II Incorporating the Synthetic Function: Reexamining Audiences and Progression
The Functions of Character and the Relations of Audiences in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

I

The two chapters of Part I have presented a case for the importance of thematizing character and knowing where to stop in that thematizing (where the progression tells one to). At the same time, its specific analyses of *1984*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and "The Beast in the Jungle" have uncovered three different relationships between the mimetic and thematic functions of character: subordination of one to the other, equality along parallel tracks of interest, and fusion. This chapter will attempt to complete the investigation into the mimetic-thematic relationship and to move the inquiry into its consideration of the interactions among the three components of character by focusing on the mimetic-thematic relationship in a narrative where the synthetic component is at least an occasionally foregrounded feature of the text. In other words, my question here is what kind of mimetic-thematic relationships will develop when the synthetic component of character moves out of the background of the narrative. Although this one case may not be representative of all, John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* raises this question more provocatively than any other narrative I can think of. Furthermore, Fowles's manner of incorporating the synthetic component into his narrative will require a closer examination of the concepts of—and the relations between—the authorial and narrative audiences than I have yet undertaken.

II

The most striking feature of Fowles's treatment of his characters is his failure—or better, refusal—to give Sarah Woodruff, whom the narrator once ironically refers to as the "protagonist," a fully developed mimetic function.1 This refusal is striking not only because of Sarah's importance in the narrative but also because Fowles takes pains to
develop the mimetic functions of the other major characters, especially Charles Smithson. Fowles's refusal is itself complexly incorporated into the progression of the narrative through the narrator's statement of principles in the famous Chapter 13. Because the narrator claims to respect the autonomy of his characters and because Sarah would reject a chapter devoted to revealing her thoughts, Fowles himself seems to escape the obligation to give us an inside view of her, an escape that allows him eventually to write his double ending. But before we examine the crucial role of Chapter 13 in the progression and in the development of the functions of character, it will be helpful to sketch the general movement of the whole narrative, and then to look more closely at its initiating moments in the first two chapters.

The general trajectory of the narrative follows a path that results from the conflicting forces of Ernestina, Sarah, and Sam interacting with the conflicting values and beliefs of Charles. This path is finally one of growth and development for Charles—but that is not the whole story of the narrative. The major instabilities of the narrative center on Charles, but Fowles's narrative manner gives rise to some significant tensions that juxtapose the authorial audience's interest in Charles with other issues about the status of the narrative itself. Let us look at the instabilities first. When the action begins Charles is engaged to Ernestina, who is only slightly different from the conventional Victorian woman he has avoided marrying for much of his adult life. His encounters with Sarah emphasize his dissatisfaction with his situation and complicate the instabilities surrounding his engagement—and indeed, those surrounding the future course of his life as a young adult who has been born and bred a gentleman but now finds the social order changing. Fowles presents his attraction to Sarah as a function of his vague unease about his engagement to Ernestina and of Sarah herself, who through her appeals to his sympathy, her unconventional behavior, and indeed, her profound mystery, eventually leads him to reject the general judgment of her as a madwoman and to envision sharing his life with her. In ways that I will discuss later, Charles's choice for Sarah over Ernestina becomes thematized as a choice for the modern age over the Victorian, a choice for freedom over duty, and a choice that Fowles asks his audience to endorse.

Once Charles makes that choice most of the significant instabilities of the narrative are resolved. Nevertheless, the resolution is different for the authorial audience than it is for our protagonist. In a typical pattern for him, Charles misjudges the relation between his choosing and his getting what he chooses. Concerned with his own problems,
he does not pay sufficient attention to the aspirations of Sam, who does not deliver the written proposal, since its acceptance would mean the end of his hopes for funds to open his own clothing store. Furthermore, it is not clear that Sarah would have accepted Charles's proposal anyway. Charles lives with the consequences of his choice for Sarah over Ernestina without looking back, although he never abandons hope that he will find her again—and again his constancy about his choice is a sign of his growth. When Charles does find Sarah through the intercession of Sam at the very end of the narrative, Fowles offers two versions of Sarah's response to his renewed proposal. In both she puts him through a difficult interview; in the first, she eventually accepts him and in the second she does not. The dou­bleness of the ending is one sign that Charles's growth is not the whole story of the narrative, and Chapter 13 is another. To see how Chapter 13 develops a potentiality in the initial narrative situation and, thus, adds a significant new tension to the narrative, let us con­sider how Fowles leads up to it.

The narrative begins at a leisurely pace as the first chapter does not introduce any instability until its last paragraph, when it also complicates the mild tension established by the opening paragraphs. Fowles begins by using the narrator to describe the setting—the Cobb at Lyme Regis—and an unnamed couple walking upon the Cobb. This initial narration also implicitly defines the narrator's temporal relation to the scene he is describing and thereby establishes the tension; consider, for example, this commentary on the Cobb:

Primitive yet clean, elephantine but delicate; as full of subtle curves and volumes as a Henry Moore or a Michelangelo; and pure, clean, salt, a paragon of mass. I exaggerate? Perhaps, but I can be put to the test, for the Cobb has changed very little since the year of which I write; though the town of Lyme has, and the test is not fair if you look back towards land.³

At the end of the next paragraph, the narrator again refers to the temporal distance between the time of the action and the time of the narration: "No house lay visibly then or, beyond a brief misery of beach huts, lies today in that direction" (p. 10). The reference to Henry Moore indicates his twentieth-century perspective, and then the reference to "today," without any marking of a difference between the time of narration and the time of publication (1969), indicates that Fowles is placing the time of narration as the late 1960s, roughly one hundred years later than the March 1867 date given in the first paragraph as the time of the action.⁴ Establishing this temporal distance influences the audience to align itself with the narrator
as “we” all look back at the characters. In addition, establishing this distance predisposes us to direct our attention to their thematic components: aware of the distance between ourselves and the characters, we look for the ways in which they represent their age. When, as I shall discuss below, the narrator describes the couple walking on the Cobb according to how their appearance identifies them as people of their age, our predisposition toward the thematic becomes an active disposition.

At the same time, the whole manner of narration here establishes a slight tension between Fowles and the authorial audience. This audience, which knows the conventions of both nineteenth- and twentieth-century narration, recognizes the twentieth-century novelist adopting the nineteenth-century conventions and wonders why. As the narrator directs attention to the scene before him, this tension does not drive the narrative the way that, say, the tension between Lardner's Whitey and the authorial audience does; instead it remains in the background, something that needs to be resolved eventually, something that could be drawn upon later, but nothing that needs to be resolved—or even complicated—immediately.

Other elements of the narrator’s treatment in Chapter 1 reinforce the authorial audience's interest in the representative status of the characters. The narrator takes up a distant spatial location and describes the couple from the perspective of a “local spy” with a telescope (p. 10). Looking through that lens, the authorial and narrative audiences focus primarily on the clothes and hair style of the couple. The woman is dressed in the latest fashion of the day, “while the taller man, impeccably dressed in a light gray, with his top hat held in his free hand, had severely reduced his dundrearies, which the arbiters of the best English male fashion had declared a shade vulgar—that is, risible to the foreigner—a year or two previously” (p. 11). These details of the character’s appearance identify him as a member of a certain class—the conventionally fashionable well-to-do. At the same time, the reference to dundrearies reinforces the point that he is a citizen—and a decidedly British one—of another age, because it indicates an attention to an element of male appearance that in our age we all but ignore.

The impression of the man as conventionally fashionable is reinforced by the immediately preceding description of his companion: she is part of the incipient “revolt against the crinoline and the large bonnet,” wearing “a magenta skirt of almost daring narrowness—and shortness” as well as a “‘pork-pie’ hat with a delicate tuft of egret plumes at the side—a millinery style that the resident ladies of Lyme would not dare to wear for another year” (p. 11). Again the details
indicate that the wearer is a member of the upper class. The elaboration of the last detail also identifies the woman—and by extension, the man as well—as noteworthy because she is unusual—more daring, more advanced than the other residents of Lyme. (A subsidiary effect of the detail is to provide a retrospective “justification” of the narrator’s adopting the perspective of the local spy.)

Although the perspective keeps us at a distance from the characters, we now see them as set off from their surroundings and begin to wonder what they are doing in Lyme. But Fowles immediately complicates this reaction by introducing another character who is not only set off from the surroundings but is also defined as unfathomable:

But where the telescopist would have been at sea himself was with the other figure on that somber, curving mole. It stood right at the seawardmost end, apparently leaning against an old cannon barrel upended as a bollard. Its clothes were black. The wind moved them, but the figure stood motionless, staring, staring out to sea, more like a living memorial to the drowned, a figure from myth, than any proper fragment of the petty provincial day. (P. 11)

The nuances of the description highlight the mystery of the figure. The pronominal reference does not allow us to tell whether this character is male or female, but “it” is defined in implicit opposition to both members of the well-to-do couple. They are walking; “it” is motionless. They are together; it is alone. The woman’s clothes are marked by the brilliant, strident quality of their colors; its are black. The couple represent a city fashion in a country environment; it is a figure from myth set down in the provinces.

The introduction of this character is also a simultaneous complication of the tension and an introduction of an instability. When the telescopist is hypothetically put at sea, so too are we, and we read on in part to return to terra firma. Given the nature of the complication here, we wonder to what extent the initial tension surrounding Fowles’s adoption of the techniques of nineteenth-century narration is connected to his handling of this mysterious figure. Moreover, when the figure is juxtaposed to the couple, who in turn are juxtaposed to the residents of Lyme, we sense a rupture in the leisurely presentation of the narrative; and we wonder what the presence of the mysterious figure will mean for the couple in particular and Lyme in general.

This initial movement is given a strong push by the events of the next chapter, in which the narrator assumes a spatial location just over the shoulder of the couple, and reports their conversation. This dialogue introduces many of the major issues of the narrative—we
learn that Charles and Ernestina are engaged, that Charles is a gentle-
man by birth, Ernestina the daughter of a rich merchant; that Charles
believes in Darwin's theory of evolution, that his future father-in-law
does not. We also see that their talk is characterized by a kind of
formal banter, in which they play conventional roles. Despite Ernes-
tina's attempts to protest against what Charles says or to undercut it
with her wit, he is clearly the superior partner. Like their clothes,
their talk appears to be conventionally fashionable, a Victorian ver-
sion of what we would today call "cutesy." By giving us this closer
look at the couple, by letting them speak in their own voices, however
conventional, Fowles is also beginning to bring the mimetic compo-
nent of the narrative more into the foreground. This movement is
accelerated with the interaction between Charles and the figure.

After Charles finally notices the figure, his questions to Ernestina
produce the first version of her story: she is known as "Tragedy" or
the French Lieutenant's Woman, because she gave herself to the
French Lieutenant and then was abandoned. Now she haunts the
Cobb, waiting for his return. Because Ernestina, a conventional out-
sider who speaks about Sarah reluctantly, tells this tale, it does not
carry much authority. As a result, the tension aroused by the last
paragraph of Chapter 1 is partly alleviated, but not eliminated, and in
fact, our interest in "Tragedy" and her story increases. This effect is
reinforced by the further complication of the instability that occurs
when Charles, exercising his sense of his superiority to both Ernes-
tina and the now identified figure, steps forward to her and expresses
concern.

She turned to look at him—or, as it seemed to Charles, through
him. It was not so much what was positively in that face which
remained with him after that first meeting, but all that was not
expected; for theirs was an age when the favored feminine look
was the demure, the obedient, the shy. Charles felt immediately as
if he had trespassed; as if the Cobb belonged to that face, and not
to the Ancient Borough of Lyme. It was not a pretty face, like
Ernestina's. It was certainly not a beautiful face, by any period's
standard or taste. But it was an unforgettable face, and a tragic
face. . . .

Again and again, afterwards, Charles thought of that look as a
lance; and to think so is of course not merely to describe an object
but the effect it has. He felt himself in that brief instant an unjust
enemy; both pierced and deservedly diminished. (Pp. 16–17)

Sarah's look not only upsets Charles's easy assumptions about his
superiority to her but also reverses the implicit power relationship he
had assumed to be in force. The description of the look emphasizes the
way in which it indicates that Sarah is not a woman of her age. In this respect, the look defines Sarah both mimaetically and thematically—she has this power and it signifies her status as the anti-Victorian woman. Thus, even as Charles feels diminished by the look, even as the egocentrism implicit in his assumption of superiority is dealt a blow, he also comes for the first time face to face with an alternative to the conventional life he is drifting toward by being engaged to Ernestina. The effect of the lance on his relationship with Ernestina is immediately felt, because Charles does not tell Ernestina anything about the look, but covers up: "I wish you hadn't told me the sordid facts. That's the trouble with provincial life. Everyone knows everyone and there is no mystery. No romance." The words become ironic in retrospect but even immediately they emphasize the instabilities between Charles and Ernestina.

Between Chapters 2 and 13, the progression establishes Charles as the protagonist, as it defines instabilities in his relationships with himself, Ernestina, Sam, and Sarah. The following passage from the beginning of Chapter 3 is a good example of Fowles's method.

His thoughts were too vague to be described. But they comprehended mysterious elements; a sentiment of obscure defeat not in any way related to the incident on the Cobb, but to certain trivial things he had said at Aunt Tranter's lunch, to certain characteristic evasions he had made; to whether his interest in paleontology was a sufficient use for his natural abilities; to whether Ernestina would ever really understand him as well as he understood her, to a general sentiment of dislocated purpose originating perhaps in no more—as he finally concluded—than the threat of a long and now wet afternoon. (P. 18, emphasis mine)

The vision here is Charles's while the voice is the narrator's, a technique that allows Fowles to let the audience see more about Charles than he sees about himself. We see that his obscure sense of defeat is connected with Sarah's look, though the same egocentrism that leads him to his invidious comparison between his understanding of Ernestina and hers of him will not yet allow him to admit it. At the same time, the nontrivial "trivial things" he had said also point to that sentiment of defeat. Charles is a man who is not at home with himself, a man who is especially vulnerable to the apparent alternative Sarah seems to offer.

As the progression develops, Charles's representative status is defined more clearly, even as his mimetic portrait is sketched more fully. He is a Victorian gentleman of a particular generation, one poised between the High Victorian era and the beginning of the modern age.
On the one hand, for example, Charles has beliefs and assumptions that indicate his unthinking allegiance to his class and its privileges. He has an almost instinctive belief in his own superiority. He assumes that a man in his position would naturally have a servant like Sam, and he believes that getting one's income in trade is inferior to getting one's income through an inheritance. On the other hand, he is also partly what he thinks he is: a forward-looking man who is not bound by old beliefs and assumptions. We see this side of him, for example, in his agnosticism, in his rejection of the Tories, and in his enthusiastic acceptance of Darwin's theory of evolution. His fondness for paleontology, his desire to hunt for fossils, nicely captures the contradictions of his character, which in turn are the contradictions that come with living on the cusp of a historical transition. On the one hand, paleontology is his modern substitute for his uncle's riding to hounds, and it is consistent with his interest in Darwin. On the other hand, his dilettantish pursuit of fossils ties him fruitlessly to the past even as it feeds his own self-satisfied sense of himself and his class as the surviving fittest.

Fowles gives us no comparable portrait of Sarah, though she has many mimetic dimensions, most of which define her according to her difference from Ernestina—and indeed, from Charles as well. Part of that difference is a difference in class; a victim of the divisions still very much in force in Victorian England, Sarah had been educated beyond her own lower class but had not been able to escape it. More particularly, Sarah has a firm, deep voice, she combines understanding with emotion, she has imagination and intelligence as well as the unconventional self-confidence to value her own intellect as the equal of Charles's. Furthermore, she has the ability to see through people and judge them accurately—she was born, the narrator says, "with a computer in her heart" (p. 61). But above all, she has a deep commitment, as we and Charles slowly learn, to her independence, to her freedom from the constricting codes of Victorian culture. On the thematic level most of these traits combine to make her represent a New Woman, but on the mimetic level she never ceases to be an enigma for Charles and the authorial audience: the tension established at the end of the first chapter is never wholly resolved.

The authorial audience enters Chapter 13, then, mimetically involved in Charles's situation—his vague dissatisfaction in his entanglement with Ernestina, his growing interest in Sarah—even as we typically view that mimetic situation through thematic lenses, view it, that is, as the playing out of some representative shift in Victorian society. In addition to the devices already mentioned that encourage this view, the narrator tells us at the end of Chapter 10, after Charles's
first, inadvertent meeting with Sarah in the Undercliff that "in those brief poised seconds above the waiting sea, in that luminous evening silence broken only by the waves' quiet wash, the whole Victorian Age was lost" (p. 81).

Chapter 13 receives an even greater emphasis in the progression because Fowles appears to be setting it up to resolve some tension by revealing Sarah's inner life, by completing her mimetic portrait, and thus perhaps to shed more light, albeit indirectly, on the narrator's claim at the end of Chapter 10. The sequence of the narration until 13 has been following a rough pattern in which Fowles presents the characters in action and then a bit later gives background information along with an inside view of those characters. He follows the pattern for Charles, Ernestina, Sam, and Mrs. Poulteney. This strategy is largely responsible for the way in which the authorial audience moves easily from mimetic involvement to thematic understanding. When Fowles ends Chapter 12 with the questions, "Who is Sarah? Out of what shadows does she come?" he is poised to follow the pattern for her.

Instead he finally builds on the initial mild tension established by the discrepancy between his situation as a twentieth-century novelist and his adoption of the conventions of nineteenth-century narration. In a sense, this complication is also partly a resolution because Chapter 13 moves the whole narrative manner from the nineteenth-century mode into the self-reflexive modern mode. The resolution is not complete, however, because at this stage the authorial audience cannot discern the reasons for the shifts in narrative mode. Furthermore, the step toward resolution between author and authorial audience is accompanied by a new tension between the narrator and the authorial audience. In order to understand how this tension is developed, we need to combine a look at Fowles's moves in the chapter with some reflections on the concepts of narrative and authorial audiences.

III

When Rabinowitz makes his case that in order to participate in the rhetorical transactions offered by narratives the flesh-and-blood audience must enter two other audiences, the authorial and the narrative, he focuses primarily on the different knowledge that members of each audience are presumed to have. As we have already seen, one major difference between the narrative and authorial audiences for all the texts we have examined so far is that the narrative audience remains unaware of the synthetic component of character while the authorial audience always has that awareness. We have also seen how
Orwell establishes some initial tension by assuming from the outset that the narrative audience is already familiar with the world of Oceania ("It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen"), and how James occasionally assumes that his narrative audience knows things that the authorial audience does not. What Fowles does in Chapter 13 is, in a sense, to exploit some fundamental differences among the assumptions of the two audiences, a strategy that leads to considerable distance between them—and that also brings the synthetic component of his characters into the foreground of the narrative. His strategy here is distinctive because the assumptions he draws upon are not assumptions about what the respective audiences know of the world he is depicting, but rather are assumptions about what each knows of reading.

Fowles's specific moves are to foil the expectations established by his previous pattern and to break the mimetic illusion which he has been developing so far, by having the narrator confess that he is not writing biography or history but fiction: "I do not know. This story I am writing is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind" (p. 104). At first glance Fowles may seem to be speaking directly to the authorial audience; the passage appears to be one in which he is taking his audience into his confidence and explaining his craft. The confessional mode continues later as the narrating voice tells the audience that all novelists write because we wish to create worlds as real as, but other than, the world that is. Or was. This is why we cannot plan. We know a world is an organism, not a machine. We also know that a genuinely created world must be independent of its creator. . . .

To be free myself, I must give [Charles], and Tina, and Sarah, even the abominable Mrs. Poulteney, their freedoms as well. There is only one good definition of God: the freedom that allows other freedoms to exist. And I must conform to that definition. (Pp. 105–6)

Thus, despite his intention to devote Chapter 13 to the "unfolding of Sarah's true state of mind," "I find myself suddenly like a man in the sharp spring night, watching from the lawn beneath that dim upper window of Marlborough House. I know in the context of my book's reality that Sarah would never have brushed away her tears and leaned down and delivered a chapter of revelation. She would instantly have turned, had she seen me there just as the old moon rose, and disappeared into the interior shadows" (p. 105).

Upon further reflection, however, the initial appearance of these
passages as confessions from Fowles to the authorial audience cannot be sustained. Since the authorial audience takes as a first principle of its reading the idea that the whole narrative is itself a synthetic construction, it comes to regard this chapter as just one move in that larger construction. And it comes to recognize that, rather than being spontaneously confessional, the chapter is carefully calculated. Whether Fowles actually rejected his original plan for the chapter is a moot point; what matters to the authorial audience is that he does not reject the current plan to have the narrator tell us that he has rejected an earlier one. In other words, the authorial audience views this "confession" by the narrator as a move in the author's construction of the whole. Thus, we can identify the voice of the chapter as belonging to the narrator, not Fowles, and we can recognize a significant distance between those two figures that also corresponds to the distance between the narrative and authorial audiences. Reading without the first principle that everything is constructed, the narrative audience takes the narrator at his word, and therefore reads on in the expectation that the narrative will continue to develop in this unplanned, organic way. The authorial audience, meanwhile, will seek to uncover what synthetic purposes the signs of the allegedly unplanned development are actually serving.

In this respect, the chapter begins to take advantage of the peculiar narrative manner Fowles has adopted. The narrative audience continues to read as if it is in the company of a reliable nineteenth-century narrator, albeit one who is forthcoming about the limits of his omniscience, while the authorial audience recognizes that the communication from Fowles behind this narrator's back is precisely what makes the narration characteristic of the modern age. Another way of describing the relationships here is to say that the chapter establishes a significant tension between the narrator and the authorial audience but no new tensions between author and authorial audience or between narrator and narrative audience. The presence of the tension along the authorial audience-narrator axis and the lack of such tension along the narrative audience-narrator axis is a sign of the distance between the two audiences.

One of the behind-the-back passes of Chapter 13 is Fowles's maintenance of the mystery of Sarah, and thus the maintenance of the old tension between author and authorial audience. The narrator's extended commentary on the necessity of respecting his characters' autonomy is a smoke screen behind which Fowles escapes the task of completing her mimetic development. The full consequences of this artful dodge are not yet apparent to the authorial audience but it is
clearly a significant part of the progression. A move with a more immediate effect is the way in which the narrator’s discussion foregrounds the synthetic component of the characters.

When Charles left Sarah on her cliff edge, I ordered him to walk straight back to Lyme Regis. But he did not; he gratuitously turned and went down to the Dairy.

Oh, but you say, come on—what I really mean is that the idea crossed my mind as I wrote that it might be more clever to have him stop and drink milk . . . and meet Sarah again. 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. (Pp. 105–6)

This whole discussion calls attention to the novelist’s role in constructing his characters and their actions. Fowles’s apparent denial of his own power is of course an exertion of that power, one that only barely masks its own display. The logic that governs the other confessional passages is at work here: Charles may (or may not) have suggested his own action, but Fowles, not Charles, is responsible for this discussion of Charles as character. The result is that the narrator’s claim about the autonomy of the characters functions as a signal from the author that those characters are constructs.

This signal functions to emphasize further that despite the genuine mimetic interests of the progression, this narrative is finally more concerned with the thematic sphere. By reminding us that the characters are constructed, the passage impels us to look for the reasons of their construction in their representativeness. Those reasons are still not entirely clear. In the last part of Chapter 13, the tension between narrator and authorial audience drops away as the narrative resumes (“I report only the outward facts”) and Fowles and the narrator move closer together, but the tension generated here remains available for further exploitation. In Chapters 14 through 55, the progression keeps a consistent focus on the instabilities, on the unfolding of Charles’s slow evolution toward his choice for Sarah. Indeed, the authorial audience’s mimetic interest is developed to the greatest extent in this long section of the book. Then in Chapter 55, Fowles once again draws upon the tension of Chapter 13. Having taken both audiences through Charles’s choice for Sarah and his discovery of her flight, the narrator addresses himself to the question of the ending.

Now the question I am asking, as I stare at Charles, is . . . what the devil am I going to do with you? . . . the conventions of Vic-
torian fiction allow, allowed no place for the open, the inconclusive ending; and I preached earlier of the freedom characters must be given. My problem is simple—what Charles wants is clear? It is indeed. But what the protagonist wants is not so clear; and I am not at all sure where she is at the moment. Of course if these two were fragments of real life, instead of figments of my imagination, the issue to the dilemma is obvious: the one want combats the other want, and fails or succeeds, as the actuality may be. Fiction usually pretends to conform to the reality: the writer puts the conflicting wants into 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, in persuading us that they were 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. (P. 417)

In his case, the narrator maintains, fixing the fight one way or the other is beside the point: the argument for fight-fixing is that it lets the reader know what the writer thinks of the world around him, but since he is now dealing with a world that is a century in the past, the argument does not apply. Therefore, he will take both sides in the fight and determine which side to present as the final one by flipping a coin.

The only significant difference between Chapters 13 and 55 in the relations among author, narrator, and their respective audiences is that in 55 the narrator's presence on the train with Charles more clearly emphasizes his own status as an authorial construct. The narrative audience again takes the narrator at his word, while the authorial audience recognizes that Fowles is fixing the fight by having the narrator claim that he cannot fix it. (Fowles acts like Browning's Duke here: "to fix the fight would be some stooping and I choose never to stoop.") He is, however, fixing it so that it will have two outcomes. The argument over which ending is better fails to see how Fowles has fixed the fight. The question is not whether one ending is better, but rather how Fowles has constructed the narrative so that completeness can be achieved only by his offering a choice of closures (even if as members of the narrative audience we are inclined to follow the narrator's injunction to choose one over the other). Why, in other words, would this narrative have closure but not completeness if Fowles gave the authorial audience only one ending?

In order to answer that question we need to reflect more on the consequences of Chapters 13 and 55 for the rest of the narrative. Like 13, 55 refuses the task of revealing Sarah's character more fully—indeed, Fowles flaunts the narrator's inability to tell us more about
her—and like 13, its foregrounding of the synthetic status of the whole narrative displaces some of our mimetic interest onto the thematic functions of the characters. In addition to seeking the reasons why he would want these effects, we need to ask why he should try to accomplish them in these ways. We can best answer the first question about reasons, I think, by noting its connection with one of the striking features of the crucial event of the progression—and one of the mimetic high points of the narrative: Charles’s and Sarah’s lovemaking.

Their mouths met with a wild violence that shocked both; made her avert her lips. He covered her cheeks, her eyes, with kisses. His hand at last touched that hair, caressed it, felt the small head through its softness, as the thin-clad body was felt against his arms and breast. Suddenly he buried his face in her neck.

“We must not . . . we must not . . . this is madness.”

But her arms came round him and pressed his head closer. He did not move. He felt borne on wings of fire, hurtling, but in such tender air, like a child at last let free from school, a prisoner in a green field, a hawk rising. He raised his head and looked at her: an almost savage fierceness. Then they kissed again . . . . He strained that body into his, straining his mouth upon hers, with all the hunger of a long frustration—not merely sexual, for a whole ungovernable torrent of things banned, romance, adventure, sin, madness, animality, all these coursed wildly through him. (Pp. 359–60)

The scene ends with the narrator’s revealing remark about the intensity of Charles’s desire: “Precisely ninety seconds had passed since he had left her to look into the bedroom” (p. 361). What is striking about the scene is that Charles’s passion for Sarah is far out of proportion to his knowledge of her. This fact is soon brought home to him as he notices the blood on his shirt, and realizes that she had lied to him about giving herself to the French Lieutenant. Charles’s intense passion, we realize, has less to do with Sarah herself than with what she represents; he loves his idea of Sarah even more than he loves Sarah herself. And his idea of her is very much like ours: although he would not call her a New Woman, he sees her as a contrast to Ernestina, duty, and a constricted way of life; her mystery is such that he is not entirely sure what kind of alternative she represents, but the mystery too is very much a part of her attraction. The language of the scene itself emphasizes Charles’s sense of freedom in possessing Sarah, and the passion he exhibits is in large measure a passion for that freedom: “he felt borne on wings of fire, hurtling, but
in such tender air, like a child at last let free from school, a prisoner in a green field, a hawk rising. . . . He strained that body into his . . . with all the hunger of a long frustration—not merely sexual, for a whole ungovernable torrent of things banned, romance, adventure, sin, madness, animality."

Had Fowles given us a full mimetic portrait of Sarah, we would be even more disturbed by Charles's behavior here—despite his feeling of being borne in tender air, and despite Sarah's willingness to give herself, we would more painfully register the violence of those ninety seconds. At the same time, the very surprise of the revelation that Sarah is a virgin, that she has more to her history than she has let Charles know undercuts the sense of possession that his sexual act otherwise implies. Because of this reassertion of Sarah's superiority and because we have been consistently turned away from the full mimetic view of Sarah, we focus less on her than on Charles and his reactions and we see him in part in his representativeness. Thus, as the narrative technique gives us Charles's vision in the scene, we adopt it as Fowles's as well and reposition the strong mimetic force of the scene within its symbolic, thematic importance.

Fowles's pattern of engaging us mimetically and then directing that engagement to thematic issues is continued in his representation of Charles's debate with himself in the chapel. Charles's intense personal crisis is resolved very clearly in thematic terms: he chooses the freedom that Sarah values and represents over the duty that Ernestsina represents. The choice becomes plain in his dialogue with himself: "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" (p. 373). And then shortly after, while Charles stares at the crucifix, the choice is transformed further: Sarah "seemed there beside him, as it were awaiting the marriage service; yet with another end in view. For a moment he could not seize it—and then it came. To uncrucify!" (p. 374). Freedom, life with Sarah, represents a possibility of escaping the constricting hold of the past and opening oneself to the opportunities of the present and future. Charles's emancipation from the past is not complete here: his final thoughts are of having Sarah on his arm as he tours Europe. Nevertheless, in this sequence of scenes at Exeter, Fowles conclusively establishes Charles's choice for Sarah as a choice for the modern age over the Victorian. The rest of the narrative shows Charles living with the consequences of that choice, learning that "escape is not one act" (p. 373) and in the final scenes with Sarah learning more about what freedom for both of them means.
IV

This analysis of these scenes has important implications for our understanding of the relation between character and progression in the whole narrative, as well as for the relation between the mimetic and thematic functions of character. Although the mimetic portrait of Charles is a crucial means for engaging our emotions in the narrative, Fowles is ultimately less concerned with the mimetic functions of his characters than any of the authors we have seen so far, including Orwell. His narrative is neither an action of the kind we examined in *Pride and Prejudice* nor a thesis novel of the kind we examined in *1984*, but is rather an *explanation* of a historical shift that works by showing how individuals participated in—or were caught by—that shift from the Victorian age to the modern. He takes three characters on the cusp of the shift—Charles, Ernestina, and Sarah—indicates that the two women represent very different degrees and kinds of change—Ernestina is the emblem of the new middle class, while Sarah is a twentieth-century liberated woman—and puts the representative Victorian gentleman in the position of having to choose between them. He slowly works out the steps by which the choice is made and then shows that the new age is not to be created by a single choice. The narrator enunciates the principle behind the narrative explanation by quoting Marx on the book’s last page: life is "*the actions of men (and women) in pursuit of their ends*" (p. 480). Fowles focuses on representative men and women pursuing their ends and shows how they participated in—and helped contribute to—a major historical and cultural shift.

In this kind of narrative, the thematic functions of the characters are developed differently from the way they are in *1984*, the other example we have seen where the thematic component is most important. The progression does not build from individual attributes to multiple thematic functions but rather takes the attributes in the aggregate and emphasizes the representative quality of that collectivity. Charles’s belief in his natural superiority to others, for example, does not participate in any developing statement against that attitude but rather signifies one of the ways in which he is representative of his class. One of the things he learns after he makes his choice is to give up this assumption. Furthermore, because the work is a *narrative explanation*, the thematic functions are best seen after the narrative is complete. In *1984*, Winston’s concern for the past gets converted into a thematic function as early as Book One when we see how the Party wants to control the past. In *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* we are, as I have repeatedly noted, consistently repositioning our mimetic en-
gage the progress into a broader thematic context, and the full meaning of the
thematic sphere is not developed until the end of the narrative: it is
only when the instabilities and tensions of the progression have been
resolved that we can adequately understand the representative story
being told.

Before I turn to the questions of why Fowles accomplishes the ef-
facts of chapters 13 and 55 through the narrator's self-conscious com-
mentary and of how they prepare the way for the double ending as
the appropriate resolution, it will be useful to indicate how this hy-
pothesis accounts for other elements of the narrative. Much of the
existing criticism on the book focuses on the narrative's concern with
Darwin's theory of evolution and with Fowles's characteristic concern
with existentialism. This hypothesis locates both of those elements
within the larger structure of the progression. The concern with Dar-
win's theory is incorporated in part to signal Fowles's belief in the
significance of the shift—a new development in the human species
occurred in the move from the Victorian age to the modern—and
thus also as a way of understanding that shift. Sarah and Ernestina
are both "mutations" of the conventional Victorian lady, but Sarah
represents a far greater advance; Charles shows signs of making a
successful adaptation to new conditions, and thus becomes a forerun-
er of what the modern successful man will be. Fowles's concern with
existential freedom is incorporated into the value structure of the nar-
rative, as the chapel scene makes the essence of Charles's adaptation
his choice for this value. In addition, the hypothesis would account
for Sam's role in the narrative as representing another way in which
Charles is on the cusp of the shift, but a way which makes Charles's
situation more difficult and qualifies the extent of his vision in the
chapel, the extent of his adaptation. Charles fails to recognize how
his own desire for change has its counterpart in Sam's and so must
face the consequences of that failure when he discovers Sam's be-
trayal. The chapters after Sarah's flight and before the final encounter
show that Charles is able to do so.

If this account of the progression and its consequences for charac-
ter is accurate, then it points to a larger rationale for Fowles's handling
of the narration, including the intrusions of Chapters 13 and 55 and
the use of the double ending. With the exception of these two chap-
ters and Chapter 61, which sets up the second ending, Fowles has the
narrator both adopt the conventions of nineteenth-century omni-
sience and frequently remind his audience of his temporal location
in the late 1960s. Clearly Fowles adopts the conventions of omni-
sience in order to make his depiction of the Victorian age more pow-
ervful, more in keeping with the age itself. If, however, he were to
adopt those conventions wholesale, he would unselfconsciously give his audience full access to the thoughts of the major characters and he would conclude the narrative by fixing those characters in a single fate. To do that would be to belie in his method what he affirms in the narrative: the freedom that he prizes as the sign of the modern age would be lost for both the characters and the audience; our guide to both ages would not himself seem to be a creature of the modern age that he continually locates himself within. The solution to this dilemma provided by the narrator’s intrusions in Chapters 13 and 55 and by the double ending has consequences for our further understanding of the functions of character in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*.

The solution is not of course one that genuinely allows the characters or the audience freedom; once Fowles commits himself to writing a narrative explanation, he commits himself to “controlling” his characters and persuading his audience. Instead the solution depends on his exploiting the distance between the narrative and authorial audiences in Chapters 13 and 55. As noted above, when we read these chapters, we accept the narrator’s statements as members of the narrative audience and reject them as members of the authorial. We need to take one further step as members of the authorial audience and incorporate our acceptance on the narrative level into our understanding of the whole communication from Fowles. That step is to recognize the narrative statements of Chapters 13 and 55 as part of a challenge that Fowles sets himself, a challenge to create and sustain for the narrative audience two related illusions. The first illusion is that his narrative is in fact following the principles of freedom that it recommends; the second is that by creating the first he is transforming his apparent nineteenth-century narrative method into a decidedly modern one. As members of the authorial audience, we need to recognize the illusion, the steps by which it is sustained, and the transformation of method that ensues. If we judge that those steps are artfully concealed from the narrative audience even as they alter our own fuller perception of the narrative, then Fowles will have met his challenge. In other words, if we take this extra step, the tension between the authorial audience and the narrator can be “resolved,” though not in the usual sense of bringing one’s beliefs into line with the other’s. It can be resolved by the authorial audience’s growing awareness of how Fowles is using this narrator to help the narrative conform to the ideas it is endorsing.

The key step in creating the illusion is the artful dodge of Chapter 13, where the narrator’s endorsement of freedom for characters acts as a screen behind which Fowles escapes the task of giving Sarah full
mimetic life. As the narrative audience endorses many of its own pre-existing beliefs, it endorses the narrative's refusal to give an account of Sarah's motives. At the same time, it foregrounds for the authorial audience the synthetic nature of Sarah's character and by extension of all the characters. Both the narrative audience's endorsement and the authorial audience's awareness in turn make possible the non-fixed fixed ending. The narrative audience can accept both Sarah's rejection and Sarah's acceptance of Charles because she has not been given enough of a mimetic function to make us certain that she would act one way rather than the other (though many of us may have our own convictions on this point). The authorial audience can accept the double ending because it grows out of the prior insistence on the synthetic nature of the characters—once we accept them as constructs then we can very readily accept them doing many things at the bidding of their maker, including of course agreeing to marry or to part forever.

With these considerations in mind, we can also see that the tension of unequal knowledge between author and authorial audience about Sarah's mimetic function ought not be resolved. In effect, this tension gets subsumed under the issue of whether Fowles can sustain the illusion of freedom for the narrative audience. Since it can only be sustained if Sarah remains mimetically incomplete, then the authorial audience is willing to let her remain that way. These considerations also explain why the completeness of the narrative requires a choice between closures: the status of the narrative itself as a product of the new age it is announcing requires such a completion.

At the same time, we need to be aware that Fowles's handling of Charles also makes both endings possible. After his choice in the chapel, Charles does learn that escape is not one act, but the extent of his own growth is not entirely clear. Just as he leaves the chapel with an image of freedom ("Sarah on his arm in the Uffizi" [p. 377]) that emphasizes he has not thrown off all the shackles of his age, so he exhibits other signs of those shackles throughout the later parts of the narrative. The most dramatic evidence of these is his shock at thinking of Sarah living among the Pre-Raphaelites. Consequently, just as both audiences do not know for sure whether Sarah would choose him, both can readily imagine each possible ending for Charles.

Yet these doubts and possibilities do not touch much that is determinately resolved in both endings. By choosing Sarah in the chapel and then not looking back, Charles resolves the major instability of his own life, as he comes to terms both with the past and his future. Furthermore, since his idea of Sarah has been as important—or even
more important—than Sarah herself and since he has grown by following his impulse toward that idea, the difference between the two endings, though real, is not all that significant. It is not, for example, equal to the difference between two endings of *Pride and Prejudice* in one of which Elizabeth and Darcy are united and in the other of which they are not. Thus, Fowles has erected another smoke screen with Chapter 55: the fight-fixing that goes on in the double ending is far less crucial than the fight-fixing that has already gone on in the chapel scene. In this way, Fowles works a characteristically twentieth-century narrative subterfuge on his audiences.

Nevertheless, as members of the authorial audience we need to see that the order of the two endings is not as arbitrary as the narrator's coin-flip would have the narrative audience believe. In the second ending, Charles takes another step along the path to the modern age because he finds some strength after the rejection, something upon which to build as he faces the now uncertain future with the certainty that Sarah will never share it with him. Once we have seen Charles take such a step, we could not go back to an ending in which he stops short of it. In this respect, given the emphases of the narrative on the shift toward the modern age, the second ending not only must be second, but it will also probably be preferred by most readers. But there is nothing in the narrative that requires Charles to take this last step or renders Sarah's acceptance of his proposal in the first ending, an acceptance which she makes in her characteristically enigmatic way through Lalage, inconsistent with what has gone before.

The double ending, finally, is also appropriate for the narrative because it removes us once again from our mimetic involvement with the characters and focuses some of our attention on the twentieth-century method of narration. It also reminds us of the synthetic elements of the characters and thereby reinforces for the last time their importance as representative figures. Consequently, the final emphasis of the narrative is not on the individual characters but on the history in which they participate.

V

All this analysis raises one final question about the relation between the narrative and authorial audiences. This account of the two audiences maintains that there is a considerable distance between them in Chapters 13, 55, 60, and 61, and much less distance during the other chapters. The narrative audience accepts the illusion of the spontaneously developing, unfixed narrative and so remains focused on the mimetic components of the characters throughout (for the narrative
audience the issue of Sarah's motivation remains an unresolved problem in the narrative). The authorial audience, on the other hand, sometimes accepts the illusion and sometimes—in 13, 55, 60, and 61—sees behind it to the synthetic component of the characters and the narrative as a whole. Can Fowles really have it both ways? Can the authorial audience be asked both to develop the emotional responses to characters that go along with the development of the mimetic component and then move away from those responses when the foregrounding of the synthetic increases our distance from the mimesis?

In one sense, these questions boil down to another one: how flexible is the authorial audience? Or, to put it another way, how able is the authorial audience to move from reading mimetically to reading thematically-synthetically? I do think that there are limits on the jerks and jolts an author can legitimately put his audience through, but I do not think that Fowles violates those limits here. If at the end of "Haircut," Whitey started reflecting on his own role as Lardner's narrator, or if at the end of *Pride and Prejudice* Austen's narrator announced that she was not going to tell us about the aftermath of Elizabeth and Darcy's engagement because it was time to admit that these characters were really only her puppets, then the implicit rhetorical contracts of these narratives would be violated. The authorial audience would have been asked to invest a kind of commitment and feeling for the greater part of the narrative that was then undermined or even mocked by the ending.

Fowles takes several steps to avoid that kind of jarring effect on his audience. First, establishing the initial tension through the narrative manner of the opening chapter puts the authorial audience on notice to begin thinking about the synthetic construction of the whole narrative. Second, the emphasis on the representative quality of the characters even as the authorial audience develops expectations and desires about their fates keeps the thematic import—and implicitly the synthetic component—of the characters as an important element of the narrative. Third, the foregrounding of the synthetic in Chapter 13 occurs early enough for the authorial audience to incorporate the tensions it produces into their developing response to the narrative. It complicates the authorial audience's reactions on the mimetic level and to some extent qualifies our subsequent mimetic involvement. Fowles's challenge, in part, is to reengage the authorial audience on the mimetic level sufficiently to make us care about Charles's choice not only for what it means thematically but also for Charles himself. The novel's popular success is indirect but eloquent testimony to his ability to meet that challenge. From this perspective, we
can also see Chapter 55 as a necessary intrusion after the point of greatest mimetic intensity—the events at Exeter and their consequences in Charles's last trip to Lyme to break his engagement—to move the authorial audience back to the importance of the thematic issues of the novel—and the way they are reflected in the synthetic.

If this analysis has merit, then it suggests that authorial audiences can be veritable Olympic gymnasts in their flexibility at shifting levels of reading, provided that the author's program is orchestrated skillfully enough to make those shifts function coherently within the narrative as a whole. The alternative hypothesis, that Fowles is asking too much of his audience in requiring us to change our commitment from the mimetic to the synthetic (and then to the thematic) spheres has the advantage of emphasizing the way in which the authorial and narrative audiences do merge for long stretches of Fowles's book, but it has the greater disadvantage of straitjacketing the authorial audience by presuming that it does not pay attention to the initial tension and that the only way it can resume reading mimetically after Chapter 13 is to forget the effects of that chapter. Its great disadvantage, in short, is to presume that the authorial audience cannot simultaneously be aware of the three components of the characters and of the narrative as a whole. My claim is that developing such an awareness is essentially what it means to be in Fowles's audience here, and that Fowles provides the mechanisms for that awareness to develop.

VI

The issues raised in these opening three chapters about thematizing in interpretation and about the different ways characters can function thematically will remain with us as we broaden our focus in the next two chapters and look harder at the synthetic component of character and its relation to the mimetic and thematic components. To some extent, however, these issues will move to the background as other become more pressing. Consequently, it will be helpful to emphasize some of the conclusions of the study to this point.

1. Although thematizing is a fundamental part of interpretation, is only a part. To pay attention only to the thematic ends of any of the narratives we have looked at, including 1984 and The French Lieutenant's Woman, would be to do a partial analysis at best and would likely lead to significant distortions as well.

2. Different narratives require different kinds of thematizing. The clearest difference here is that between the way the thematic functions of the protagonists work in Pride and Prejudice and The French Lieutenant's Woman. In Austen's narrative individual attributes are
verted by the progression into different thematic functions, whereas in Fowles's the progression works on the representative quality of the aggregate of attributes.

3. The progression, and especially the way it makes use of the mimetic function, determines the point at which the generalizing move of thematism should stop. In this respect, the lack of a full mimetic function for Sarah actually invites broader thematic generalizations about her than the mimetic function of, say, Marcher, invites about him, and I believe that the narrative leaves some room for such generalizations—for example, we can take quite seriously the narrator's reference to her as the Sphinx. At the same time, the progression's dominant concern with the shift from the Victorian age to the modern requires us to treat the reference as a metaphorical rather than literal one.

4. The foregrounding of the synthetic component of character frequently introduces a significant difference between the narrative and authorial audiences. This difference typically means that the progression will be complicated by some tension between the narrator and the authorial audience, and the author may use that tension to displace our interest from the mimetic to the thematic component of character.

5. There are no hard-and-fast rules about the way that progressions may develop. Instabilities can be introduced immediately as in *Pride and Prejudice* or more leisurely as in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Progression may be generated for a time by the arousal and resolution of tension as in *1984* and then switch to movement by instability. Alternatively, progression may intermittently be complicated, as it is in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, by the development of tensions. The corollary of this finding is that there are no hard-and-fast rules about how or when mimetic and thematic dimensions of a character will be converted into functions. All such questions deserve the answer, it depends on the particular progression.

6. What all these previous conclusions suggest is that the development of this rhetorical theory is not so much the development of conclusions about the necessary connections among the components of character as it is the establishment and illustration of categories and principles that allow us to discover the functions of character within any one work. This point is clearly one that I must return to before the progression of this argument can be complete.

In addition to working toward these conclusions, I have implicitly been arguing for the importance of conceiving progression as I do, and of course in the previous chapter I have argued that this concep-
tion has a greater explanatory power than Scholes's method of reading by oppositions. As I turn in the next chapter to take up the interaction among the mimetic, thematic, and synthetic roles of a secondary character, I shall also take up an alternative model for analyzing progression: the psychoanalytically based one offered by Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot*. Just as this chapter has required me to expand on the concepts of audience I have been employing so far, a consideration of Brooks's model will require me to expand on the concept of progression I have been using. The specific focus of my discussion will be Dickens's Wemmick in *Great Expectations*, a narrative that Brooks himself discusses at length.