

The French Lieutenant's Woman (1981)
Directed by Karel Reisz, written by Harold Pinter

Victorian morality might be called the English disease. If the excesses of the so-called sexual revolution had an intellectual effect, it would be a certain fascination with its obverse: the elaborate chastity belt of nineteenth century inhibitions. In the *French Lieutenant's Woman* these conflicting world views are startlingly juxtaposed. While neither represents a desirable image, against the back-drop of contemporary banality, Victorian morality is at least intellectually stimulating. The nineteenth century has passed to posterity the intricacies of Freudian psychoanalysis and by comparison the impact of modern sexual license is as barren as a dildo.

The novel, from which the film is derived, is very self-consciously written, replete with digressions on character, structure and philosophy. It is a book about writing a book, and it works. The movie attempts to recreate this in film by devising a contemporary story parallel to the Victorian romance. This doesn't work. Any initial interest in the idea of a dual narrative dies a quick, if somewhat painful death, doomed by the massive irrelevance of the sub-plot. A casual affair between two movie actors is hardly earth-shattering and has none of the force and depth of repressed nineteenth century sexuality. The melodrama of whether their liaison would last until the end of the movie or simply be revealed as Californian-style serial polygyny, pales into nothingness when contrasted with the duties of a mid-Victorian man to a despoiled virgin.

Meryl Streep, the current darling, is Sarah, the French Lieutenant's Woman. In fact, she isn't anyone else's woman but since people believe she is, in effect it becomes so. She is guilty only of having expressed sexual feelings -- quite enough at the time to place her outside the white picket fence of polite society. She is at once mysterious and independent, free to suffer existentialist anguish.

Ironically, Charles is attracted more by the tarnished reputation than the independence. During their brief climactic encounter, she was the innocent who exuded worldliness, he the upper class rake who fumbled with his clothes as awkwardly as he had with the substrata of Victorian morality. It was by no means an auspicious awakening for Sarah. The ten second frenzy of immediate ejaculation must have done nothing for her repressions and reinforced the Victorian image that sex was hardly worth the bother for a woman, that it was purely for procreation, and so Sarah found it.

By violating a virgin, it was Charles' honour which was tarnished. Caught in a dilemma between the verbal contract with Tina and the prerogatives of a woman's most "precious possession" -- and being independently wealthy which lessened the pain of the future cast aside -- Charles chose the gentlemanly solution and vowed to marry Sarah. For doing so he forfeited the right to be called a gentleman by not accepting Tina's solution -- the tacit acceptance of the Victorian double standard.

Despite appearances, then, the *French Lieutenant's Woman* is not a film about love, or romance, but rather is about sex, a far less intriguing topic in contemporary trappings than in the stiff collars and constricting bodices of the reign of England's hardly-virginal Queen.