Novelist, not God Humanism in the Fiction of John Fowles

by Mary-Anne Harrington



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Scope of Topic

This *Bookmark* examines humanism in two novels by John Fowles and explores the role of the writer in these texts, both of which have been made into memorable films.

BOOKS TO READ

John Fowles: *The Collector* (Pan 1963)
John Fowles: *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Pan 1969)

NOTES

> Miranda: How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world
> That has such people in't!
> Prospero: 'Tis new to thee
>
> Shakespeare: *The Tempest* (1611) Act V Scene 1

> 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 which he himself favours 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 favour of . . .
>
> But the chief argument for fight fixing is to show one's readers what one thinks of the world around one - whether one is a pessimist, an optimist, what you will.
>
> John Fowles: *The French Lieutenant's Woman* Chapter 54

In *The Collector* (1963), Fowles presents us with an ironic modern variation upon a traditional fairy-tale: a story of the beautiful, virtuous princess ensnared in the clutches of her evil, respectful worshipper, beyond hope of rescue. The author also draws strong parallels between his novel and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* by his nomenclature: the heroine's name is Miranda, whilst Clegg, her captor, despite posing as a Ferdinand-figure, is swiftly identified as being more of a Caliban. Clegg is the embodiment of all that is most despicable in human nature; essentially devoid of any fine moral instincts, he has no qualms about killing butterflies to hoard them up in his collection, nor does he feel any compulsion to donate any of his newly acquired wealth to charity (near the end of the novel, he highlights his own moral obtuseness by responding to Miranda's delirious cry "We're all such pigs, we deserve to die" with the cynical observation that "I reckon they pinched the money they should have given in"). On a more serious level, he is able to excuse kidnapping a young girl and allowing her to die tragically of a curable disease - merely because he lacks the courage to take her to the doctor - and then to pursue another. Admittedly, Clegg has suffered a great deal throughout his life as a result of his unhappy upbringing, his rejection by wealthy London society and his complete inability to relate sexually to women; however, this cannot excuse

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his behaviour. His final verdict "It's in my character, it's how I was made" is more to the point. Miranda herself makes a similar observation upon him:

> He doesn't believe in any other world but the one he lives in and sees. He's the one in prison, in his own hateful, narrow, present world.

Clegg's problem, in Freudian terms, is the under-development of his super-ego (or conscience) which prevents him from suppressing the visceral desires of the id and from having any concept of the altruistic ideals towards which Miranda aspires. Her analysis of his character recalls Robert Lowell's view of himself in his poem *Skunk Hour* (1959) in which he states that "I myself am hell", confessing that he has failed to find the values by which he is to live in the atheistic universe in which he finds himself. Lowell's concept of hell, like Fowles' of 'prison', is not geographical, but rather of a state of mind. Thus Miranda is imprisoned literally in a cellar, but metaphorically by the darker elements of the human soul from which Clegg has failed to liberate himself: she is trapped because he cannot be free. Fowles is writing in an existentialist age which, experiencing God only as a terrifying absence, puts its faith in humanity, in the supreme power of man to control both himself and the society in which he lives. His awareness of the true nature of mankind (as Clegg says "a lot of people . . . would do what I did or similar things . . . give way to what they pretend they shouldn't") precludes any optimism: thus, in the words of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Fowles 'fixes the fight' in favour of Clegg (by having Miranda die rather than having him punished) in order to vindicate his pessimism. Rather like Prospero, Fowles remains cynical (as a result of his experience) about the likelihood of the brave new world's ever coming into being whilst man remains such an ignoble, weak creature.

It is as a result of his lack of a moral sense that Clegg is not only able to destroy the freedom of the one thing which he misguidedly believes that he loves (a sentiment entirely beyond him), but furthermore is able to maintain his ludicrous notion that Miranda will one day fall in love with him and that she should be grateful that his treatment of her is not much worse. He is only able to understand Miranda's needs at the physical level of food and warmth - despite the fact that he buys art-books and records for her, which are designed to win her affections - having little concept of the psychological anguish he is forcing her to endure. His perverted desire is to possess Miranda, rather like one of his prize butterfly-specimens ("You've pinned me in this little room and you can come and gloat on me"); thus he cannot allow her the smallest degree of freedom, not even a potentially life-saving hospital visit when she has pneumonia, for fear that she will be taken away from him. Her response to his behaviour is one of outraged incredulity:

> But he'd have to get a doctor. He might kill me, but he couldn't just let me die

and later:

> It's pneumonia.
> He must get a doctor.
> It's murder.

Having been raised to believe that the universe is essentially moral, to take it for granted that man is impelled to behave in certain ways, Miranda is completely unable to comprehend Clegg's treatment of her. However, as she herself has previously conceded, she remains to some degree little more than 'a middle-class boarding school prig', having had little experience of real immorality. Indeed, the most morally risqué event in her life has been her non-sexual affair with her artist-mentor G.P. of whom her family disapproved. Her imprisonment by Fowles' design enables him to illustrate his view that the universe, far from being civilised, is in effect psychopathic. In his desire for artistic integrity, Fowles assigns to Clegg the absolute freedom which he perceives mankind - having rejected the concept of an intervening deity - to be possessed of. Thus, contrary to Miranda's beliefs, Clegg is under no obligation whatsoever to behave decently towards her: neither to refrain from taking

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pornographic photographs of her nor to let her live. In creating this situation, in which an apparently average man abuses his freedom by tyrannising another, Fowles lends further credence to his thesis that man, far from being a 'beauteous' creature, has great capacity for evil and that optimism in humankind is therefore misplaced.

Like Shakespeare's Miranda, Fowles' heroine is also possessed of a deep faith in the innate goodness of humans which sustains her throughout most of the period of her imprisonment. Despite her awareness of the evils of the atomic bomb, famine in the Third World and the crass 'New people' ("'anti-life, anti-art, anti-everything") who, rather like her captor, have no spiritual aspirations whatsoever, she has witnessed enough of the beauty mankind is capable of - both in terms of artistic creation and of moral, altruistic behaviour - to arrive at the conclusion that Ariel must eventually triumph over Caliban. Her initial outrage at her imprisonment is tempered by her pity for Clegg (whom she senses is 'absolutely inferior' to her in all respects) and resolves to show him the error of his sub-human ways. In her isolation, she is given an opportunity to examine her own beliefs in detail which, despite the desperateness of her situation, remain touchingly optimistic. She arrives at a deeper understanding of her inconclusive relationship with G.P. and of her attitude to art, whilst she is filled with an ardent desire to live creatively and virtuously once she is free again, declaring that "A new age is beginning . . . I love, I adore my age." Her experience has been valuable, for she has come to a profounder sense of self-awareness:

> I would not want this not to have happened. 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 wanted to be.

Fowles betrays us - by means of Miranda's faith in herself and the brave new world which the few are about to create - into sharing her belief that goodness will triumph and that she will eventually be freed. However, our hopes are to be frustrated, as Miranda's likening of the cellar to Clegg's killing-jar hints. "Because I can see through it I still think I can escape - I have hope - But it's an illusion". She is better morally equipped than Clegg and therefore able to 'see through' him, almost to transcend her physical situation by retaining her spiritual liberty. Yet as she falls ill, Miranda begins to realise in her despair that the dark element of human nature which Caliban epitomizes imprisons us all. She begins to question her belief in God upon whose existence, earlier on in her imprisonment, she insisted:

> I hate God. I hate whatever made this world. I hate whatever made the human race, made men like Caliban possible and situations like this possible. If there is a God he's a great loathsome spider in the darkness.
> He cannot be good.

Her faith in humanity was, we realise, founded upon the concept of a benign creator who, her experience has taught her, cannot rationally be claimed to exist. Her attempts to escape from her literal prison throughout the novel are metaphors for the struggle of an idealist Ariel spirit to escape from the horror of the human condition in which she ultimately finds herself trapped ("the black and the black and the black"). Having built up our hopes for Miranda, Fowles brutally crushes them, casting her, her previous sense of identity shattered, into the existential void where she is forced to acknowledge the freedom of the Cleggs in the world to perpetrate such outrages. His is an apocalyptic view of the universe.

However, despite the fact that he fixes his fight in favour of Clegg, Fowles patently does not support him, nor the amoral world which he represents. Clegg's Calibanistic behaviour, mechanically obeying the promptings of his baser instincts rather than the glimmerings of his better nature, lest he should lose his prize specimen, cannot fail to appal us, for they cause another human being great suffering. Clegg, rather like Miranda and Fowles himself, has a dim sense that in this contingent universe (which he imaginatively compares to a pools coupon in which he can find no happiness) God, as traditionally defined, cannot exist -

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> I think we are just insects, we live a bit then die and that's the lot. There's no mercy in things. There's not even a Great Beyond. There's nothing.

- but his response to this realisation differs radically from theirs. Here, he demonstrates quite how little regard he has for the fellow members of his species, dismissing them as mere insects, their brief existences as insignificant, almost civilising his treatment of Miranda by his choice of metaphor. His awareness that there is nothing spiritually 'beyond' man in the universe leads him to a nihilism which in his eyes absolves him from the blame for his actions, for there is no one to judge him. Fowles, on the other hand, demonstrates throughout the novel his belief that, in the absence of a beneficent over-lord, human beings and their actions, become more, rather than less significant, for it is in man's own hands that the destiny of the human race lies. It is therefore evil to harm another in the manner that Clegg does. Although he alerts us to the falsity of Miranda's belief that, as a result of divine intervention, justice will prevail, he does not go so far as to challenge her sense of superiority over her sub-human captor. Her eventual resolution not to resort to violence, however much Clegg may deserve 'an axe in his head', is exemplary, as is her final decision to forgive him, for it reveals her determination not to harm other human beings. We realise that, had she been allowed to live, Miranda would, in her deeper understanding of herself and her fellow men, have benefited society. However, Fowles must let this 'brave new' creature perish in order to maintain his artistic integrity; for to allow Miranda to survive would be in his view to present a false picture of the world which he perceives to be essentially psychopathic, in which the Calibans outnumber the Ariels. Moreover, Miranda could only be saved, as both he and finally she recognise, by an act of divine intervention inconceivable in an existentialist universe. For Fowles himself, as novelist, to assume omnipotence and pluck her from Clegg's claws would at best be disingenuous. Thus he fixes the fight against her in a realistic manner, designed to outrage us, to force us to re-examine our own beliefs and attitudes, rather than to have us sanction her sacrifice, like Calibans.

Fowles' technique of fixing fights in order to present a realistic, rather than idealistic view of the universe, whilst abstaining from intervening on behalf of his protagonist, is developed further in his third novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), a portrait of Victorian society in 1867. Despite the fact that he imitates with consummate skill the ossified literary conventions of the age (for instance, his use of stilted Victorian syntax and his assumption of omniscience), this novel is far from a mere re-working of an out-moded form. For Fowles demonstrates his sensibilities to be those of the modern existentialist: in the jarring Chapter 13, having confessed, in a thoroughly un-Victorian manner, his inability to read Sarah's mind, he reveals himself to be very much a modern by asserting the autonomy of his characters. In 1867, the novelist was universally considered to stand next to God in his own created world. So Thackeray reveals at the end of *Vanity Fair* (1847): "Let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out". This was an age in which Newtonian physics explained to the satisfaction of the educated man the workings of the physical universe, where the British Empire dominated the world and society was founded upon religious morality. Such was the congeniality of the established order that the Victorians felt secure in their belief that it was upheld by a benign God; therefore, the right of the novelist to assume divine status in his work went unquestioned, for in so doing he would be presenting a 'realistic' world-view. However, by 1969, following, for example, Einstein's relativism, the atrocities of the Second World War, the concept of a theistic universe had become intellectually unacceptable; thus Fowles would be being hypocritical were he to perpetuate the convention of authorial omnipotence in his fiction. We have already seen that as a humanist he believes in the absolute liberty of man, which he duly assigns to his characters:

> . . . to be free myself, I must give him (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.

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It is perhaps no accident that Fowles set his novel in 1867, the year of Matthew Arnold's seminal poem *Dover Beach* which describes an existentialist universe from which 'the sea of faith' has withdrawn; his point is, surely, that even by this time too much was amiss in the world for genteel society's attitudes to be feasible. In a supposedly Christian country, prostitution, squalor and the exploitation of the working classes by their employers was rampant, whilst Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), which refuted Genesis by claiming that man had evolved from apes, offended millions: the edifice of order was evidently crumbling. However, the novelists of the period, persisting disingenuously in their omniscience, do not reflect this in their fiction. Fowles, on the other hand, in giving his characters the freedom to control their existence upon the 'unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea' (Arnold: *To Marguerite*, 1853), is transcending the intellectual hypocrisy of the age in which this novel is rooted which is testament to the degree to which his humanism has affected his approach to his art.

Given that he has granted his characters their liberty, Fowles has abandoned his omniscience. However, unlike the modernist of his age, he will not renounce omnipotence, which he uses to considerable effect throughout the novel. His intrusive authorial voice intercedes with pleas for a sympathetic understanding of Charles' confusion ("see him for what he is: a man struggling to create history") whilst it invites us to reject Ernestina's 'catatonia of convention'. He makes no attempt to maintain the illusion perpetuated by his contemporaries that the novelist can be absent from his fiction. So we see in Chapter 13:

> The novelist is still God, since he creates (and not even the most aleatory avant-garde modern novel has managed to extirpate its author completely; what has changed is that we are no longer the gods of the Victorian image, omniscient and decreeing, but in the new theological image, with freedom our first principle.

In Chapter 55, we encounter Fowles himself incognito, as the archetypal novelist, regarding Charles intently with the 'look an omnipotent god - if there were such an absurd thing - should be shown to have' in his railway carriage. His dilemma is how he is to end his novel, for the Victorian convention in which he is writing precludes the inconclusive open ending which he, with his modernist concerns for freedom and realism, would prefer. Whilst recognizing that the novelist 'only pretends to conform to the reality' (that he usually 'fixes the fight, letting that want which he favours win') Fowles is concerned both to avoid impinging upon the freedom of his creations and to avoid imposing a view of the world upon his readers. His response to his ironic position, that of the humanist novelist playing god in a world from which he maintains that He is missing, is to present two endings to the novel, ultimately giving his readers the freedom to choose which view of the world they find the more congenial.

Of the two endings which Fowles presents, the first fails to satisfy because it is so conventionally Victorian. Having finally been located in the Rossetti household, Sarah explains to Charles that she cannot marry him, for she has come to treasure her loneliness, which she equates with freedom (she is the one who prefers to 'walk alone'). However, the couple is finally reunited in a touching domestic scene, Fowles having introduced Lalage, a standard deus ex-machina, supposedly born as a result of their liaison at Exeter. Charles attributes his fortune to 'God's hands', yet throughout the novel, Fowles has expanded the theological thesis which he reiterates in the following chapter: namely, that 'there is no intervening God beyond whatever can be seen'. The first conclusion, dependent upon an improbable Victorian desire, reeks of fight-fixing; if we accept it, we reject humanism and settle for the Victorian concept of an omnipotent God and thereby rob not only Charles and Sarah of their freedom, but, moreover, condemn ourselves - like ammonites - to petrifaction. Fowles now makes his second excursion into the novel - in the guise of impresario - to efface the previous fifteen minutes by adjusting his watch, just as he tossed his coin earlier in the train-cabin to decide which ending should come last. His point is clear: that, despite their pretentions to the contrary, novelists always have controlled their fiction. It is only by offering two endings that he can allow his protagonists and his readership any semblance of

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freedom. In this version of events, Lalage is omitted, and Charles is forced to recognise in Sarah

> a spirit prepared to sacrifice everything but itself - ready to surrender truth, feeling, perhaps even all womanly modesty in order to save its own integrity.

Thus he realises that to accept her offer of friendship would be to 'hurt her most' and therefore be immoral in humanist terms. Fowles has ultimately fixed the fight in favour of the liberty that he finally gives Sarah, whilst Charles (as a result of his two-year soul-searching) is able to refuse her implied offer of a relationship on her own terms, having acquired the requisite degree of faith in himself to survive upon the 'unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea'. Thus the novel ends on an apparently optimistic note: the protagonists are kept free to create the 'brave new world' of the twentieth-century society. Yet, as Fowles maintains in Chapter 54, he has merely 'pretended' to slip back to 1867; it is therefore futile to show optimism about it, for we 'know what has happened since'. As we have seen in *The Collector*, society has evolved very little; almost a century after 1867, Clegg has Miranda imprisoned in his cellar. Fowles' view, I would therefore maintain, is that, until the majority of people react like Charles, Sarah and Miranda to the modern situation, by recognizing both their complete freedom and the moral obligations that man has towards his brothers, man will remain a fallen creature, unable to realise the brave new world. Despite his awareness of the 'beauteous' things that humans can achieve, he remains a disillusioned Prospero-figure.

FURTHER READING

John Fowles, *The Magus* (Picador revised 1977)
John Fowles, *The Ebony Tower* (Pan 1974)
John Fowles, *Daniel Martin* (Picador 1977)

Mary-Anne Harrington wrote this *Bookmark* while a 6th form pupil at Newcastle-under-Lyme School, Staffordshire; she went on read English at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford.

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