EXISTENTIALISM AND DARWINISM IN
THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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August 1977
Lee, Cynthia, **Existentialism and Darwinism in The French Lieutenant's Woman.** Master of Arts (English), August, 1977, 98 pp., bibliography, 10 titles.

Existentialism and Darwinism provide a means of viewing the development of personal freedom in a young English gentleman, Charles Smithson. Guided by Sarah Woodruff, a social outcast, Charles approaches freedom through the existential conditions of terror, anguish, and despair; he encounters alienation, human finitude, and the loss of a relationship with God on the way. The realization of his trapped state is aided by the Darwinian analogy present in the novel: the monied leisure class to which Charles belongs is presented as the species approaching extinction because it fails to make the changes necessary to survive changed conditions. The novel's two endings combine existential and Darwinian elements to present to Charles the choice that can help him escape his trapped state and gain freedom.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

With The French Lieutenant's Woman, John Fowles makes subtle use of a number of literary traditions of the Victorian period, twisting them slightly so as to undermine the purposes for which the Victorians intended them. For example, what initially appears to be an omniscient narrator arbitrarily manipulating his characters soon appears to be a narrator-creator who allows and even encourages his characters to develop minds and actions of their own, and who provides occasional philosophical insight into the nature of man's place in the universe. In the same way, he brings the novel to a closed, traditional ending, with characters solemnly performing their duties and fulfilling their obligations to others with a slightly nostalgic feeling of regret for not fulfilling their own desires instead; Fowles reminds the reader that this is a modern novel, however, and refuses to let the novel end in such a formulated manner. In addition to these techniques, the underlying tone of the story is indicated by the narrator's subtle use of irony, which constitutes the ruling attitude of the entire book. Throughout the novel, the reader is
constantly reminded that he is viewing a tableau of a century ago through the filtered lens of the latter half of the twentieth century.

This modern viewpoint is partly influenced by Fowles's use of two modes of thought that had their origins in the nineteenth century and which have had a profound influence in this one: existentialism and Darwinism. By the period of the time frame of the novel (1867-69), existential tendencies had had only a slight effect on British thinkers; evolutionary concepts, by reason of their shocking content and their emergence in England, had had a much more discernible impact on Darwin's countrymen. (And since existential ideas first came to prominence on the Continent, it was easy for the Victorians to dismiss them simply as foreign notions.) Not only had the British had eight years to react to *The Origin of Species* by 1867, but the publication of that work was merely the capstone of several decades of biological and geological speculation. As Richard Altick indicates, as early as 1802, William Paley had published *Natural Theology* in an attempt to counter some of the skepticism resulting from the discrepancies between the facts of scientific observation and the dogmas of religious institution.¹ The fact that this type of speculation had

long been public knowledge, however, did not further its acceptance to any great degree. Altick illustrates his point by citing one of history's most amazing pieces of pseudo-scientific fabrications: Philip Gosse's *Omphalos* (1857). Gosse claimed that the fossils that geologists found embedded in the strata of the earth (which indicated that the earth was much older than the official, Bible-computed figure of approximately six thousand years) were placed there by God during his act of creation as a ploy to tempt geologists into infidelity.  

Why Gosse attributes functions to God that are traditionally performed by Satan poses an interesting question.

In contrast to the general Victorian awareness of evolutionary theory, most of the body of literature that we call existential had not been written by 1867. Of the major existential writers, Kierkegaard was the only one who had published significantly by that time. Nietzsche did not publish *The Birth of Tragedy*, his first work, until 1872, three years after Fowles's novel closes. Of novelists who dealt with existential considerations, only Dostoevsky had published before 1867, and it was not until around the turn of the century that his works (and those of other Russians) were readily available in English. Thus, the

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2Ibid., p. 231.
existential ideas presented in the novel could have been written only by a modern writer. This does not imply the false application of a modern theory to the Victorian period, however; while existentialism had not been gathered into a body of thought and labeled at that time, it was largely produced by the social changes that took place in the Victorian period. Existentialism, although a modern attitude, is a reaction to conditions of human life that have no boundaries in time or location; these problems have been with man since he first achieved self-awareness. Existentialism is considered a modern phenomenon primarily because the problems it is concerned with have been greatly intensified through the emphasis on rational and scientific thought and the rise of industrial and other forms of collectivization in the last two centuries.

Fowles uses existentialism in this novel as a means of showing one man's quest for self-assertion and freedom and the reaction of other characters to him. Charles Smithson is a relatively young man of the upper class whose most notable characteristic is a tendency towards dilettantism. Charles considers himself different from others in his class because of his superficial agnosticism, his interest in paleontology (the usual interests of his class began and ended with hunting), and his mildly ironic sense of humor. Because these three qualities set him off somewhat from the
majority of his acquaintances, he thinks of himself as uncommonly free of the restraints of convention.

Sarah Woodruff, the title character, is responsible for pointing out to Charles his tendency to fall back on convention whenever faced with the unknown. As he begins to perceive this, his sometimes unwilling quest for freedom begins. His progress has something of a wave effect: he moves forward, fails to perceive the next step he must take, falls back, and is motionless. The result of this is that his quest does not move forward by consecutive arrivals at ascending stages; instead, he achieves one level, loses his hold on it, and must strive for the primary level again. In addition, he spends a certain amount of time rationalizing the motivations for his proposed actions and only perceives (or admits) their true meaning after they have been completed.

Charles's quest, in spite of its halting manner, can be seen to comprise three separate levels which correspond to the existential concepts of terror, anguish, and despair. Although he does not, as indicated above, arrive at one level and then move with sureness to the next, the three do collectively form a progression, and each grows out of the one preceding it. In addition, Fowles deals with such existential considerations as the collectivization of humanity; the perceptive person as outside the rules of
convention (and thus an outcast); the self in relation to the other; the responsibility of the free; and, what is in Charles's case the climax of his despair, the realization of human finitude, which is related to man's sense of forlornness and meaninglessness in a universe with an absent god.

Furthermore, Darwinian thought has an equally important role in revealing to Charles the emptiness of his life and indicating to him the necessity of change. If existentialism impeaches Charles, then Darwinism convicts him. Through such Darwinian elements as natural selection, the survival of the fittest, regression to the characteristics of a progenitor, the concept of living fossils, and the implications of intercrossing species, Charles's unfitness for the industrial Victorian world is illuminated. Charles's paleontological studies bring him to a clear understanding of the relationship between the natural sciences and the living inhabitants of the present. While Charles ultimately rejects some of the tendencies implied by evolutionary trends, it is not without becoming more aware of its movement in present life and seeing more clearly his own position and his potential in that life.

With these general notes as a basis, the remaining chapters of this thesis provide a more detailed examination of the thematic applications of existentialism and Darwinism
in The French Lieutenant's Woman. Existential aspects, dealt with in chapter two, mainly provide a context in which to see Charles's development from a slave of convention to the form he takes at the end of the novel, as he becomes increasingly self-aware and nears understanding of the nature of freedom. The Darwinian elements, presented in chapter three with an application of The Origin of Species to the novel, serve as symbolic devices which indicate the position in the scale of nature that Charles and his class occupy, and also add another dimension to Charles's growing self-awareness. Darwinistic and existential elements appear at times in the novel to be functioning in opposition to each other, but on occasions of crucial choices, the two work in harmony to indicate the validity of Charles's decisions. This relationship between the two elements is discussed at greatest length in chapter four, which examines the novel's two endings in relation to the two thematic modes and suggests an interpretation for those endings and serves as a summary for this thesis.
CHAPTER II

EXISTENTIALISM

One of the first tasks of anyone attempting to show the presence of a philosophical attitude in a work of literature is to define that attitude. I use the word "attitude" advisedly, for most commentators on existentialism maintain that it does not function as a philosophical system, but rather as a collection of attitudes, thoughts, and approaches to themes present in the life of mankind, themes which have been with us throughout history, but which have been dramatically intensified in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. William Barrett claims that while such things as "anxiety, death, the conflict between the bogus and the genuine self, the faceless man of the masses, the experience of the death of God" are not generally the themes of analytic philosophy, they are the themes of life. Man daily encounters and experiences all of these; therefore, they are problems for the existentialist. Barrett also cites the divorce of mind from life, which he sees throughout modern civilization, as one of the central themes of existential philosophy.1 Jean-Paul Sartre

maintains that existentialism is the "doctrine that makes human life possible," and bases his understanding of the philosophy on three interrelated principles: (1) God is non-existent or absent, (2) existence precedes essence, and (3) man has total responsibility for himself. Actually, the three concepts are so closely related that to separate them would be arbitrary. As Sartre explains it, his brand of existentialism is not so atheistic that it consumes itself in trying to prove the non-existence of God, but Sartre claims that if God should exist, it would make no difference. Modern man is faced with the problem of living in a world in which the non-existence of God is a very real possibility, a world in which even an existing God does not manifest himself. The absence of God distresses man because it strips him of a believable system of values. In this situation, everything is permissible, and man is bereft of any guidance from without. He is forced to determine and take responsibility for his own existence.

The idea that existence precedes essence is essentially an outgrowth of the idea that man originally appears, formless, and only afterwards determines his nature. In

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3Ibid., p. 278.
the existential sense, man is indefinable because at first he is nothing; he becomes something afterward, and he decides what that will be. If there is no God, Sartre further states, then there is no human nature: man alone initially forms himself by his conception of himself; he continues to be what he wills after his initiation into existence. Essentially, "man is nothing else but what he makes of himself." 4

Paul Tillich sees existentialism as an expression of anxiety caused by the confrontation with meaninglessness and as an attempt to counter this anxiety by means of "the courage to be as oneself." Tillich traces the loss of meaning which has occurred in the past two centuries, citing man's loss of subjectivity as the result of sacrificing himself to the very objects he has created. Man escapes ignorant bliss, however; he is painfully aware of what he has lost and is losing, and he is still self-conscious enough to react to his loss with despair. The authentic man's reaction is to realize that there is no exit, but that one must react with "the courage of despair, the courage to take his despair upon himself and to resist the radical threat of non-being by the courage to be as oneself." 5

4Ibid., pp. 278, 282, 297.  
William V. Spanos also deals with the nineteenth-century realization of a universe without God, a realization that stripped many thinkers and artists of the time of their most treasured and comfortable assumptions; philosophers and theologians were forced to confront the reality of Nothingness that the absence of God illuminates; artists were obliged to construct microcosms that reflected an irrational macrocosm. Spanos describes existentialism as "a kind of poetry of the philosophical imagination, defying rational systemization." It attempts to see man's complex and concrete relationship with his universe. Both atheistic and theistic existentialists consider two alternatives facing man in this God-bereft universe: (1) the socially organized, collectivized life towards which man is drifting, and (2) the painful decision to live the authentic life, to retain one's unique consciousness in spite of society's pressures to conform.6

These two alternatives fit in with Fowles's own conception of man's function in society. In The Aristos, Fowles speaks of an aspect of human nature which he calls the nemo. The nemo he defines as "the state of being nobody--'nobodiness'"; the anti-ego to the human psyche's

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ego. Man has two methods of countering the effect of the nemo, Fowles says: he can conform or conflict. One conforms by adopting accepted symbols of success in order to prove that he is someone; in other words, he can deny his nobodiness. These symbols constitute a uniform: "Some uniforms prove I am a success, others hide that I am a failure. One of the attractions of the uniform is that it puts a man in a situation where part of the blame for failure can always be put on the group. A uniform equalizes all who wear it. They all fail together; if there is success, they all share it." On the other hand, one conflicts by building up his own unique style of life, by defying the masses.

Fowles advocates existentialism as the antidote to fascism; he sees it as the individual's rebellion against all of the socializing forces that try to limit his individuality. "The best existentialism tries to re-establish in the individual a sense of his own uniqueness, a knowledge of the value of anxiety as an antidote to intellectual complacency (petrifaction), and a realization of the need he has to learn to choose and control his own life. Existentialism is then, among other things, an attempt to

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8Ibid., p. 50.
combat the ubiquitous and increasingly dangerous sense of
the nemo in modern man.\textsuperscript{9} Because of its insistence on the
uniqueness of individual man, Fowles insists, existentialism
is basically opposed to all forms of society and belief
that deny individual choice; existentialism by its very
nature is inclined to reject traditional modes of moral
behavior, especially those apparently based on tradition
merely. Total allegiance to any dogma or organization is
unexistential; the existentialist insists on forming opin-
ion and judgment on every situation on an individual basis
rather than by following the dictates of a guiding organi-
zation.

Existentialism, Fowles contends, acts as a counter-
force to the longing for security that drives many people
into conformity or belonging; because of this, existen-
tialism cannot function even in political or social
subversion, for it will not accept "organized dogmatic
resistance or formulations of resistance." Existentialism
encompasses only the individual's revolt; it puts forward
only one's personal expression.\textsuperscript{10}

These very general statements provide a rudimentary
understanding of some aspects of existentialism and provide
a necessary context for understanding The French Lieutenant's

\textsuperscript{9}Ibid., p. 122.

\textsuperscript{10}Ibid., pp. 121-23.
Woman. The novel is a presentation of the consciously willed life of Sarah Woodruff, the outsider, the outcast. It is also an examination of Charles Smithson's attempt to progress towards initiation, his quest to affirm his own free will as opposed to resigning himself to the dictates of conventional society. Ernestina Freeman, also, although not nearly as thoughtful a character as the other two, has occasional flashes of insight, which, had they any chance of being developed, might perhaps at least have allowed her to glimpse an alternative to her conventional, prescribed manner of living. Although Sarah continues changing throughout, her initial momentous choice of freedom was made before the novel opens; what we see of her is the result of that choice and the shifting contingencies with which she deals. It is through Charles Smithson's progress that we actually see the greatest number of existential considerations portrayed. Charles experiences freedom, terror, anguish, and despair. He realizes that he lacks free will and is finite. He recognizes the absence of God, the alienation of man, and his failure to be a freely-choosing individual in a collectivized society. Charles at first rebels against the radical freedom which Sarah Woodruff personifies and tries to retreat to the shelter of convention. After his night of agony in Exeter, he determines to live authentically, to purge himself of the security that a
uniform provides. To what extent he succeeds is the problem of the novel and the problem of any consideration of the novel.

In The French Lieutenant's Woman, Fowles depicts the Victorian world becoming aware of the possible non-existence of God. If God is not dead, at least He is absent or indifferent. Fowles establishes this awareness in the character of Charles Smithson, who rebounds from the arms of a Cockney whore to the clutches of the Church (specifically, the Oxford Movement within the Anglican Church), but who finally, with the aid of a little beneficial wickedness in Paris, returns to London to examine superficially several current religious theories and arrive at a healthy agnosticism: "What little God he managed to derive from existence, he found in Nature, not the Bible; a hundred years earlier he would have been a deist, perhaps even a pantheist."\[11\]

Fowles's heavily ironic language describing Charles's arrival at agnosticism clearly indicates what he thinks about the depth of his reverse conversion, but his characterization of Charles as one who would have been a deist in a previous century gives a clue as to the mode of

\[11\] John Fowles, The French Lieutenant's Woman (New York: New American Library, 1969), p. 18. This edition will be used for all further references to the novel and page numbers will be given in parentheses.
divinity which Fowles has chosen for the novel. In the
deistic universe, God is a powerful force who creates and
then grants freedom to His creations by absenting Himself,
by refusing to interfere in their lives: He creates the
machinery and sets it in motion, but assumes that His
creatures will be able to keep it repaired and running.
Fowles supports this idea when he says, "There is only one
good definition of God: the freedom that allows other
freedoms to exist" (p. 82).

Fowles's description of a universe with a non-
interfering God is most clearly seen in his narrative
technique: he assumes the role of a creator who allows the
products of his imagination to make their own choices.
Paralleling the Victorian tradition, Fowles uses a ver-
sion of the omniscient narrator who can see freely into
the minds of his characters. The narrator frequently
addresses the reader directly, commenting and giving his
opinion on the art of writing and the creation, freedom,
and responsibility of his characters. Despite his omni-
science, the narrator also presents himself as a minor
character in the novel; he is often overbearing and un-
pleasant, and his most characteristic traits are his self-
importance and his relentless observation. Fowles, as
novelist, character, and narrator, rather humorously cari-
catures himself as, on one occasion, an ambitious butler
or successful lay preacher (the type whose success is founded on the rhetoric of eternal hellfire). On another occasion, he presents himself as a foppish and Frenchified operatic impresario.

The narrator first makes his presence known on the second page of the novel, when he refers to himself as "the local spy" (p. 10) who observes Charles and Ernestina walk on the quay of Lyme Regis. His next overt appearance (though there are many intervening authorial intrusions) occurs in chapter thirteen, in which he reacts to Sarah's contemplation of suicide. He had closed the preceding chapter by rhetorically asking about Sarah's essence and origin, and he opens this one by confessing his ignorance. He then explains that although the novelist originally creates his characters, there comes a time when they assume a life of their own and begin to disobey, a time when the decisions determining their actions come from their minds instead of from the author's. The narrator cites the example of the aftermath of Charles's first encounter with Sarah on Ware Commons: he had intended Charles to return directly to Lyme Regis, but in defiance of those plans, Charles stopped at the Dairy, which gave him the chance to meet Sarah again. The narrator denies that he manipulates Charles in his decision to stop at the Dairy. Instead, the narrator tells the reader, Charles has begun to develop a
mind of his own:

That is certainly one explanation of what happened; but I can only report—and I am the most reliable witness—that the idea seemed to me to come clearly from Charles, not myself. It is not only that he has begun to gain an autonomy; I must respect it, and disrespect all my quasi-divine plans for him, if I wish him to be real.

In other words, to be free myself, I must give him, and Tina, and Sarah, even the abominable Mrs. PoulTeney, their freedom as well. (pp. 81-82)

This does not mean that the novelist ceases to function as a god, the narrator says; to the extent that he creates, he is a god. What has changed, both in the novel and in the modern world, is the concept of god: the Victorian saw God as omniscient and omnipotent, but the new divine image has freedom, not authority, as its first principle. The Victorian novelist, like the Victorian God, corresponds to the character of Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor, while the modern concept of novelist and God is more closely allied with the image of Christ in The Brothers Karamazov. The modern God is a divinity who insists on giving His creatures their freedom, although it creates for them spiritual agony and physical hardship; He insists on allowing them to plot their own courses and succeed or fail on the basis of their own choices and resources.

Charles's own experiments leading to freedom certainly provided him with ample hardship. Unlike the Spanish peasants for whom bread was a reasonable barter for their souls, Charles, by virtue of his birth and fortune, had no worries
about providing for his physical sustenance; his descent into hell occurred on the spiritual and social levels. His transition from thoughtless conventionality to self-conscious freedom was effected by a three-stage progression: (1) awareness of alternatives, accompanied by terror; (2) radical uncertainty of the correctness and the consequences of one's decisions, in other words, anguish; and (3) despair, the realization of one's insignificance and impotence in an infinite universe. Charles's approach to freedom is not as orderly as this analysis makes it appear; his initial experiences with each of these levels drive him back repeatedly into a dependence on the dictates of convention. It is only after several false starts that he is able to make the leap from despair to freedom. It is interesting to note the stimuli for the terror that Charles and Ernestina experience: Ernestina first encounters terror as a result of fearing that she has committed acts displeasing to God or Charles; Charles's first experiences with it are sparked by some sort of interaction with Sarah; for both of them, though, the final experience of terror—the experience that leads them to a decisive action in their lives—is brought on by a confrontation that makes each realize his solitude, his aloneness in the decision-making process.
Nikolai Berdyaev discusses terror in relation to anguish and as distinct from fear. Anguish refers to a transcendental reality and is associated with "the experience of the insignificance, precariousness, and transitoriness of this world." Anguish deals with the distance between man and the transcendent, with the yearning for a different realm beyond the limits of our finite world. Terror and anguish are related, but both are distinct from fear; while anguish and terror relate to the higher world, and thus allow for hope, fear is associated with the lower world and allows no such possibility. Fear has connections with external peril, but terror is "an experience in the depths of spirit and concerns the transcendent realities of being and non-being." In distinguishing anguish and terror, Berdyaev says that terror is the more poignant and intense; anguish is softer, easier to live with. In quasi-medical terminology, terror corresponds to the acute disease and anguish to the chronic. If anguish is the experience of man's fleeting insignificance in an enduring universe and the desire for a higher realm, then terror is the original realization of those thoughts and feelings.


13 Ibid.
The novel's first example of existential terror takes place in a solitary scene with Ernestina. She is a rather pretty young woman, a fact she is very much aware of, and the reader sees her in the act of partially undressing to take a nap and rather vainly contemplating herself, in various poses, in front of the mirror. But her narcissism ceases rather abruptly: "she suddenly stopped turning and admiring herself in profile; gave an abrupt look up at the ceiling. Her lips moved. And she hastily opened one of her wardrobes and drew on a peignoir" (p. 29). The thought that had precipitated this terror and supplication to heaven was of a sexual nature. Ernestina's extreme reaction was not born entirely of her Victorian sense of sin; rather, her terror was based on more fundamental reasons: her ignorance of sexual matters and the atmosphere of pain and violence that she associates with the act of copulation. This violence, especially, seemed to deny the romantic gentleness which she perceived and admired in Charles. In response to these feelings of horror, she had developed a formula to ward off the unknown--the words "I must not" which she silently uttered when the sexual thought first occurred.

In feeling as she did about sexual matters, Ernestina reflected the Victorian society in which she lived, a society which had developed a negative, restricted manner
of conducting itself when confronted with aspects of reality for which it had no proper response. Fowles explains that this attitude pervaded all visible elements of society and was primarily responsible for typical Victorian modes of art, clothing, and architecture: "there was that strangely Egyptian quality among the Victorians; that claustrophilia we see so clearly evidenced in their enveloping, mummifying clothes, their narrow-windowed and -corridored architecture, their fear of the open and the maked. Hide reality, shut out nature" (p. 143). Charles, as we will later see, shared with Ernestina a reluctance to experience the unknown aspects of life, although he was more aware than she of his self-imposed blindness.

Ernestina's method of dispelling her terror is simple and direct: she invokes her talismanic phrase and she appeals to God. Her rather child-like dependence on Him is again revealed when, after behaving "like a draper's daughter" and overreacting to the news Charles brings about his uncle's marriage, she expresses repentence in her diary. She writes in the diary, Fowles tells us, partly as if Charles were someday to read it, and, "like every other Victorian woman, she wrote partly for His eyes" (p. 202). Comforted by the confession to Him of her willfulness, she is able to go to bed and enjoy untroubled sleep, convinced
that if He can find it in His heart to forgive her, then Charles surely can.

But ultimately, both of Ernestina's methods fail her. When Charles returns to Lyme Regis to break off their engagement, Ernestina reacts at first with shocked restraint, with a carefully controlled and sincere expression of her hopes and feelings. She then passes to a near-hysterical state and pleads for him to reconsider his decision. In the middle of her outburst, she bitterly realizes that Charles is not telling her everything. At that moment, she capitulates to her terror; she weeps openly and appeals to him with gestures "like some terrified, lost child" (p. 297). It never occurs to her to appeal to God in this her most extreme experience of terror; her "I must not" is, ironically, now an irrelevant issue. With the loss of her two protective devices, Ernestina is faced with the necessity of making a choice: either to rely on her own resources in formulating a response or else to adopt some pre-established, formulated response. She falls back on the measures provided by convention, including malicious rage--a desire to punish him harshly for his crime--and then she lapses into the helplessness that Victorian society provided as an escape for females: the convenient and contrived fainting spell, the "catatonia of convention." In the last analysis, Ernestina, in spite of the flashes of insight she had shown
in the interview, failed to make the transition from the shock of intense experience--terror--to an expanded awareness of herself and her world. Her pattern is set for the remainder of the novel and, we may assume, for the rest of her life.

Charles's experiences with terror follow a different pattern from Ernestina's, evoke different responses, and have a different result. Since Charles has casually eliminated God from his conscious reasoning, he has no temptation to allow Him to solve his problems; he also, simply by reason of his sex, does not have an "I must not" in his canon of responses, at least not to the degree that Ernestina does. (Charles does, of course, repress the sexual impulse he feels on one occasion while kissing Ernestina. Part of his discomfort on that occasion, however, stemmed from his sense of hypocrisy for feeling carnal desire for Ernestina after having kissed Sarah that morning.) However, Charles's early encounters with terror are no less conditioned by convention, though they are more subtle. Whereas Ernestina eventually uses conventionality as a device to fall back on when she is unable to formulate a response from her own resources, conventionality seems to trigger Charles's terror. The effect of convention on Charles is insidious; he seems, in his inclination to think of himself as operating by his free will, to fail to
perceive exactly how it has conditioned his responses. Charles is a minor master at rationalization (for example, his "reasons" for lying, sometimes by omission, to Ernestina about meeting Sarah), and his skill at rationalization is shown clearly when he uses it to try to avoid confrontations with terror.

In considering Charles, it is rather difficult to make the distinctions that Berdyaev does between terror and fear. What appears to illustrate his definition of fear seems, on second examination, to have deeper significance. The first instance of this occurs when Charles is on his way to his final assignation with Sarah on Ware Common after she has been dismissed from Mrs. Poulteney's service and has disappeared. Charles carefully picked his path in order to avoid being seen, but his lack of detection by anyone does not clear his mind: "Some paranoic transference of guilt now made him feel that the trees, the flowers, even the inanimate things around him were watching. Flowers became eyes, stones had ears, the trunks of the reproving trees were a numberless Greek chorus" (p. 192).

The fear/terror that is caused by Charles's sense of guilt has, in one sense, achieved absurd proportions with his distrust of the flowers and minerals of the woods. In this case, Charles has transferred society's disapproval of his actions to the only audience he has at the moment. But
in another sense, the rocks and plants function not only as representatives of the society which will condemn him, but also represent terrified parts of Charles himself, the one part that is aggressively fighting the other in an attempt to deny what Grogan had forced Charles to face the night before: that he was "half in love with her" (p. 179). At this point in Charles's story, he is still unable to give credence to the message of that part of himself that is clamoring to be heard. Like Ernestina, he accepts the Victorian predilection for wanting to hide things, to deny reality.

Charles's next experience of existential terror, coming after his and Sarah's act of passion in her hotel room, is again the result of uncertainty about the consequences of an action. In this case, however, the details are reversed: the terror strikes after the deed is done, and not in anticipation of it. In addition, this occasion caused him an extra element of concern over the effects which his actions have had on another person--although this consideration is rather minute. The knowledge that terrified him during that early morning walk to meet Sarah on Ware Common now becomes a reality: he capitulated to his love for her and now they lie silent in the aftermath. As before, negative feelings creep in with the guilt and the feeling that he has betrayed something in himself. (Not until later that
night does he realize that he has just completed another step in casting off the shackles of convention.) He lies there, "like a city struck out of a quiet sky by an atom bomb. All lay razed, all principle, all future, all faith, all honorable intent. Yet he survived, he lay in the sweetest possession of his life, the last man alive, infinitely isolated . . . but already the radioactivity of guilt crept, crept through his nerves and veins" (p. 275).

Charles's escape from this terror is more kindly engineered than is Ernestina's, for he has Sarah by him to smooth the path back to convention if he showed an inclination in that direction. Sarah's gift to Charles is her attempt to teach him to ignore the dictates of society and to choose freely to act on his own impulses. His first words shatter any illusions on her part that he has realized the true significance of his action: "I am worse than Varguennes" (p. 275). After hearing these words, Sarah begins gently to prepare him for his rejection of her: she tells him that she is to blame for the incident; she is the one who had wished it. The still-conventional Charles, of course, has difficulty accepting that sort of attitude from a woman. The fact that she has consciously wished for and carried out an act which society condemned relieved him of the responsibility of thinking of her as an equal, as a woman to be respected. Her admission also makes it easy for
him to forget that he has wished it, too. But his sense of duty was still with him: he must break his engagement, he must marry her, for, he says, "I could never look at myself in the face again if I did not" (p. 276). This implied rejection of the love between them is even more unacceptable to Sarah than his earlier words; his perception has failed him, and Sarah's love for him does not, now or later, include acceptance of him unless he does achieve self-awareness. The one thing she loves more than Charles is freedom, a gift she tries to give to him. When he fails to grasp it, she cannot allow herself a relationship which has the potential of stripping her of that freedom too. She stresses her unworthiness of him, and he begins to accept that judgment, although not without being touched by her sacrificial nature (never sensing any irony on her part). At this point, Charles at least has the integrity to convict himself personally, as the world will do later; he knows he will always carry his guilt with him.

After Charles's discovery of her deceit (her actual virginity, her uninjured foot), she patiently bears his reproaches and counters only with her reiteration that she is not worthy of him. But she refuses to give an explanation, saying only that he had given her the comfort of knowing that under different circumstances she could have been his wife. She knows that an attempt to explain the
ineffable could only result in a contrived and artificial compromise. She might have been able to make Charles see the truth of her position, but if he was unable to perceive it by means of his own awareness, his perception was flawed and he would one day feel manipulated and betrayed. Sarah has not finished testing him, however; he is given one final chance to accept her gift. In ordering him to leave her, she is again offering him a choice, one which he at least subconsciously realizes and consciously rejects: he "seemed about to speak, to spring forward, to explode; but then without warning he spun on his heel and left the room" (p. 279).

The final instance of Charles's existential terror, which assails him in the moments before he confronts Ernestina and breaks off their engagement, represents another stage in the evolution of his character. In this case, his terror is based not on guilt, not on concern for how his future or past actions might be judged by the standards of society, but on the realization of the enormity of the responsibility that he has taken on by choosing to make decisions based on his own free will. He feels this responsibility for two reasons: first, because of his unwillingness to cause pain to Ernestina, although he knows that he cannot avoid it; and second, because he realizes that the only way he will be able to justify his unorthodox
behavior both to himself and to the world is, as Grogan later reminds him, to live the rest of his life in testimony of the correctness of his decision. What is most terrifying about this situation for Charles is that his decision has been derived solely from himself; he is bereft of the comfort of having an approving code of morality established by God or society to reaffirm that his choice was the correct one; instead, he is flying in the face of every established pattern of behavior. The whirlwind of emotions that assault him in his uncertainty over the truth of his decision is characterized by the second of the major existential modes experienced in confronting reality in an authentic manner--anguish.

As mentioned before, Berdyaev considers anguish to be related to the "world above"--the realm of man's unconscious and subjective nature--in connection with man's feelings of insignificance, hazard, and finitude, a witness of the transcendent in man's daily life. Through man's anguished questing after the higher world, hope is allowed, but at the same time the distance between man and the transcendent and man's solitude before the transcendent is emphasized. Ultimately, anguish intervenes "Between the transcendent and the abyss of non-being, of void." Berdyaev speaks of a type of anguish especially prominent in adolescence, an anguish caused by the realization of a person's many unfulfilled
powers and the accompanying doubts and uncertainties about whether or not they can be realized. Anguish, he says, is always a sign of longing for eternity, of an inability to accept the terms of time. In facing the future, we face not only hope but also anguish, for both future and past quarrel with eternity: the future is a promise of death and thus creates anguish.14

Sartre begins his consideration of anguish by saying that man is anguished. Sartre says that this is so primarily because of two elements: responsibility and the uncertainty of voice. Man experiences anguish because each time he chooses to be, he involves not only himself but all of mankind. He functions as lawmaker, and his every choice determines the fate of mankind. Furthermore, no one, even if he tries, can escape this responsibility and its resulting anguish. Anyone who has had responsibility is familiar with anguish. Sartre gives the example of the officer who must send soldiers to battle, knowing that some will be killed. Although his orders to send the men in come from above, he decides who will go, when they will go, and where they will go: he cannot escape responsibility, and he cannot escape anguish. This type of anguish does not prevent action; rather, it is a part of action itself.

14Ibid., pp. 317-19.
The second of the two elements is the kind of anguish that Kierkegaard called the anguish of Abraham. When Abraham was ordered to kill his son, he felt correct in obeying God's command. His anguish derived from his uncertainty about the voice: was it really an angel telling him to do this? or was it the devil, or an evil side of himself? He experienced anguish because he could not be sure.

Sartre extends the example of Abraham to every man's life. When I choose, how can I know that my choice is the result of my awareness of responsibility and regard for the welfare of others? How can I know that that choice is not the result of my evil nature, or of a pathological condition? And how am I to know that I have the right to impose any choice on others? The answer to all these questions, Sartre says, is that there is no answer. No one will ever receive any prior external proof to indicate the correctness of his decision. The individual must always agonize over his choice and decide whether it is right or not; if he considers it good, then he must also choose to say that it is good rather than bad.15 Therefore, every man is forced to be a moralist, at first concerning himself only and then concerning those affected by his decision, and the accompaniment to this morality is always anguish.

15Sartre, pp. 280-81.
These two elements that Sartre presents are the primary causes of the agony that Charles feels before his final interview with Ernestina. He has the perception to realize immediately upon making his decision that he must cut himself off from her, that however compelled he might be to act in accordance with his feelings of freedom and honesty, he cannot escape the hurt that she will feel. He also feels the uncertainty of his position, his agonized hope that his decision is the correct one; in fact, he has anticipated the doubt, and partly because of it has sent the letter to Sarah--to keep himself from going back on his resolve.

But Charles also realizes that the agony he feels that day was only the highest point of a quieter anguish he had been nursing for some time. His feelings grow out of his slow realization--and then conviction--that by marrying Ernestina he was acting in contradiction to himself. Ernestina had first captured his attention by her irony and her sense of humor; she stood apart from her peers by her tendency to poke fun at the society that was taken so seriously by everyone else. Charles gradually became aware that this was the extent of her uniqueness, and doubt began to creep in, although he fully intended to do his duty and honor his vows to her. On several occasions (prior to his decision) he hinted at dissatisfaction; at first this was
expressed simply as a perception of her actual shallowness, then as a subdued wish to go abroad, to avoid the situation, and finally as an acknowledgment that he did not feel that they were fitted for each other and that he had betrayed himself.

The interesting point about each of these occasions is that the feeling of dissatisfaction occurs either directly after or during an encounter with Sarah. Since Sarah's decision to be an authentic human takes place largely before the novel begins, her function is to guide Charles to awareness. As becomes evident to Charles (and to the reader) after their coming together in Exeter, Sarah consciously determines to play the role of guide, to use whatever means necessary--short of coercion--to help Charles see through his fog of adopted conventions. She helps him become aware of his ability to execute free will. In working to achieve this end, she displays a rare knowledge of human motivations and responses. One of her first moves is to put Charles under obligation by presenting him on two occasions with tests that she has searched for and extracted from the earth herself. Sarah knows precisely what effect these gifts would have on Charles; her previous gift to Mrs. Poulteney of an embroidered antimacassar, an unnecessary item, stood as a silent reminder to Mrs. Poulteney of those aspects of Sarah for which she was grateful--her calming
influence among the domestics, her reading and sewing skills. Charles, too, was not unaware of the subtle tyranny of objects: he knew that his place in his uncle's heart was symbolized by his "immortal Bustard," and that his expulsion from his uncle's favor was correspondingly indicated by the removal of the rare stuffed bird. To Charles, the tests "spoke of some kind of hold she had on him" (p. 115); when she asked him for an hour of his time, he realized the "second reason behind the gift of the tests; they would not have been found in one hour" (p. 119).

Sarah also does not hesitate to deceive Charles in pursuit of her goal, something that Charles finds extremely offensive when he discovers it. And yet, one result of Charles's meetings with Sarah is that he begins to lie—at least by omission—to Ernestina. After Charles's first, accidental encounter with Sarah on Ware Common, he had an impulse to mention the incident to Ernestina, but he repressed it:

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell them about the girl; a facetious way of describing how he had come upon her entered his mind; and yet seemed a sort of treachery, both to the girl's real sorrow and to himself. He knew he would have been lying if he had dismissed those two encounters lightly; and silence seemed finally less a falsehood in that trivial room. (p. 76)

It must be admitted that there is an element of nobility in his silence at this point, although an observer might have pointed out that Charles did have a third alternative: to
tell the truth simply, minus the facetiousness. However, although Charles experienced some embarrassment on this occasion, with each succeeding lie he began feeling intense guilt over his omission. He felt that he had betrayed Ernestina, although after he agreed to meet Sarah to give her his hour, he ceased to suffer the agony of trying to decide whether to tell Ernestina: "he did not even debate whether he should tell Ernestina; he knew he would not. He felt as ashamed as if he had, without warning her, stepped off the Cobb and set sail for China" (p. 120). And later, with rationalization as thin as that which he used to excuse his first omission, he managed to justify his silence by telling himself that "Ernestina had neither the sex nor the experience to understand the altruism of his motives" (p. 135). But his most dangerous attitude toward his silence was yet to come, when, after he had heard Sarah's story and become frightened over his inability to control himself, he convinced himself that, among other things, he had the right to deceive Ernestina. He based such a right on his free will--a blatant misapplication of the concept of free will, a false flight from anguish, and certainly an act of irresponsibility. He had wrongly identified the voice; it came from a devil and not an angel.

Ironically, Sarah warned Charles of the perils of deceit when she related the story of her experiences with
Varguennes. When Charles expresses amazement that she was so completely fooled by the French lieutenant, she admits that her naivété was partially self-induced: "Perhaps I always knew. Certainly some deep flaw in my soul wished my better self to be blinded. And then we had begun by deceiving. Such a path is difficult to reascend, once engaged upon" (p. 140). And moments later: "My innocence was false from the moment I chose to stay" (p. 141). What Sarah is relating to Charles in these oblique statements is a parable of what is and will be their relationship. Because her innocence of Varguennes's real intentions had been false, so was the role she played for Charles on the Common and later in Exeter. And the same holds for Charles, too: although at each succeeding meeting with her he attempts to convince himself of "the altruism of his motives," eventually he is forced to admit that he continues to meet her simply because she attracts him. But there is a difference between Sarah's and Charles's deceptions. The most obvious difference is that Sarah's deceptions are carefully planned and executed, while Charles's are not—they follow some act he feels unable to interpret to Ernestina because he is afraid to be truthful to himself about that interpretation. On a deeper level is the fact that Charles deceives Ernestina in order to protect himself, while Sarah deceives Charles as part of her plan to bring him to enlightenment.
Whether or not she had the right to interfere in his life is another issue, one that Charles later decides in her favor. Essentially, her decisive role in his life is no more than an acknowledgment of the impact any individual's action has on others; Sarah listened to the voice and credited the message to an angel rather than a devil; she made the decision that the action was good. And only she and Charles would ultimately be qualified to decide whether she was correct.

To a certain extent, Sarah and Charles function as parallel characters. Sarah deceives the Talbots about her relationship with Varguennes just as Charles deceives Ernestina and Aunt Tranter; both pretend to an innocence in their respective situations which they know is false. And both are led by an unconventional relationship to renounce the values of society and to assert the primacy of the values they discover within themselves (although Varguennes was probably not the conscious guide to Sarah that she later was to Charles). As we have seen, Sarah's words about the dangers of deceit are as much a warning to Charles as they are a summary of her experience. Both express a need to confide: Sarah to Charles, and Charles to Grogan. Both experience a sense of excommunication, not only from society, but at one point from the possibility of ever experiencing happiness. Finally, both arrive at the
same position in regard to their feelings and their places in society: "Sarah and Charles stood there, prey--if they had but known it--to precisely the same symptoms; admitted on the one hand, denied on the other; though the one who denied found himself unable to move away" (p. 199).

This last statement outlines not only the relationship that Charles and Sarah share, but also the aspect that separates them. They respond to the same stimulus, but their reaction is different: Sarah trusts her impulses, her inner voice; Charles represses his. Sarah is able to absorb new information and move in unsanctioned areas in pursuit of her freedom, while Charles for most of the novel is unable to do so. His inclination in that direction can be traced, however; it follows the same progression as does his growing dissatisfaction with Ernestina, which was, although he found it difficult to admit, representative of his growing impatience with the restraints of society. All of these elements can be seen in an examination of his changing attitude toward Ernestina.

The first time that Charles feels any sort of disapproval of Ernestina, the feeling is not expressed as the sense of dissatisfaction and entrapment that he later will experience; however, the scene is significant because it is prototypical of scenes that will follow. During this incident, which takes place at Mrs. Poulteney's, Ernestina
responds to her hostess's comments about the behavior of Sam and Mary by disagreeing with her aunt and Charles and rather dogmatically echoing Mrs. Poulteney's disapproval. The result of her behavior is that Mrs. Poulteney rather heavy-handedly slights Charles, who responds with cold sarcasm. Three elements emerge from this scene which establish themselves as a pattern. First of all, Charles and Sarah (who had accidentally met for the first time on Ware Common the day before) exchange a look which is an acknowledgment of their mutual understanding of the situation, a perception which no one else in the room shares: "two strangers had recognized they shared a common enemy" (pp. 88-89). The most obvious enemy is Mrs. Poulteney, but the reader is led to consider that other inhabitants of the room, and perhaps even a situation larger than the room itself, might be at enmity with him. Second, Charles allows himself for the first time—even on the subverbal level—to disapprove of Ernestina: "Bigotry was only too prevalent in the country; and he would not tolerate it in the girl he was to marry" (p. 89). And finally, Charles's reaction to Ernestina's almost immediate remorse (for inadvertently arranging for Charles to be snubbed by Mrs. Poulteney) is interesting. Charles chides her for denying to Sam and Mary the same thing that gives themselves such happiness, and Ernestina responds:
She smiled up at him from her chair. "This is what comes of trying to behave like a grown-up."
He knelt beside her and took her hand. "Sweet child. You will always be that to me." She bent her head to kiss his hand, and he in turn kissed the top of her hair. (p. 90)

Since Ernestina's comment has invited Charles's, the reader does not immediately see much significance to his characterizing her as a child. But as will later become evident, this is one of his methods of consoling himself about his fate. He first makes an appeal to his own sense of duty, and then he degrades Ernestina's position by referring to her as child, thereby both asserting his own superior position and allowing himself to feel righteously protective of her. At the age of twenty-one, Ernestina, in spite of her sheltered upbringing, is no child, a fact she makes quite clear in the last scene which she and Charles share.

Charles's next feelings of doubt occur during a rather horrible Lenten concert at the Lyme Regis Assembly Rooms. This concert took place on the evening following his second accidental meeting with Sarah. During the concert, Charles, in what he dutifully labels an examination of his conscience, allows his mind to range freely: he admits things to himself that he will soon deny ever having thought. A certain number of these thoughts concern his feelings about Sarah, and he is not only honest but rather perceptive about his reactions to her. "In simple truth he had become a little
obsessed with Sarah . . . or at any rate with the enigma she presented" (p. 106). Charles seems to realize that he is responding to Sarah not merely on the basis of her personal attraction, but also because of the freedom she represents—a thought he will return to moments later.

First, however, it is useful to follow Charles's thought progression, for Fowles here presents the subverbal progression that forms the pattern of much of Charles's behavior during a large part of the novel. Thoughts about Sarah lead him again to desire to tell Ernestina of his meeting in the woods. This time, however, the occasion does not seem "opportune"—he has to act as fashion consultant for Ernestina. Charles's continued failure to mention Sarah after this incident is, he realizes, for a different reason. For the first time, he has begun to feel twinges of guilt concerning his conversation with Sarah, to feel as if he has become more involved than he intended. The outgrowth of this attitude is that he does not wish to suffer Ernestina's jealousy, though it might be no more than teasing.

These thoughts lead directly to his feelings of dissatisfaction with and alienation from Ernestina. He was not pleased with her that night; she seemed unacceptably artificial and elicited a correspondingly artificial response from him. For the first time, she appeared to him as a
stranger, as someone he did not know, and who on examination revealed only superficiality: "She was very pretty, charming . . . but was not that face a little characterless, a little monotonous with its one set paradox of demureness and dryness? If you took away those two qualities, what remained? A vapid selfishness" (pp. 106-7). Charles characteristically and loyally discounts these thoughts as they emerge, but he is also being honest when he lays the blame on himself instead of on her. Ernestina had attracted him because she stood apart from the other young husband-seekers in London society, but why, he asked himself, had he judged her only in that context? Ultimately, the blame was his: "Instead of doing the most intelligent thing had he not done the most obvious? What then would have been the most intelligent thing? To have waited" (p. 107).

The trapped feelings resulting from these thoughts also lead him back to thoughts of Sarah:

his mind wandered back to Sarah. . . . Undoubtedly it awoke some memory in him, too tenuous, perhaps too general, to trace to any source in his past; but it unsettled him and haunted him, by calling to some hidden self he hardly knew existed. He said it to himself: It is the stupidest thing, but that girl attracts him. It seemed clear to him that it was not Sarah in herself who attracted him--how could she, he was betrothed--but some emotion, some possibility she symbolized. She made him aware of a deprivation. His future had always seemed to him of vast potential; and now suddenly it was a fixed voyage to a known place. She had reminded him of that. (p. 107)
These thoughts and Charles's reaction to them are quite revealing. For one thing, although he is perceptive enough to realize what it is in Sarah that attracts her to him, he lapses into Victorian sophistry again when he tries to persuade himself that he is not attracted to her personally. The line about his betrothal, which seems so transparently laughable to the reader and which Charles obviously takes quite seriously, is the giveaway; it also foreshadows some of Grogan's later comments to Charles. The second thing is that for the first time Charles links dissatisfaction with Ernestina to an acknowledgment of his suddenly limited potential, and he correctly identifies Sarah as the force which brought about this realization.

His reaction to his dissatisfaction and realization of Sarah's role, however, is not to admit his new knowledge but to attempt to repress it by reasserting the priority of duty and by seeing Ernestina as a child. This time he reveals somewhat more of himself than he did on the last occasion: "She was so young, such a child. He could not be angry with her. After all, she was only a woman. There were so many things she could never understand: the richness of male life, the enormous difficulty of being one to whom the world was rather more than dress and home and children." And most significantly: "All would be well when she
was truly his, in his bed and in his bank . . . and of course in his heart, too" (p. 107).

This gives a rather naked portrait of Charles, one that he himself does not seem to see. Fowles's irony is at its most biting here, and he uses it in that final sentence to damn Charles severely: not only is Charles attempting to apply a simple solution to a complex problem, but his ordering of priorities, because of its very casualness, reveals himself and his motives for marriage. Ernestina will satisfy him sexually, provide him money, and, almost as an afterthought, she will give him someone to love and be concerned for. And all of this is couched in the terms of a chattel relationship: their happiness will be assured when he owns her.

In regard to the low opinion of woman that he expresses, Charles will painfully learn, through Sarah, exactly how limited his notion of "only a woman" is. Sarah's interests extend beyond "dress and home and children," and she shows him how his life has become "a fixed voyage to a known place." This metaphor is significant, for Charles is closely associated with the imagery of voyages or journeys. Throughout the novel, a journey of some kind has been used by Charles or appears to him as a means of escape or an attempt to attain freedom. A concrete example occurred when his father, terrified that Charles was seriously
considering the priesthood, packed him off to Paris for some socially approved philandering. When Charles's father died soon after his return, Charles again expressed his freedom, this time from paternal restraint, by going abroad. The voyage imagery also functions as a scaled-down reflection of the larger journey that is the entire novel—Charles's quest for freedom. But the most telling way that travel imagery functions in the novel is as a leitmotif for Charles's growing dissatisfaction and his increasing longing for freedom: as he begins to feel that his prospects are becoming limited, he develops a yearning to travel again.

Voyage imagery is apparent when Charles compares his feelings of guilt at having betrayed Ernestina by meeting Sarah to the shame he would have felt if "he had, without warning her, stepped off the Cobb and set sail for China" (p. 120). The implication is that Charles is so distracted and unhappy with the way things are going that leaving is precisely what he would like to do. The result of his third encounter with Sarah—unplanned by him, calculated by her—is that again he feels dissatisfied with Ernestina. On the occasion of the dinner with Aunt Tranter, Ernestina, and Dr. Grogan in his hotel rooms, the same qualities in Ernestina that had troubled him at the concert plagued him again: her shallowness and her artificiality, his feeling that "her acuteness was largely constituted . . . by a mere
cuteness. Was there not, beneath the demure knowingness, something of the automaton about her, of one of those ingenious girl-machines from Hoffman's Tales?" But again, Charles dismisses these disloyal and disturbing thoughts by remembering that "she is a child among three adults" (p. 122).

Charles's next feelings of dissatisfaction and doubt are of a general nature. Instead of being a reaction against Ernestina, these feelings occur as a recognition that his life is not as he would have it. This moment of insight takes place in the middle of Sarah's confession to him; the nakedness of her revelation, her honesty in speaking of things that society ruled should not be done and certainly not spoken of opened up the possibility of a reality other than conventionality to Charles. His association of the voyage with escape from life's encroaching limitations is nowhere more evident than in this scene; and again, his unhappiness is expressed in the desire for travel: "the far clouds reminded him of his own dissatisfaction, of how he would have liked to be sailing once again through the Tyrrhenian; or riding, arid scents in his nostrils, towards the distant walls of Avila; or approaching some Greek temple in the blazing Aegean sunshine" (p. 144). But he is still too much under the spell of conventionality to break any bonds; he reverts to the
dictates of common sense and gives Sarah the kind of trite, unimaginative advice that implies a total lack of understanding of anything that she has said—or perhaps he understands, but refuses to admit that he does. Once again, Charles has failed one of her tests; he realizes it immediately and is pierced by that realization, but when they part, it is to two different worlds, and Charles still has not allowed his new knowledge to penetrate any deeper than his surface.

Charles's largest problem—or rather, what he uses as an excuse for his conventionality—is his concern for Ernestina and his unwillingness to do her any harm. By now, he is thoroughly wracked by the anguish of knowing that he and Ernestina are inappropriate mates, that his narrowing boundaries are a source of discontent to him, and that Sarah has pointed out an alternative. But he justifies his refusal to act by capitulating to the demands of his duty, to marry as a means of avoiding giving pain to Ernestina. Charles's final expression of agony comes when he makes his confession to Grogan. Ostensibly at the doctor's house to inform him of what he knows about Sarah and to relieve himself of responsibility for her, Charles stays to admit his doubts about Ernestina in a way that he never has before. After the doctor forces from Charles the admission that he is "half in love" with Sarah, Charles speaks of what he has
kept to himself for so long: "I am not made for marriage. My misfortune is to have realized it too late" (p. 180). And then, with unusual candor, Charles lays bare his soul, revealing some things that he still fails to comprehend: "Oh my dear Grogan, if you knew the mess my life was in ... the waste of it ... the uselessness of it. It seems only a few months ago that I was twenty-one--full of hopes ... all disappointed" (p. 180). Two things emerge from this statement, one of them in conjunction with what Charles will next say. The first is that Charles has so let down his guard with Grogan that for the first time, he admits that he has no driving inner sense for duty--that it is something he has taken up against his own nature, presumably in an attempt to invest his life with some meaning, to construct a rampart against chaos, against a confrontation with the self. In other words, he hears the inner voice, and to avoid the anguish of making the judgment of whether it is angel or devil, he assumes the more comfortable pose that duty allows him. The second thing relates to his next comment about Ernestina, that "she understands so little of what I really am" (p. 180). If any one thing is glaringly evident in the first statement, it is that it is made by a man who not only does not know what he is, but who is also in frantic flight from the terror of ever finding out. The
complaint he makes about Ernestina is almost cruelly ironic, emphasizing as it does his own ignorance of himself.

Yet Charles is at least partially correct in his evaluation of Ernestina and the task that lies before him. He is able to discern that his dissatisfaction with her is just a symptom of his disappointment in himself. Ernestina functions in his mind at this point as blinders do on a nervous horse. As long as he continues his relationship with her, he does not have to admit the existence of some flaws in himself; a dilemma develops when he must decide whether the security those blinders give him is worth the price they demand in cutting him off from other things as well. The difference between himself and the horse is that he knows precisely the function of those blinders, while the horse merely accepts their protection. Charles reaches another level in his climb toward self-awareness when he realizes and admits—to himself this time, not to Grogan—that it is himself and not Ernestina who has deceived and betrayed him: "He could not tell the doctor his real conviction about Ernestina: that she would never understand him. He felt fatally disabused of his own intelligence. It had let him down in his choice of a life partner . . ." (p. 180). But as he had on every previous occasion, Charles refuses to apply his new insight toward any sort of change or improvement. This time his movement back to the shelter
of conventional thought receives some well-intended aid from Grogan, who performs one of Charles's usual functions by characterizing Ernestina as a "pretty young innocent girl" (p. 18).

The same blindness that allowed him to blame Ernestina for the limitations of his freedom also renders him unable to receive Sarah's guidance in the spirit in which it is given. As long as Charles is unable to accept Sarah's voice as an angel's rather than a devil's, he is unable to see his own position in the situation. Here again, Dr. Grogan is instrumental in keeping Charles firmly on the path of conventionality. By convincing Charles that Sarah is deranged by her despair, he relieved Charles of the responsibility of coming to a conscious decision as to the authenticity of the voice. And by not confronting this problem, by seeking to avoid the anguish of indecision, Charles is only compounding the anguish he feels about his own dissatisfaction. Charles's moves to eliminate anguish and to grasp his freedom initially occur when he rejects Grogan's advice and determines to give Sarah the opportunity to state her case for herself.

It is as a result of his anguish that Charles begins to feel a need to exercise his free will. His terror had shown him that he had options; his anguish moved him to want to exercise them; and his confrontation with his present lack of free will brought him to experience despair.
According to Paul Tillich, man experiences his dehumanization—the result of the loss of a meaningful world, his subjection to man-created objects, his loss of subjectivity—as despair. The result of this despair is that he feels that humanity has no exit; his only reaction can be to express courage, to accept that despair and to resist the threat of non-being. Tillich claims that all modern Existential philosophy, art, and literature show the same structure: "the meaninglessness which drives to despair, a passionate denunciation of this situation, and the successful or unsuccessful attempt to take the anxiety of meaninglessness into the courage to be as oneself."16

William Barrett provides an even more gripping description of despair in discussing Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*. Despair is that sickness, "the sickness in which we long to die but cannot die; thus, it is the extreme emotion in which we seek to escape from ourselves. . . ." This last aspect of despair forcefully reveals what it means to exist as a human. Kierkegaard maintains that whether we are aware of it or not, we are all in despair and that any attempt to rid ourselves of it, except through religion, is either futile or unholy. Kierkegaard further insists that in despair, man never grieves simply over the external object, but always ultimately over himself: "The unbearable

loss is not really in itself unbearable; what we cannot bear is that in being stripped of an external object we stand denuded and see the intolerable abyss of the self yawn at our feet." The humanist existentialist would substitute for Kierkegaard's religion the striving for freedom that will enable man to accept the self in a meaningless universe.

Charles experiences despair on two major occasions: one, after having reached the limits of terror and anguish, in his ordeal in the Exeter church; the other, after that night of agony in the church, when, after he decided to make a bid for freedom, Sarah disappears. The result of the first ordeal is that for the first time in the novel Charles is able to think clearly and honestly, and to begin consciously to plan his life rather than simply to follow preset paths of the least resistance. Charles misses his chance to grasp freedom at this point for two reasons: he still values some conventions as society does (he delays his visit to Sarah until he has cleared himself of attachments to Ernestina); and he makes his freedom dependent on a second person (Sarah).

Charles enters the church in a moment of confusion and is quickly subjected to a far deeper problem than any other that has occurred to him, for he is unable to communicate

17 Barrett, p. 169.
with God. Charles is experiencing directly the existential sorrow that comes with the realization of the loss of faith. Prior to this, Charles's agnosticism had been a rather off-hand and convenient matter: he had had no special need for faith, and agnosticism fitted in nicely with his allegiance to Lyell and Darwin. Yet now, "here he was, not weeping for Sarah, but for his own inability to speak to God" (p. 282)--a reflection of Kierkegaard's comments concerning the actual object of despair.

In the depth of this despair, a dialogue began taking place, as Fowles put it, "between his better and his worse self--or perhaps between him and that spreadeagled figure in the shadows at the church's end" (p. 282). However labelled, the dialogue is a debate between two poles--Charles the child of convention and Charles the honest examiner and apologist for his soul. To Charles's assertion that he has to honor his vow to Ernestina, whether it be for love or for guilt, the Christ in him answers by saying that a vow which cannot distinguish between the two has no meaning. To Charles's answer that he cannot consciously cause pain to Ernestina, the Christ answers that Ernestina knows that she is not truly loved and that every day will be a reënactment of their mutual deceit. Charles is finally freed of the answer which he has always used to
counter the dissatisfaction he has felt with Ernestina and with himself.

Out of the dialogue between Charles and his better self three very important—and quite existential—things emerge. The first, given through the voice of the Christ, serves to remind Charles that no matter how he strives to exonerate himself for his actions with Sarah in Exeter, the truth remains that he had chosen that way to release himself from the prison of his future. But the task is not so simply accomplished, the voice asserts:

escape is not one act, my friend. It is no more achieved by that than you could reach Jerusalem from here by one small step. Each day, Charles, each hour, it has to be taken again. Each minute the nail waits to be hammered in. You know your choice. You stay in prison, what your time calls duty, honor, self-respect, and you are comfortably safe. Or you are free and crucified. Your only companions the stones, the thorns, the turning backs; the silence of cities, and their hate. (p. 284)

Charles receives the second message after the voice has ceased. He moves closer to see the figure behind the rood-screen, and, as he does, for the first time, he sees himself there, crucified, with Sarah beside him, as if awaiting something. In a flash, Charles sees the purpose of the figures there—to uncrucify—and he is able to extend this image to perceive at once the true purpose of Christianity—not to celebrate a pagan, tortured image, but to "bring about a world in which the hanging man could be descended,
could be seen not with the rictus of agony on his face, but the smiling peace of a victory brought about by, and in, living men and women" (p. 285). At the same time, the words that the Christ had spoken earlier about Sarah begin to make sense: "there is one thing she loves more than you. And what you do not understand is that because she truly loves you she must give you the thing she loves more" (pp. 283-84). He was to obtain his freedom not merely to be crucified, to become an object of hatred and loathing, but to help others to climb down from their crosses in victory, as Sarah was trying to help him to do.

The third element in this scene comes to him as he stands reflecting on the impact of the other two, seeing his age as it was for the first time and wondering how he first became trapped in its grip. He considered it, with its rigid conventions, its repressed emotion and facetious humor, its cautious science and incautious religion, as "the great hidden enemy of all his deepest yearnings" (p. 285). But behind this he sensed the tyranny of the dead, of the false concept of afterlife:

if they were truly dead, if there were no afterlife, what should I care of their view of me? They would not know, they could not judge.

Then he makes the great leap: They do not know, they cannot judge. (p. 285)

In fully coming to terms with human finitude, Charles has finally rid himself of the last restraints which society
held over him. He holds for himself no more ties to Ernestina, to propriety, even to his uncle. He pictures a new world, "a new reality, a new causality, a new creation" (p. 286). But Charles's flaw begins almost simultaneously with his grasp of this new vision; immediately, his thoughts shift to thoughts of Sarah, and significantly, his metaphor for freedom is the image of Sarah on his arm at the Uffizi, Sarah in Paris, Florence, and Rome--again, the image of the voyage, this time functioning as his symbol of the realization of freedom.

Just how tenuous his freedom is becomes clear when Charles, after freeing himself from obligation to Ernestina, rushes back to Exeter to claim Sarah as his own--and finds her gone. His despair is nearly complete when he discovers her gone, but he allows himself some hope in thinking that she left because she thought herself rejected. She might, he hopes, look for his house in London. But he has to abandon that idea, for if her intentions had been honorable, she would have looked for him in Lyme, where she knew him to be. Her going to London, then, indicates a renunciation. With that hope gone, the only thing he has left is some sort of false hope that he might manufacture himself. He does and swears to find her if it takes the rest of his life.

Some twenty months later Charles is seen again. He is a changed man, stronger in some ways, weaker in others. He
no longer lives by hope, but by an acceptance of himself which subtly denies some of the assertions he now makes:

When he had had his great vision of himself freed from his age, his ancestry and class and country, he had not realized how much the freedom was embodied in Sarah; in the assumption of a shared exile. He no longer much believed in that freedom; he felt he had merely changed traps, or prisons. But yet there was something in his isolation that he could cling to; he was the outcast, the not like other men, the result of a decision few could have taken, no matter whether it was ultimately foolish or wise. . . . However bitter his destiny, it was nobler than that one he had rejected. (p. 335)

What the narrator implies is that for him freedom is still embodied in Sarah, for he is unable to attain it without her some two years later. Charles is not able to grasp the notion either that his connection of the concept of freedom with Sarah may be false or that there may be another type of freedom. At this point in the novel, Charles is just as helplessly adrift as he was when we first encountered him squiring Ernestina about at the beginning of the novel. There is a qualitative difference in his lost existence now, however; he has rid himself of much of the excess poundage he had formerly carted about in the form of convention; he is much more self-aware and more inclined to accept his own voice as being as valid as others' voices. Whether he can make the leap to freedom is an issue that has not been determined at this point; it remains for the ending to give some indication of his progress toward freedom.
Before proceeding to the ending, though, some insight into the Darwinian concepts that appear in the novel will help to develop a more complete picture of the book. Darwinian elements at once complement and conflict with some of the existential aspects. When Darwinian analogy is applied to the novel, Darwinism initially appears to suggest a response to Charles's predicament that is roughly opposite to the response suggested by existentialism. A closer examination of Fowles's and Darwin's thought reveals, however, that the message of novelist and scientist supports or at least allows the freedom advocated by existentialism. Charles may render himself more likely to survive by adapting himself to the demands of industrial society, but Fowles, Darwin, and the existentialists agree that mere survival does not guarantee intrinsic superiority.
CHAPTER III

DARWINISM

The most important function of Darwinism in the novel is the way it provides—often ironically—a running commentary on Charles Smithson and traces his frame of mind from its initial assurance that he is, indeed, one of nature's elect to the point that he becomes truly self-aware and realizes how close to extinction he and his type are. In this chapter, I will examine the Darwinian concepts of natural selection (or survival of the fittest), fit species, the reversion to prototypical characteristics of progenitors, natural selection leading to the extinction of some species, and the effect of changing conditions on organisms. In the final chapter I will also deal with one of the implications of hybridism.

Fowles as narrator speaks of Darwinism and of the breakthrough that nineteenth-century scientists made and provides a sort of guide for looking at the rest of the novel and especially at Charles. Fowles first addresses himself to this matter when he comments on the extreme "methodicality" of the Victorians. For all that he dislikes about that age, Fowles finds much that recommends it, and he
attributes to the insistence on method and on form many of the scientific and intellectual advances of the age. The narrator's comments come just after we have seen an absurdly costumed Charles outfitted properly--and extremely uncomfortably--for his geological outing. The narrator contradicts the very irony his words have created by commenting on the inner meaning of this outward manifestation, this insistence on duty, propriety, and order:

it was men not unlike Charles, and as overdressed and overequipped as he was that day, who laid the foundations of our modern science. Their folly in that direction was no more than a symptom of their seriousness in a much more important one. They sensed that current accounts of the world were inadequate; that they had allowed their windows on reality to become smeared by convention, religion, social stagnation; they knew, in short, that they had things to discover, and that the discovery was of the utmost importance to the future of man. (p. 44)

Clearing the window on reality and on his own existence is, of course, Charles's largest problem, although he muddles through a considerable portion of the novel before he even realizes that the window was smeared.

Fowles switches from a general discussion of Victorian scientific discovery to a more specific examination of Darwin and the implications of his ideas. Fowles defends Charles's lack of specialization in his scientific interests; he then goes on to say that that quality was typical of the nineteenth-century natural historian. After all, The Origin of Species is an example of generalization, not
specialization. While eventually specialization may be more useful to scientific inquiry, Fowles says, it is not more beneficial to the human soul.

In the next paragraph, Fowles identifies what was perhaps Darwin's greatest contribution to biology: he demolished the idea of nulla species nova (a new species cannot enter the world). This concept had been established—or rather, given scientific credence—by the Linnaean Scala Naturae, and it explains the Linnaean obsession with classifying and naming. As Fowles says, "We can see it now as a foredoomed attempt to stabilize and fix what is in reality a continuous flux, and it seems highly appropriate that Linnaeus himself finally went mad; he knew he was in a labyrinth, but not that it was one whose walls and passages were eternally changing" (p. 45). Even Darwin, Fowles says, never quite escaped the tyranny of this thought, and Charles, although he termed himself a Darwinist, had not yet really understood the concept of nulla species nova. Charles's failure to understand Darwin sheds light on his thoughts as he looked at the strata of the cliffs above the sea:

He knew that nulla species nova was rubbish; yet he saw in the strata an immensely reassuring orderliness in existence. He might perhaps have seen a very contemporary social symbolism in the way these gray-blue ledges were crumbling; but what he did see was a kind of edificality of time, in which inexorable laws (therefore beneficently divine, for who could argue that order was not the highest human good?) very conveniently
arranged themselves for the survival of the fit-
test and best, exemplia gratia Charles Smithson, 
this fine spring day, alone, eager and inquiring, 
understanding, accepting, noting and grateful. 
What was lacking, of course, was the corollary 
of the collapse of the ladder of nature: that if 
new species can come into being, old species very 
often have to make way for them. Personal extinc-
tion Charles was aware of--no Victorian could not 
be. But general extinction was as absent a concept 
from his mind that day as the smallest cloud from 
the sky above him. . . . (p. 45)

Among the telling elements present in this passage is a 
great deal of insight into the workings of Charles Smithson's 
mind. His convenient blindness can be seen: he sees the 
order but not the decay; he sees an order in existence, 
which to him implies a kind of divine benevolence that 
really does not conflict with his casual agnosticism (as 
the second chapter of this thesis suggested, the novel is 
largely a history of Charles's growing awareness of the 
lack of order in the universe). Most important, in the 
example of the survival of the fittest implied in the strata, 
Charles sees himself as a shining example of the best and 
the most fit--certainly not as a candidate for inevitable 
extinction. And yet Charles very shortly becomes increas-
ingly aware that he belongs to a class that is doomed to 
extinction and that he individually has done nothing to 
counteract the tendency of his species (class).

Charles's scientific interests provide an obvious 
starting point for an examination of Darwinian elements.
His primary interest was paleontology, but Fowles tells us that he was also a competent ornithologist and botanist. In developing an interest in science, Charles was expressing an eccentricity that neither his father had shown nor his uncle appreciated. However, Charles's grandfather had late in life developed a similar interest in fossils and excavation and had quite embarrassed his family by digging up various clumps of earth all over his three-thousand-acre estate. The relics and neolithic graves he discovered did not justify his activity, and as soon as he died, his eldest son--Charles's Uncle Robert--had as quickly as possible removed those same trophies from the house.

An accidental meeting with one of his grandfather's old acquaintances, however, had made Charles realize that what had mortified his family had been taken quite seriously by scientific figures of his day. Charles begins to feel that his true familial affinity is with his grandfather, not with the two representatives of the intervening generation. He had become interested in paleontology during the last three years and had decided to make it his field, much to his uncle's dismay. In assuming the characteristics of his grandfather rather than his father, Charles acts as a minor example of the Darwinian concept of reversion to the progenitor. Darwin gives the example of distinct breeds of pigeons which occasionally produce offspring with
characteristics that neither parent possesses but that are characteristic of the rock-pigeon, the breed that he claims is the parent of all the other breeds. Reversion can occur after dozens or even hundreds of generations because, Darwin says, even though those traits have not been visible in the intervening generations, each organism has continued to carry the latent tendency for that characteristic, and the law of averages alone indicates that the tendency will emerge occasionally. While Charles's reversion to his grandfather's interests and temperament is much more direct and deals with emotional and aptitudinal tendencies rather than to physical ones, Darwin's thoughts still function as an explanation of an apparent anomaly: why Charles does not in the least resemble either father or uncle.

Another clue as to Charles's position in relation to survival and extinction can be seen in the various imagistic motifs that Fowles connects with several of his characters. His most vibrant and fiercely alive characters are associated with different animals; the characters that seem most bound by convention and blind to reality or humanity are characterized by images of death and extinction. Thus Mrs. Poulteney and Lady Cotton are characterized as two battling brontosauri, and Ernestina perceptively speaks of a London counterpart of these dowagers as an example of

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"the Early Cretaceous era" (p. 69). Significantly--although Ernestina was no doubt unaware of this--the Cretaceous period was the period during which the dinosaurs began to become extinct. Similarly, the society dowager was one of the last of a race which enjoyed an idealized, pampered existence.

On the other hand, that dynamic example of Irish intensity, Dr. Grogan, is first characterized as a "dry little kestrel" (p. 121), and later we find that during a conversation, his "tongue flickered wickedly out" (p. 123), an image immediately suggesting a snake. Both the falcon and the snake are credited with quickness, shrewdness, and sharpness, qualities which Grogan certainly embodies. Furthermore, Grogan identifies himself as a student of neo-ontology rather than paleontology: "When we know more of the living, that will be the time to pursue the dead" (p. 125). In addition, he cuts to the core of Darwinism when he insists that The Origin of Species "is about the living. . . . Not the dead" (p. 131).

Predictably, the character most related to animal imagery is Sarah Woodruff; specifically, she is associated with wild animals. When she slips on a muddied path and Charles helps her up, she was "totally like a wild animal, unable to look at him, trembling, dumb" (p. 98); during a later meeting in the woods of Ware Commons, Charles noticed
in her "a kind of wildness, which the fixity of her stare at him aggravated" (p. 113). But the most extended image associated with Sarah is one that Charles perceives, in his confused state of mind, as he goes to meet her after she had been dismissed by Mrs. Poulteney. As he walks the lane to the Undercliff, nature seems to put on a show expressly aimed at him: animals acknowledge his presence and gaze at him before slipping away into obscurity; the foliage seems to glow with a life greater than its own. But the birds, and especially a wren, most intensely insist on expressing the glory of their existence:

A tiny wren perched on top of a bramble not ten feet from him and trilled its violent song. He saw its glittering black eyes, the red and yellow of its song-gaped throat—a midget ball of feathers that yet managed to make itself the Announcing Angel of evolution: I am what I am, thou shalt not pass my being now. He stood . . . astonished perhaps more at his own astonishment at this world's existing so close, so within reach of all that suffocating banality of ordinary day. In those few moments of defiant song, any ordinary hour or place—and therefore the vast infinity of all Charles' previous hours and places—seemed vulgarized, coarsened, made garish. The appalling ennui of human reality lay cleft to the core; and the heart of all life pulsed there in the wren's triumphant throat.

It seemed to announce a far deeper and stranger reality than the pseudo-Linnaen one that Charles had sensed on the beach that earlier morning—perhaps nothing more original than a priority of existence over death, of the individual over the species, of ecology over classification. We take such priorities for granted today; and we cannot imagine the hostile implications to Charles of the obscure message the wren was announcing. For it was less a profounder reality he seemed to
see than universal chaos, looming behind the fragile structure of human order. (pp. 191-92)

With this disturbing message in mind, Charles soon associates Sarah with that wren. After she woke from sleeping in the barn: "There was a wildness about her. Not the wildness of lunacy or hysteria--but that same wildness Charles had sensed in the wren's singing... a wildness of innocence, almost an eagerness" (p. 197). In a moment of rare perception, Charles--although he does not seem to realize the significance of his connecting her with the wren--has identified what it is about her he finds at once puzzling, compelling, and repelling: she represents undisguised reality, the freshness of a clear perception that reveals not only the terror of the unfamiliar but also the possibility of greater freedom, greater self-awareness, and greater honesty.

The natural image Charles is most often associated with is the test, a fossil of an ancient sea urchin or echinoderm. In his paleontological pursuits, Charles has taken this relatively rare specimen as his own special interest. Echinoderms are rather beautiful and are difficult to find--attributes that Fowles suggests is what at lease unconsciously attracted Charles to their study in the first place. Of course, Charles has a scientific attraction to them also, and he spends a certain amount of time
indignantly protesting their shameful neglect by scholars. As Fowles says, "a familiar justification for spending too much time in too small a field" (p. 45).

Unlike Sarah, Grogan, and the dowagers, Charles is not directly compared to his personal symbol, the test, except in a few special, hypothetical situations in the latter part of the novel. Instead, his association with fossils is always understood to be potential rather than actual. The tests as a class can be seen as a mirror image of Charles's social class: rare, difficult to locate, and extinct. The tests point out the type of existence that Charles is plainly aimed toward if he continues to accept the blurred view of reality that convention provides for members of his class; they plainly point toward his extinction.

In twice presenting Charles with gifts of tests, Sarah, apart from shrewdly choosing what she knows will put him under obligation to her, is subtly indicating her knowledge of his type. Just as significantly, the only time that Charles succeeds in teaching Sarah anything--his attempts to give her advice on conduct seem even to him to be trite and fatuous--is when he tells her about a couple of tests she had given him, pointing out different physiological features recorded in the stones. Charles's original perceptual error was not in choosing paleontology--Grogan is somewhat off the mark in suggesting that paleontology dealt
with the dead only and not the living—but in being unable to see the relationship between the long dead and the presently alive. The dead tell about themselves and make predictions for the living. Darwin's strength, as Grogan points out, was that he was able to see that relationship, to see the story of the past, present, and future in the record of the dead. We have already seen Charles's blindness in this area in his insistence on seeing only order in the cliff strata.

The chief irony of Charles's assumed role as a Darwinist is his complete assurance that in a scale of individuals most and least fitted for survival, he was among the fittest. That he clearly thinks himself fitted to survive is seen on several occasions, none more sharply than when he leaves Grogan after several rounds of grog and cheroots having discovered that both are Darwinists:

The mood in both of them—and in Charles especially, when he finally walked home in the small hours of the morning—was one of exalted superiority, intellectual distance above the rest of their fellow creatures. Unlit Lyme was the ordinary mass of mankind, most evidently sunk in immemorial sleep; while Charles the naturally selected (the adverb carries both its senses) was pure intellect, walking awake, free as a god, one with the unslumbering stars and understanding all. (p. 132)

In identifying "pure intellect" as the quality that renders him superior to the mass of humanity, Charles is ignoring instinct and intuition, as well as the kind of understanding
that Sarah possesses, the quality that Fowles says is the essence of her intelligence—an intelligence that Charles, with his scientific pretensions, would not recognize as such. By exaggerating the importance of his narrow intelligence, Charles is able to assume a condescending attitude that protects him from real emotional involvement with people or situations that present him with problems which he is unable to solve. We have already seen this condescension in action when he conveniently thought of Ernestina as a child on those occasions when he found himself unable to deny his dissatisfaction with her; it is apparent also when he seeks to justify his involvement with Sarah: "now he detected a clear element of duty. He himself belonged undoubtedly to the fittest; but the human fittest had no less certain responsibility towards the less fit" (p. 134). Of course, this is not the first time that Charles converts doing what he likes into a duty, but the added element of feeling himself to be one of the fittest gives it an interesting twist. His lack of understanding of Darwin is evident here also: although in his discussions of natural selection, Darwin was not referring to humans, he never indicated that the fittest had any sort of obligation to the less-favorably adapted. As a manifestation of an impartial universe, natural selection benefits only the
organism which it affects; it does not instill in that organism a desire to help the less fortunate.

Charles's feelings of superiority are also evident in a passage occurring shortly after this last one, just following the scene in which Sarah makes her confession, when they discover Sam and Mary and share that disconcerting smile. In this case, Charles's subvocal reassertion of his superiority is an attempt to relieve himself of a certain degree of guilt and of a fear of having become too involved in a dangerous situation. He reminds himself of his superiority in an attempt to reassure himself that he will be able to extricate himself from that situation; after all, "he was a highly intelligent being, one of the fittest, and endowed with total free will" (p. 152).

By now, if any two things are obvious, they are that Charles possesses no free will—or at least exercises none—and that he and his class are not among the fittest. What exactly did Darwin have to say about such things as the fittest, natural selection, and extinction? The answer is necessary for one to see where Charles and others in the novel fit into the Darwinian schema.

Darwin defines natural selection as the "preservation of favourable individual differences and variations, and the destruction of those which are injurious."2 Natural

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2Ibid., p. 64.
selection, he says, arises from the struggle for life; as a result, any variation in an organism which helps it to survive the physical conditions of life or competition with other individuals will tend to the preservation of that individual and will tend to be inherited by its offspring, which will, in turn, increase their chances of survival. According to Darwin, the struggle for existence is the result of the extremely high rate at which all life tends to increase. This struggle and its accompanying high rate of destruction are absolutely necessary, he maintains; otherwise, if a single pair and their offspring were allowed to procreate without check, their progeny would soon cover the face of the earth.

Natural selection does not create variations; Darwin says that variations merely provide materials for natural selection to work on. Furthermore, in comparing natural selection with man's power of selection, Darwin states that while man can select only those variations which are visible and while he selects only those which will benefit him, nature can act on the whole machinery of life, internal and external. In addition, nature selects only those variations which will benefit the organism.

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3 Ibid., pp. 51-52.
4 Ibid., p. 53.
5 Ibid., p. 39.
Of the elements that encourage the appearance of variations, Darwin lists a change of environmental conditions as among the most important. He says that this change in conditions tends to increase variability, which of course is favorable to natural selection because it has a larger number of examples from which to choose.\(^6\) A reader can also infer that a change in conditions will result in different variations being beneficial and formerly useful variations becoming neutral or even injurious. This explains why a species which had enjoyed dominance for some time might find itself supplanted by some other variety in times of change of climate, location, or some other shift from the previous norm.

These Darwinian concepts can be--and have been by Fowles--applied to the various strata in, specifically, British society. By equating the various classes with species, a Darwinian analogy can be seen. The aristocracy came to dominance in a time when the only value understood was power by force, and the only way to gain power was to discover and support the strongest man available. The men who came to constitute the aristocratic class were changing their behavior to fit the demands of the conditions of that time. As conditions changed and the demands for military

\(^6\)Ibid., p. 65.
support became less frequent, the nobleman continued to spend his time in activities that were a metaphorical shadow of his former warrior activities: gaming, hunting, and engaging in sports. In this regard, Sir Robert was more representative of his class than was his nephew.

As the conditions of life continued to change and industrialism began its rise, the aristocracy failed to adapt to these variations. The rising industrial and merchantile middle class was beginning to exhibit self-preserving variations, however, variations which allowed them to succeed more readily under the new conditions. The middle class was not kept from exploiting this situation by the taboo that held the gentleman from it: that work, and especially trade, was to be avoided at all costs. The most obvious result of this prohibition was that by Charles's time, individuals of the aristocracy had lost much of their vitality, consuming their time with hunting and fashionable soirees and generally following the occupation of being idly rich. Actually, in Darwinian terms, the rise to prominence of the aristocracy was something of an anomaly, a rarity made possible only by the unusual circumstances of feudal times; for, as a rule, Darwin says, the dominant species—which he defines as, among other things, those most numerous in individuals—most often produce many well-marked
varieties,\textsuperscript{7} which makes them more likely to survive.\textsuperscript{8} Since the aristocracy has always been composed of a small number of individuals, the more numerous middle class fits into the Darwinian schema more comfortably in their rise to power. Because of the sheer numerical size of this class, it was able to produce enough individuals who had the tendency (or, in Darwinian terms, the variations) to exploit the new conditions; consequently, they were destined to supplant the aristocracy. This social progression reflects Darwin's theories, for he insists that "a dominant species . . . will tend to spread and supplant many others."\textsuperscript{9}

If useful variations tend to preserve the organisms possessing them, then, conversely, organisms which do not show favorable variations will become increasingly poorer equipped to survive: that is, they will tend to extinction. To quote Darwin: "as new forms are produced, unless we admit that specific forms can go on indefinitely increasing in number, many old forms must become extinct."\textsuperscript{10} Extinction is simply the other end of the scale of natural selection; and if natural selection favored the middle class in an era of industrialism, it tended the aristocracy toward

\textsuperscript{7}Ibid., p. 46.
\textsuperscript{8}Ibid., p. 78.
\textsuperscript{9}Ibid., p. 97.
\textsuperscript{10}Ibid., p. 82.
extinction. Now the numerical minority of the aristocracy worked to their disadvantage, for, as Darwin says, "rare species will be less quickly modified or improved within any given period; they will consequently be beaten in the race for life by the modified and improved descendants of the commoner species."\textsuperscript{11} As applied to social evolution, "commoner" can be taken in both its meanings. Darwin also said that "beings which stand low in the scale of nature are more variable than those which are higher."\textsuperscript{12} Again, both meanings of "low" and "higher" apply; the middle class certainly ranked lower than did the aristocracy, and they just as certainly displayed more variation. The working class, too, was adapting to the new conditions and showing useful variations; in fact, as the example of Sam and Mary indicate, many are on the way to becoming part of the middle class. The aristocracy, as the rare species, is surely on the road to extinction, while the middle and working classes -- the lower, commoner, dominant species -- are on the rise.

To look at this matter of extinction in another way, Darwin also says that as natural selection tends to make an organism as efficient as possible, if a part of that organism, under changed conditions, becomes superfluous or less useful, it will consequently be reduced in order that

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., p. 83.

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., pp. 111-12.
nutrients will not be wasted in developing something useless. Darwin gives as examples wild and domestic ducks: the former have heavy wing bones, bones that have been reduced in the domestic duck, which spends most of its time on the ground. By equating British society with an entire organism, one can see how, in the changed conditions of industrial times, the aristocracy becomes mostly ornamental and less useful and is thus reduced in power and prominence.

The aristocracy, furthermore, adds to its own demise in seeking to maintain itself. If the predominating value of feudal times was the power of physical force, the predominating value of industrial times is the power of money, and consequently, shrewd noblemen of diminished financial means sometimes made matches by marrying into industrial money. Yet Darwin tells us that the extermination of rare species is hastened by interbreeding; that is, by habitually crossing with a dominant species, the individual characteristics of the rare species are diffused until that species is simply assimilated into the stronger one. Thus Charles, in planning to marry Ernestina for motives never entirely clear to himself, is hastening his own extermination, or at least the extermination of the self that belongs

13 Ibid., p. 111.
14 Ibid., p. 81.
to the aristocratic class—something that is not brought home to him until he is effectually disowned and then offered a position in trade by Mr. Freeman.

However, in spite of the increasing tendency, the aristocracy had not in the nineteenth century—and has not yet in this one—become extinct, although its powers have been greatly reduced. Instead, it takes a form which corresponds to what Darwin calls a "living fossil": an anomalous form which has "endured to the present day, from having inhabited a confined area, and from having been exposed to less varied, and therefore less severe, competition." Darwin's examples include some fresh water fish which are remnants of an order now largely extinct. These species are preserved only because they inhabit an isolated region in which they are protected from being forced to compete with the stronger, better adapted species. British aristocracy enjoys a similar isolation and protection because of the perverse regard the British have had for the class system and for the aristocracy especially; the middle class may have allowed the aristocracy to continue its impotent existence simply because the middle class wants to define itself in relation to that symbol of respect and lofty status. Mr. Freeman's, and to some

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.
extent, Ernestina's attitude towards Charles's future baronetcy is evidence of this. To have his daughter some day be referred to as Lady Ernestina seems to him the proper justification of his riches. Consequently, when Sir Robert marries and Charles's likelihood of ever becoming Sir Charles is dimmed, Mr. Freeman has to consider the relative value of the match; he subtly indicates his diminished regard for Charles by offering him a position in trade: he no longer regards Charles as a member of the aristocracy but as an unprepossessing suitor who should earn the fortune Ernestina will bring him.

Mr. Freeman's offer has the effect of forcing Charles to realize the powerlessness of his class and of his role in it; what is more, it forces him to see the relationship of his scientific interests to the life he lives: "The abstract idea of evolution was entrancing; but its practice seemed as fraught with ostentatious vulgarity as the freshly gilded Corinthian columns that framed the door..." (pp. 228-29). It is especially humiliating for Charles to be taught a lesson in the implications of evolution by a man who thought that Darwin should be caged in a zoological garden. But the lesson is no less effective: Charles immediately accepts the bald truth of Freeman's conclusion and just as readily identifies the aristocracy as the dying species. For the first time, he regrets his membership in
the aristocracy; he recognizes that his position is dooming him to impotence and leaving him open to the accusation of idleness and dilettantism: "he felt that the enormous apparatus rank required a gentleman to erect around himself was like the massive armor that had been the death warrant of so many ancient saurian species. His step slowed at this image of a superseded monster. He actually stopped, poor living fossil, as the brisker and fitter forms of life jostled busily before him" (p. 230). Charles has identified his class and himself as the fossil form, as the less fit, while the more vital aspects of humanity are embodied in the lower orders of society.

This is not the first time that Charles has identified himself with a form of fossil, but it is the first time that he seems to see that identification as being directly applicable to an ongoing life process; it is the first time that the identification seems to have more than a fleeting significance to him--how permanent the impact is will be seen in a moment. He had first applied it to himself after he had effectively given over Sarah to Grogan's care, after being convinced that she was deranged by despair and needed to be confined to an asylum. In the agony following his decision--and following the reading of the Matthaei case histories--he reversed his decision and condemned himself for turning his back on Sarah:
Why had he allowed Grogan to judge her for him?
Because he was more concerned to save appearances than his own soul. Because he had no more free will than an ammonite. (p. 189)

The result of this identification was that he did take action, meet Sarah, and save her from a mental institution, but the decision was not one made with conviction, and immediately after this action he made a strong attempt to shore up the defenses of convention and return to a life dominated by duty.

The fossil imagery appears again in the novel's false, traditional ending, in which Charles succeeds in maintaining the priority of duty. In this ending, Fowles allows no hope for Charles and condemns him to live the life of the dead: "He was one of life's victims, one more ammonite caught in the vast movements of history, stranded now for eternity, a potential turned to a fossil" (p. 262). In outlining this ending, Fowles is giving fictional credibility to something Charles is just beginning to glimpse after his interview with Mr. Freeman. As Charles continues to become more aware of the personal meanings of these concepts, he finds it increasingly difficult to live that life. The fact that he loses interest in paleontology after Sarah disappears indicates his revulsion against the life of the dead.

By the time of Charles's encounter with Mr. Freeman, Charles's unfitness has been obvious for a while, beginning
with the ludicrous geological attire which caused uncomfortable and unnecessary sweating as well as decreased maneuverability on the type of terrain he had to cross, and continuing with his inability to react to life directly and honestly, as is especially seen in his separate reactions with Ernestina and Sarah. The fact that after that interview he begins to realize his unfitness does not indicate that he is immediately ready to begin making necessary changes; on the contrary, his first response is, predictably, a desire to escape, to enter on another journey, a desire which, thanks to his concern for duty, he quickly rejects: "Charles found himself wishing he were in Paris—from that, that he were abroad...traveling. Again! If I could only escape, if I could only escape...he murmured the words to himself a dozen times; then metaphorically shook himself for being so impractical, so romantic, so dutiless" (p. 231).

As Charles at his most conventional and duty-bound is associated with the fossil, so, as he begins to develop a realization of and a revulsion for his life on those terms, he is associated with—on rare occasions, to be sure—animal images. The first instance comes about when he finds Sarah asleep in the barn. His first overwhelming instinct to protect her he immediately and correctly identifies as a manifestation of the love for her that Grogan had pointed
out; worse than that, however, is the feeling that next arose, suggested by her posture and the intimacy of the isolated barn. Since she is asleep, he cannot, as he had before, rationalize his response by claiming that she has consciously manipulated the situation to arouse those feelings; as Fowles puts it, "the tiger was in him, not in her" (p. 196), and he knows it. And moments later, the tiger wins; in spite of his best dutiful intentions, he pulls her into his arms and kisses her. "The moment over-came the age" (p. 199); passion establishes its priority over duty. In the same way, on a later occasion, Fowles has Charles leave a cabaret/brothel, disturbed by the lewd public performance, but "enough of an animal" (p. 242) to be privately excited. He gets into a cab, intending to return home, but instead he stops for a prostitute and goes to her rooms.

Charles's final reaction to Mr. Freeman's offer, however, is much more indicative of his realization of this position than his first reaction of longing for escape: he finally rejects the offer, the store, and everything the two stand for. Fowles does not give full approval to this decision; he detects three flaws in it. One is snobbishness, as his willingness to be influenced by his ancestors shows. Another is laziness, as is seen in his fear of work, routine, and concentration on detail. The third is cowardliness;
as Fowles says, Charles is frightened by other people, especially the lower orders. (Perhaps at the unconscious level Charles has realized the precarious place he fills in the scale of nature and the superior, more vital position held by less elevated individuals.) But, ultimately, Fowles sees signs of good qualities in Charles's rejection:

But there was one noble element in his rejection: a sense that the pursuit of money was an insufficient purpose in life. He would never be a Darwin or a Dickens, a great artist or scientist; he would at worst be a dilettante, a drone, a what-you-will that lets others work and contributes nothing. But he gained a queer sort of momentary self-respect in his nothingness, a sense that choosing to be nothing--to have nothing but prickles--was the last saving grace of a gentleman; his last freedom, almost. It came to him very clearly: If I ever set foot in that place I am done for. (p. 233)

The commentary in this passage reflects more of existentialism than of Darwinism, but it does reveal one thing that has echoes in Darwin's writing: that a refusal to conform to the demands for survival of nature and of society can be the path of greater value. In making the decision that implies this hierarchy of values, Charles dispells the misconception which plagues most people who think that they understand the concepts of evolution and the survival of the fittest: that evolution is always a progressive operation, ever making man and nature better and better. Darwin himself specifically denies this: "natural selection, or the survival of the fittest, does not necessarily include
progressive development--it only takes advantage of such variations as arise and are beneficial to each creature under its complex relations of life."17 Thus, though the demands of natural selection indicated that he should accept Mr. Freeman's offer, enter trade, and usefully modify himself to meet changing conditions, Charles is able to reject it, knowing that while it might make him better equipped to survive, it will be at the price of demeaning himself and lowering the essential quality of his life.

Fowles had already prepared Charles for this insight into the nature of evolution, although the perception had at that time no immediate personal relation to his life. Extremely agitated after Sarah is dismissed, disappears, and then sends him a note, Charles's mind erratically lights on the image of the ammonite he had given Ernestina, a record of ancient disaster: "In a vivid insight, a flash of black lightening, he saw that all life was parallel: that evolution was not vertical, ascending to a perfection, but horizontal" (p. 165).

Therefore, in rejecting Freeman's offer, Charles rejects the demands of evolution in order to preserve a profounder purpose for his life. In that rejection, Charles is not, however, refusing to comply with the demands of progress and falling back on his rank in the aristocratic

17 Ibid., p. 94.
class: he has found reasons of deeper and more essential significance than those. His rejection has, in effect, put him in a position similar to Sarah's: both are rendered unfit for the demands of society by their education, intelligence, and upbringing (although each is drastically different); each chooses, although Charles's final choice is still to come, to admit his role as outcast, to offend society if necessary, by showing himself to be a thorn tree walking in their midst.
CHAPTER IV

THE TWO ENDINGS: SYNTHESIS
AND CONCLUSION

The final enigma of the novel obtains in, of course, the two endings Fowles leaves us with: one in which Charles and Sarah are finally reconciled after a rather brutal verbal exchange and after Charles is shown their child; the other in which a more extended conversation takes place and Charles leaves alone. Clues to how the endings are to be taken are given when both endings are considered in the light of some existential and Darwinian concepts; in addition, the narrator, in his perverse manner, gives some hints of his own.

As Charles settles into a first-class compartment in the train from Exeter to London, he is joined by a bearded man. Fowles for the first time introduces the narrator as a character in the novel (although his presence in various scenes had previously been indicated). Charles nods off to sleep, and the stranger considers him, openly, unabashedly. As the novelist, his problem now is what to do with Charles--how to end the novel. He had considered ending the novel at this point, with Charles eternally riding to
London, but he rejected that idea because this is a novel in the Victorian tradition, and the conventions of that type of novel did not allow for an open ending. And, more importantly, the narrator is still functioning as the non-intervening god; he has the responsibility of maintaining the freedom of his characters and providing the ending in terms of what they would want and do.

That is the basis of his problem, for while Charles's desires are clearly evident, he is not the only character to be considered: Sarah's wishes must be weighed also, and the narrator does not know what they are. If this were an issue in real life, the narrator says, instead of between two figments of his imagination, the deciding would be easier and more obvious. One desire battles another; one fails and the other succeeds. However, reality decides the issue. Fiction, Fowles, as author and narrator, maintains, follows a similar form:

Fiction usually pretends to conform to the reality: the writer puts the conflicting wants in the ring and then describes the fight—but in fact fixes the fight, letting that want he himself favors win. And we judge writers of fiction both by the skill they show in fixing the fights (in other words, by persuading us that they are not fixed) and by the kind of fighter they fix in favor of: the good one, the tragic one, the evil one, the funny one, and so on.

But the chief argument for fight-fixing is to show one's reader what one thinks of the world around one—whether one is a pessimist, an optimist, what you will. I have pretended to slip back into
1867; but of course that year is in reality a century past. It is futile to show optimism or pessimism, or anything else about it, because we know what has happened since. (pp. 317-18)

Under these circumstances, the narrator feels, there is no reason to "fix the fight," which leaves him two alternatives: he can merely report what happens in the fight, or he can take both sides. But he sees that even that dilemma need not exist: the only way not to take sides is to give two versions of the fight. The problem that this solution leaves him is one involving the simple human proclivity to believe that the final version will seem to the reader to be the "real" one. To solve that problem, he lets chance, the hazard that he, in his role of non-intervening god, embodies, make the decision for him: he flips a coin.

Several considerations emerge from this entire line of thought. One is that while the narrator seems quite serious and sincere in his discussions of the strategy and art of fiction, he seems to be less believable when he claims that the flip of the coin will decide the ordering of the final two chapters. One reason the reader is not persuaded is simply that the author has had too much to say about the tyranny of the last chapter; then he solves the problem by tossing a coin. The reader is left with the impression that in spite of the implied opposite meaning, the narrator really is trying subtly to indicate which ending the reader should consider most seriously. Another item which has to
be discounted is the narrator's avowal that he could not leave the novel open-ended, for one of the two endings is indeed open. And leaving the reader with the choice of one of two endings is about as inconclusive an ending as can be devised. Besides these issues, there is an unconvincing note to the narrator's disclaimer that since the novel is about a time past, attempts to show optimism or pessimism would be irrelevant. Just as Ruskin's commentary on art applies to life, too, as Sarah will assert, so this novel about the past provides a commentary on our own time. And the attempt to deny the stating of a moral position by the narrator ranks among the greater ironies of the novel.

One reason that the first ending must be rejected is simply that it is not consistent with the rest of the novel. In its own way, this ending is just as traditional as the false ending that had Charles married to Ernestina and gradually becoming completely fossilized—an ending, significantly, that the narrator refused to take credit for and instead maintained was a concluding chapter that Charles had spun in his own mind. Although the subject matter of this first ending is too daring ever to be found in a real Victorian novel—man and woman finding each other and entering into wedded bliss together with their child—the implications of this happy union are the same as if the groom had been a paragon of male chastity and the bride a
blushing virgin. The beguiling message of this type of ending is that Charles can simultaneously achieve happiness and recapture freedom by finding the elusive woman he loves and binding himself to her.

And yet everything in the novel to this point leads us to reject the implications of the first ending. The reader recognizes, whether Charles does or not, that Charles's concept of freedom was inextricably bound with the idea of finding and possessing Sarah. As his hopes of finding her faded, his belief in freedom dwindles also. What Charles was not able to conclude was that binding the two together was his mistake: the two were separate goals, and a freedom he felt he had attained through Sarah would not ultimately be satisfying because it would not ultimately bring him to the widest understanding of a true freedom. The first ending, by allowing Charles to attain one goal while thinking he had attained two simultaneously, simply would not be an honest conclusion to the purpose of the entire novel.

The penultimate ending can be read as yet another test that Sarah administers to Charles--thus the brutal verbal exchange--that she must give before she can be sure of him and then see her way to share their child and her life with him. But that reading is unsatisfactory; all tests have been given before this time, and the mere fact that Charles appears to her, after two years, with the same intentions
he had before indicates to her that he still fails to grasp the central lesson of her message of freedom. Therefore--keeping in mind the dialogue in the Exeter church, that there is one thing Sarah loves more than Charles, and because she loves him, she must give it to him--Sarah, to be consistent with herself, has a moral obligation to reject Charles and to send him away, bringing him, she hopes, to an understanding so that he will be able to discover freedom on his own. This decision is not as completely idealistic as it might sound, though; Sarah has the perception to realize that, in their present conditions and states of mind, marriage would not give them the happiness that Charles is so sure of. The key to this is seen in Sarah's analysis of their situation in terms of art criticism (although this takes place in chapter sixty rather than in the final one, it must be remembered that the two endings are identical up to the point that Charles pronounces judgment on Sarah. So, although this part of the conversation is not repeated in the final chapter, the implication is that it occurred in that ending also): "Mr. Smithson, I remarked a phrase of Mr. Ruskin's recently. He wrote of an inconsistency of conception. He meant that the natural had been adulterated by the artificial, the pure by the impure. I think that is what happened two years ago" (p. 351). Charles is now able to see the real problem
between them, although he does not admit all of its implications immediately:

He saw . . . what had always been dissonant between them: the formality of his language—seen at its worst in the love letter she had never received—and the directness of hers. Two languages, betraying on the one side a hollowness, a foolish constraint—but she had just said it, an artificiality of conception—and on the other a substance and purity of thought and judgment; the difference between a simple colophon, say, and some page decorated by Noel Humphreys, all scroll-work, elaboration, rococo horror of void. That was the true inconsistency between them, though her kindness—or her anxiety to be rid of him—tried to conceal it. (p. 351)

"Two languages"—a dissonance so great that they fail utterly to communicate; and yet a dissonance that is not implicit in the language barrier but rather is manifested by it. It is a dissonance so great that it is as if they belong to different breeds, or different species. In emphasizing the utter difference between the two, Fowles is pointing to another reason why the union should not be effected. To return to Darwin, separate species, although their reproductive systems may be in perfect condition, when matched can produce few or no offspring, and furthermore, when offspring do result, they are invariably sterile. ¹

If we apply the Darwinian analogy to the novel's situation, we know that if Charles and Sarah had made a union, it would

¹Darwin, p. 209.
have been a spiritually unproductive one: only sterility could result.

Sarah seemed to see this clearly, while Charles refused for a time to admit what his mind had clearly outlined. After Charles had come to this realization, though, there was nothing left to their conversation but harsh words, accusations, and admissions, some of them designed by Sarah, apparently, as part of her plan to repel him. Her one last kind gesture, however--laying her hand on his arm and making her implicit offer of friendship and perhaps more--gave him his final choice. Now for the first time, he passed her test. This gesture made him see clearly how life with her could only strip him of his self-respect and never give him freedom. In rejecting her, Charles for the first time gains a glimpse of an attainable freedom that had no connections with her. He envisions a true freedom, not the false illusion that a voyage or escape into another human provides, but a freedom based solely on himself and the strength he found there. Already, with tears still in his eyes, still smarting from rejection and rejecting, Charles is beginning to realize the lesson he has learned:

he has at last found an atom of faith in himself, a true happiness, on which to build; has already begun, though he would still bitterly deny it, though there are tears in his eyes to support his denial, to realize that life, however advantageously Sarah may in some ways seem to fit the role of Sphinx, is not one riddle and one failure
to guess it, is not to inhabit one face alone or to be given up after one losing throw of the dice; but is to be, however inadequately, emptily, hopelessly into the city's iron heart, endured. (p. 366)

Whether Charles will be able to maintain the lonely drudgery required, the daily decision to be and be authentically is not revealed. Fowles ends the novel by giving Charles the final message, the inkling that his salvation is in his own hands. Ultimately, Fowles is a modern novelist and cannot force his words to fit the conventions of the Victorian novels: if fiction is to be at all a reflection of reality, even a writer of historical fiction must conform to the demands of a reality that was ignored or denied in the time of the novel's setting. And if the narrator is to maintain the practice of allowing his character's freedom, it would be a betrayal for him to tell the readers the future action of a man whose mind he cannot predict.

The ending of the novel combines both existential and Darwinian elements to indicate to Charles the choices he must make in order to gain control of his life and develop a clearer picture of reality. Throughout, Charles has been moved and inspired by the lessons forced on him by Sarah, Mr. Freeman, nature, and any number of Darwinian and existential elements. While both elements provide a basis for a structural analysis of the novel by means of frequently
occurring motifs, rhythm patterns, and a three-stage pattern of development, their main contribution to the novel is the light they shed on its meaning. They illuminate the many enigmas and unanswered questions of the novel and show it to be a work of coherent and meticulously planned problems and solutions--or at least suggestions for solutions.
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