.
- As John Fowles imagines them, the Victorians era was marked by:
  - i. Prudery...this harks back to Lady Catherine de Bourgh in [Pride and Prejudice](#) (1813) and closer to our times, to Miss Havisham in Charles Dickens' Miss Havisham in [Great Expectations](#) (1861). The mention of [Becky Sharp](#) within *The French Lieutenant's Woman* explicitly brings to mind [Vanity Fair](#).
  - ii. Suppressed/Repressed eroticism: the novel is peppered with suggestions of incipient sexual displays bordering on [onanism](#)<sup>3</sup>.
- There are repeated references within the novel to [Charles Darwin](#). Fowles emphasises Darwin's theories regarding the survival of the fittest. In this sense, Darwin's theories as found here reduces man to an animal; and by extrapolations to [thinking/desiring-machines](#)<sup>4</sup>. It is to be noted that acceptance of Darwin's concept of man as an animal makes the way clear later for [Sigmund Freud](#)'s conception of the human psyche. Freud's Id is the animal within us. This is best illustrated by [Robert Louis Stevenson](#)'s [Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde](#) (1886).
- The descriptions of the kitchens for examples, take us back to a pre-industrial society where we find the cooking process described in painstaking detail. It has no comparison with the 1960s' kitchens.
- The novel is a manifesto for socialist thought. In its advocacy for the rights of maids and servants; it ironically foregrounds the need for the rights of the common person during the Cold War.
- The novel is a commentary on the hypocrisy and collusion between Church and capitalism. The Victorian Age is shown in its full capriciousness in its fear of hellfire

---

<sup>1</sup> Some of the most memorable lines are from [Alfred, Lord Tennyson's In Memoriam](#).

<sup>2</sup> The references range from works by [Anthony Trollope](#) to [Charles Dickens](#).

<sup>3</sup> See also <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/4199> along with the embedded link.

<sup>4</sup> See the works of Bruno Latour (b.1947) for understanding the philosophy of desiring animals, or, thinking-animals.

with its awareness that money can indeed buy heaven. Yet, this heaven and this hell are all imagined by the characters which Fowles creates.

Students are advised to follow up and read the linked items within this paper. This paper is being made open access for use of students worldwide due to the ongoing global COVID 19 pandemic. Any ideas from these points need to be cited properly. Further, this author declares that nothing is plagiarised here.

Subhasis Chattopadhyay.