

## Butterflies and Voices in John Fowles' *The Collector*

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### Abstract:

John Fowles's *The Collector* incites the readers from the first contact they have with the novel by drawing them into a world where two voices are heard in clear contrast and so they are, in a way, forced to choose between them. The story by not being a typical thriller can be regarded as a starting point for new generations of artists, who can juggle with the psychological elements and also cultural ones so as to produce a new and more daring work of art. The present article intends to highlight the way in which Fowles manages to bring forward the core behind the mask, by showing that no human is purely good or evil, and that mixed elements can give pleasure to the reader. The way the story is told is one of the most important traits of Fowles' work, showing his imprint on the swinging emotional states presented in the diary entrances that structure his novel.

**Key words:** class, history, collection, the few, the many

Well-known for his *unfolding* character, John Fowles states in the introductory section of his novel, *The Aristos*, what his intentions had been regarding his 1963 work *The Collector* as he "tried to establish the virtual innocence of the many." By inspiring himself from Heraclitus' vision of separating people into two groups: "the few" represented by the good (who were not necessarily the nobles) and "the many" who were nothing more than a conforming mass, Fowles highlights the fact that his male protagonist (Frederick Clegg) in *The Collector* is incapable of connecting with the others because he hates those richer than himself, being unable to appreciate art and social events. His inferiority complex is acute, as he is forced to seclude the female protagonist (Miranda Grey) in order to have any actual contact with her, after having followed her around for quite a long period of time. His voyeuristic preferences make him keep a diary of her every move, similar to observance sheets, the same he had for

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the butterflies in his collection. He never seems to feel exhausted or defeated and when his luck changes by winning the pools his mind develops new ways of satisfying his obvious psychological traumas.

The Collector, as Fowles envisages him, imposes a static system of images on the world and then proceeds to live inside that system, denying the existential implications of contingency. The system is the result of accretion – a cumulative calcifying of social and political attitudes, aesthetic constructs, emotional responses, and (most insidiously) self-image. (Eddins 205)

The psychodramas Fowles's protagonists are faced with, in Eddins's opinion, have to do mainly with Miranda as a novice: the first one revealing the so-called "collection" of Miranda by Clegg, while the second deals with the amount of memories and remembered experiences she had with an artist and a spiritual guide named G.P.

In Fowles's opinion, both characters, Freddie and Miranda, do not possess enough control over their own personalities: the former being an obsessed butterfly collector, who shows clear signs of schizophrenic behaviour and the latter displaying arrogance and behaving like a liberal humanist slob. This might be one of the reasons why Fowles chose to have the same story told by two different voices, providing two surrogate authors for the text, each one having his/her own version of the events.

The novel is divided into four parts, out of which three (one, three and four) belong to Clegg, while just the second section is Miranda's. Thus, the male point of view dominates the narrative through its position. However, it has been commented upon that Miranda's part is actually some pages longer than Clegg's. The claustrophobic position that her diary has is meant to show her impossibility of educating and changing Freddie Clegg, who is and will remain a lower class collector incapable of grasping life as an expression of freedom. As a result of this inability he keeps Miranda in an isolated region, in an even more isolated house, actually in the hidden cellar of such location, leading her way straight to the most isolated space there could be: her coffin.

Miranda appears at first as “pure object” in Clegg’s imaginative deformation of reality (the writing of his text), the sole concession to subjective animation being that her speeches are in inverted commas, suggesting a live voice. However, in Part Two, Miranda writes her text and begins to assert a “subjecthood”: she is not merely a character of Clegg’s creation, but a discrete individual with a history independent of that which Clegg tries to impose, a history which stretches beyond her present situation and which is not strictly relevant to “Clegg’s plot.” (Docherty 122)

Fowles places his characters in situations that force them to become the authors of their own lives, creators of their own histories. Even though Miranda is an intelligent and charming young lady, her attempts at communicating with Clegg seem rather inefficient as he is the embodiment of stupidity and ignorance, treating her as one more special butterfly in his collection, a live one trying to escape his entrapment. His obsession with beauty is one which reveals his thirst for possession, for feeling worthy of coming into contact with beautiful things. All his butterflies are dead. He is in control over them because they did not survive his interaction. The same happens to Miranda at the end of the novel. Even though she has gone through changes which helped her outline the young lady she would have desired to become there is no escape for her anymore. Due to the fact that Clegg is intimidated by her education and knowledge, he distrusts her in such a way that he eventually lets her die. He is aware of the fact that he would never actually let her go, not only because he might be caught by the authorities, but also because he knows this was the only way he could have contact with someone similar to Miranda.

Clegg wants to have control of himself and also of the things / people surrounding him. He feels oppressed by the other social groups and could be seen as the embodiment of the Angry Young Men’s belief, as he voices the injustice of social classes’ existence. Up to a certain point Clegg understands that in order to gain such power he has to use force and be ready to do anything it takes to achieve his goal. The obsessive movements that he makes are clear signs of his psychological problems. The issue is not that he could never adapt to the world around him, but that he in fact believes that his actions could be truly understood at a certain moment if

attention were to be paid. In his opinion, Clegg is just the product of his class, capable of stating judgement of other people by having only a peripheral experience with them.

Miranda and Clegg are representative for the social classes they belong to and this forces them to see the other as *different*. As Tamás Tukács points out, “within the enclosed space of the house, both of them play roles and wear masks. The technique of both of them is allegorisation as a mode of reading, interpreting the other as a representative of something else, in this case, of his / her class.”

The young lady is upper-middle class and she regards everything accordingly as she is the image of the community she has been living in. Fowles even called her a snob for not leaving aside stereotypes and preconceptions, especially in describing Freddie Clegg: “He’s got one of those funny inbetween voices, uneducated trying to be educated.” (Fowles 122) However, it is quite obvious, at the end of the novel, that the two social classes the protagonists stand for are too different to actually arrive at a point in which they could have real communication. The stamp of the social register is deeply impregnated in their personalities. Clegg is unable to separate the vision he has of Miranda as being a member of the middle class and the same happens in her case. Clegg recognizes Miranda’s value from the educational point of view, but she can never do anything similar. They cannot escape the groups they belong to, as they are the result of the social environment they have developed in.

She often went on about how she hated class distinction, but she never took me in. It’s the way people speak that gives them away, not what they say. You only had to see her dainty ways to see how she was brought up. [.. .] Stop thinking about class, she’d say. Like a rich man telling a poor man to stop thinking about money. (Fowles 41)

At a certain point Clegg even complains about how he is being treated in a jeweller’s as the shop assistant at first does not want to accept his cheque “There was trouble about the cheque, of course. The woman wouldn’t take it at first, but I got her to ring my bank and she changed her tune very quick. If I’d spoken in a la-di-da voice and said I was Lord Muck or something, I bet... still, I’ve got no time for that.” (Fowles 79) He felt that he did not matter, that he had no voice.

The male protagonist is frustrated from several reasons, one of them being that he does not speak English very well, that he is not a very educated individual, always comparing himself to Miranda and feeling inferior. Docherty points out that Clegg presents that inability of regarding the Other in an equally subjective relation with the Self. When he tells her that they are very different because her presence charms the ones around her when she steps into a room, he is revealing himself as the individual he and others view as rather strange and definitely not interesting or appealing. There are two forces fighting inside Clegg, because he feels the need to complain about the fact that not all people have the same opportunities and that some are luckier than others, but at the same time he wants, up to a point, to impress Miranda with his development, intending to show her that his character can also make a good impression in front of some of the other people around.

In Fowlesian terminology, Miranda's failure to educate Frederick Clegg, to teach him the language of art and to help him abandon his collecting and voyeuristic activities, can be interpreted as Clegg's inability to achieve 'whole sight', that is, as the kidnapper's failure to bring about his transformation from collector to creator, from disciple to magus or, in archetypal terms, from man to Anthropos. (Onega 40)

In his study regarding the female and male reading in the novel Tukács hints at the fact that not only there is an opposition between the interpretations of Miranda and Clegg, but also the idea that she is more educated than him, while there are others even more educated than her. Clegg is so embarrassed with his background that he is blinded by her confidence in herself and in her opinions. Nevertheless, we cannot omit G.P., who is the artistic guide Miranda needs in order to be able to have form, definition and clarity about herself and her artistic work.

The introduction of G.P. as a non-present character seems to serve to both challenge and to reaffirm this opposition. Thus a hierarchy is extended into a tripartite structure between Clegg – (the worst reader) – Miranda (the disciple) and G.P. (the "master-reader"). Compared to G.P., Miranda is still a student, while here it is she who teaches Clegg. In G.P.'s opinion, Miranda does not articulate her own personality in her pictures, she tends to plagiarise. (Tukács)

So, while Miranda considered herself *so* superior to Clegg, she was just imitating what she had seen before, she was not actually voicing something new or her own private opinions. Eddins, however, considers that Miranda in her turn is herself a collector as in her paintings she is not original; she just accumulates images from others and reproduces them in her own. Still, she definitely considers herself as part of the Few and she even complains about her imprisonment as some sort of revenge from Clegg's part that he not lucky enough to be like her:

A martyr. Imprisoned, unable to grow. At the mercy of this resentment, this hateful millstone envy of the Calibans of this world. Because they all hate us, they hate us for being different, for not being them, for their own not being like us. They persecute us, they crowd us out, they send us to Coventry, they sneer at us, they yawn at us, they blindfold themselves and stuff up their ears. They do anything to avoid having to take notice of us and respect us. They go crawling after the great ones among us when they're dead. They pay thousands and thousands for the Van Goghs and Modiglianis they'd have spat on at the time they were painted. Guffawed at. Made coarse jokes about. I hate them. (Fowles 206-7)

Nevertheless, one may discuss the fact that Miranda can develop, as Fowles himself stated, only after this traumatic experience. Her potential exists and although she hated the experience, she never truly regrets it. She has to learn to let go of her preconceptions of being one of the Few and actually becoming one. "With this, Fowles tries to exemplify how one must evolve to join The Few. And for that to happen, loss of faith is growth and is desirable even though freedom may lead to suffering". (McSweeney 106) Miranda's attitude shifts from that of someone who believes to be superior to Clegg, to that of a young woman who understands that he is dealing with real mental health issues and it is her turn to be responsible and understanding.

I would not want this not to have happened. Because if I escape I shall be a completely different and I think better person. Because if I don't escape, if something dreadful happened, I shall still

know that the person I was and would have stayed if this hadn't happened was not the person I now want to be. It is like firing a pot. You have to risk the cracking and warping. (Fowles 255)

Many critics have argued that there is no certainty that she would have actually changed, but the mere idea that she has taken into account developing into a completely new human being should be enough to at least make readers wonder what could have been.

Clegg, on the other hand, has no desire to change or hear any other opinions. He proves unable to give up his prejudices and repressed sexuality, never speaking up front and always choosing a roundabout way. There is an obvious failure in communication, mainly because Clegg feels alienated and insecure about himself. He creates all sorts of scenarios in his mind, never having them confirmed. Miranda chooses to describe him in relation to Allan Silintoe's character from *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*: "I see there's something of Arthur Seaton in him, only in him it's turned upside down. I mean, he has that hate of other things and other people outside his own type". (Fowles 230) Clegg is trapped in his own world, with his mental problems and a perpetual vicious circle. He resembles that hamster on the wheel which hopes to get somewhere. If the animal might get some sort of satisfaction out of the movement, in the protagonist's case there does not exist any as he feeds on his exaggerated feelings.

His attempted reification of Miranda, which can be equated with the novelist's tyrannous manipulation of character, is immoral, and kills her. The value of discreteness lies in the dimension of free space it allows one in which to expatiate imaginatively as subject of one's own text or fictional construct of reality. (Docherty 120)

There is a reading to the novel that Clegg really wanted to become more than what he was regarded to be, that he wanted to show he was maturing. Unfortunately, his plans and actions are in opposition with what a young man should stand for. All his fears invade him and he can no longer articulate his aims, transforming himself into an unpleasant human being. As Susana Onega observes,

the hero's quest for maturation, still recognizable for all its realistic and parodic displacement as an inversion of the modernist version of the myth, the *Künstlerroman*: transforming himself from butterfly collector to woman collector and murderer, the young working-class hero frustrates the possibility of his own and of Miranda's self-maturation and he becomes an aloof and ogre-like monster, the frightful parodic development of the alienated and pathologically introverted Beckettian subject. (Onega 40)

Clegg is never able to find himself, as he continues to be fragmented even at the end of the novel, while the author hints at the protagonist's inability to self-reunite and to learn the value of true love for others and himself. Even in these circumstances he has managed to change a little for Miranda's sake. She, on the other hand, has been shaped by her experience as she understands that Clegg views her as an *objet d'art*, but in fact she is growing into the woman she would have liked to be.

She tries to break out of her physical imprisonment and also to escape the metaphysical labelling and reification implied in Clegg's plan for her. It is on this second level that she achieves at least the dignity of freedom. The tragedy is that as a result of her physical death she cannot exercise the human freedom which she has found; she has the potential to walk out of mere text into the world of history (ultimately the reader's world) but the potential will never be realized in actuality. (Docherty 122)

*The Collector* was intended to make readers stop for a moment and think about otherness trying to grasp the meaning of life, survival and self-respect. Unfortunately, for Fowles' characters there might not have been more time to voice their desires or give more recognition and power to the *other*, but there is hope that the novel has helped readers teach themselves about human relationships.

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