

Tamás Tukacs

“Close, But Not Touching”

Readings and Misreadings In John Fowles’s *The Collector*

Ever since its publication, John Fowles’s *The Collector* (1963) has been a great commercial success – “an intriguing study in warped sexuality [...] cunningly worked suspense” by “an artist of great imaginative power”¹ – as well as the object of intensive critical activity. It has been interpreted as a psychological thriller,² an allegorical treatment of the struggle between “the Few” and “the Many,” a modern version of the Bluebeard legend,³ a Bildungsroman, an existential journey towards self-discovery,⁴ and so on. What I want to look at in this study is the issue of interpretation as it is encoded in the novel. In *The Collector* the two protagonists, Frederick Clegg and Miranda Grey enter a reciprocal interpretive game in Clegg’s secluded house. It is the nature of this intersubjective reading process that I shall try to explore here. In relation to this, I shall look at the ways the reading process is dramatised within the context of the novel. What kinds of reading are approved or rejected by the novel? The most important question proposed by my interpretation is this: is the dichotomy suggested by the novel between apparently good/authentic reading (Miranda) and bad/fake reading (Clegg) still maintained at the end? Finally, is the two characters’ interpretation of each other successful – do we have readings or misreadings?

1 See the cover pages John Fowles’s *The Aristos* (London: Triad Grafton, 1986).

2 Bo H. T. Eriksson, *The “Structuring Forces” of Detection. The Cases of C. P. Snow and John Fowles* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksel International, 1995), p. 125.

3 Sherill Grace, “Courting Bluebeard with Bartók, Atwood and Fowles: Modern Treatment of the Bluebeard Theme,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 11/2 (1984) 245–262.

4 Robert Burden, *John Fowles, John Hawkes, Claude Simon: Problems of Self and Form in the Post-Modernist Novel: A Comparative Study* (Wurzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1980), p. 152.

1 INTRODUCTION: SCENES OF READING

A careful reading of the novel reveals that the idea of reading texts, specific acts of reading, of books, of newspapers play a crucial role in the work, and that, as we shall see later, reading is always somehow in connection, on the one hand, with the activity of looking and peeping, and, on the other, with the interpretation of the other person.

Reading is already present in the opening section of the novel, which is narrated by Frederick Clegg, the collector of the title, a lower-middle class clerk whose hobby is collecting butterflies, and also women. After having won a large sum of money on the football pools, he decides to kidnap Miranda Grey, an art student, and to imprison her in his newly purchased country house. Within the space of the first two pages of the text we encounter three scenes that are related to reading. Once he meets Miranda in the library: "I stood right behind her once in the queue at the public library down Crossfield Street. She didn't look once at me, but I *watched* the back of her head and her hair in a long pigtail" (5, emphasis mine).⁵ Next he sees her on the train: "She sat three seats down and sideways to me, and read a book, so I could *watch* her for thirty-five minutes" (5, emphasis mine). This short train scene is crucial with regard to the rest of the novel. It suggests that Miranda is exposed to Clegg's watching and becomes vulnerable through reading. (Does Clegg perhaps desire the ability of reading that, as we shall see later, he definitely lacks?) Finally, he reads a newspaper article about her: "Well, then there was the bit in the local paper about the scholarship she'd won and how clever she was, and her name as beautiful as herself, Miranda" (6).

What is common in all three instances is that the idea of reading, watching, and Miranda are interconnected in them. This pattern can be discovered in further scenes of reading as well. Once he follows her into a coffee-bar: "I sat on a stool at the counter where I could watch. [...] Then she was standing right next to me. I was pretending to read a newspaper so I couldn't see her get up" (15). Later he returns to the same coffee-bar, hoping to see her again, and he spends "nearly two hours there pretending to read a book" (24). A basic contrast is suggested in all these instances. Miranda seems to be the real, authentic reader, who goes to the library, reads on the train, and Clegg appears to be a fake reader, who reads only newspapers, or only pretends to read. After incarcerating her, he buys for her,

5 All parenthesised references to *The Collector* are to this edition: John Fowles, *The Collector* (London and Sydney: Pan, 1965).

among other things, art books, with reproductions of famous paintings, that is, pictures that can be looked at as long as one wants to. Elsewhere he also mentions books: “one reason I got fed up with Aunt Annie was I started to get interested with some of the books you can buy at shops in Soho, books of stark women and all that. I could hide the magazines, but there were the books I wanted to buy and I couldn’t in case she tumbled” (12). Clegg reads books, indeed, but these are pornographic ones, not exactly designed for reading, but rather for watching. Miranda is not present here, but Clegg’s attempt to conceal these pornographic books from his aunt is not unlike his desire to conceal, hide and “read” Miranda in a secluded place. Thus Miranda becomes transfigured into a pornographic book in Clegg’s fantasies. Once Miranda writes into her diary: “He reads it [*The Catcher in the Rye*] only to show me how hard he is trying” (192), not realising that it is *she* who is being read, and that Clegg is really trying hard to interpret *her*.

Books also play a crucial role in the second section, which comprises Miranda’s diary that she is writing during her imprisonment. There are a number of activities related to reading in this section, too. Miranda spends her first days in the cellar reading, but then this is a rather uneasy activity: “I couldn’t do anything if he was in the room. I pretended to read, but I couldn’t concentrate” (149). What we have here is the reversal of the train-scene: Miranda, like Clegg, begins to pretend reading. (Of course the cause of her distraction is not desire but fear.) Later in the novel, several specific books are read. First and foremost, Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, in which some of the characters’ names coincide with those in the novel: Miranda, Ferdinand (Clegg claims that he is called Ferdinand [40]) and Caliban (Miranda’s nickname for Clegg), and a part of which is indeed cited in Miranda’s diary (255). Miranda recommends to Clegg *The Catcher in the Rye*, whose protagonist she identifies with him: “You’re a Holden Caulfield. He doesn’t fit anywhere and you don’t” (216). Further, Miranda reads Jane Austen’s *Emma*, and identifies herself with its protagonist: “I *am* Emma Woodhouse. I feel for her, of her, and in her” (167). Once she makes mention of Shaw’s *Major Barbara*, and the act of identification also takes place: “A year ago I would have stuck to the strict moral point. Like Major Barbara” (146). Two emblematic novels of the 1950s are also read by Miranda: *Room at the Top* and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. The protagonist of the latter she violently rejects and identifies him with Clegg: “He’s mean, narrow, selfish, brutal. [...] he has the hate of other things and other people outside his type” (241). Mention is also made of the *Arabian Nights* (223), Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (160) and Dickens’s *Great*

Expectations (194). What is common in all these texts? It is with the help of these fictional works that Miranda tries to interpret, to make sense of the situation, and, what is perhaps more important, she identifies Clegg with certain fictional characters: Caliban, Holden Caulfield, Mr. Elton in *Emma* (230), Pip and Arthur Seaton. Miranda interprets her situation as fiction and tries to read it as a book with Clegg and herself as fictional characters in it that also need to be deciphered. Thus, Miranda interprets the world through reading, which precedes her experience, that is, she attempts to apply certain patterns to her experience based on her previous readings.

The abundance of specific scenes of reading in the novel serves as a set of metaphors for reading the other person and the situation in which they find themselves, indicating that *The Collector* is also a novel about reading. Clegg treats Miranda as a pornographic book which he tries to watch, hide and interpret; on the other hand, Miranda interprets Clegg, the situation, and later herself on the basis of books, and thereby gets involved in a reading process. Reading becomes the metaphor of interpersonal relationships and vice versa, intersubjective relationships represent certain modes of reading.

2 MALE VS FEMALE READING

The novel strongly suggests a fundamental dichotomy between the "good," energetic, or catalytic female reading and the "bad," distorted or warped "male" reading; this dichotomy is supported by Fowles's theoretical writings, most notably *The Aristos*, in which he outlines this binary structure.

In the terms provided by *The Aristos*, the apparent opposition of Clegg and Miranda could be explained along three dichotomies: analysis vs. synthesis; determination vs. hazard; and stasis vs. kinesis. Clegg is a quasi-scientist, he collects butterflies, similarly to the rest of Fowles's male collectors, like Charles Smithson in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, who collects fossils. Thus he is closely linked to external reality, which he analyses, divides up, therefore cannot achieve "whole sight." Being a woman and a creator, Miranda has the chance to reach "whole sight," synthesis, as opposed to Clegg's analytic mind. Contrary to Clegg's artificial activities, such as photography, which can be seen as inauthentic, mere reproduction, she paints pictures, which is by definition an authentic, creative activity. Clegg embodies determination and authority as well. He gives no chance to "chance," to hazard, as he puts it, "just one mistake and you lose

everything” (100). In turn, Miranda often relies on the aleatory, on play and hazard. She is unpredictable, whimsical, playful: “She walked away but suddenly she snatched a cushion off the chair, turned and kicked straight at me [...] almost at once she pulled the jug thing off the mantelpiece and threw it at me [...]” (80). “Another day, it was downstairs, she just screamed. For no reason at all [...] What’s up, I said. ‘I just felt like a good scream,’ she said” (72). Thirdly, Clegg’s personality is helplessly passive and static. In the novel there is a hope that Miranda, embodying kinesis will manage to put an end to his passivity and “set him in motion” by filling in the gaps in Clegg, by revitalising him. Miranda, however, does not manage to get a unified image of him, as we shall see later: Clegg resists her reading.

In what follows I want to show how the carefully-built gender-based metaphysical polarity, which gives preference to Miranda’s reading can be questioned, how the hierarchies of reading slowly break down and finally how both characters turn out to be inadequate readers of each other. In the following section of the essay I shall briefly present two of Clegg’s reading modes, which posit him as a definitely inadequate reader of Miranda. One of these modes is in connection with the isolated setting in which the novel takes place, and, in relation to this, with the psychoanalytic concept of *anal*ity, which constitutes a crucial aspect both of the notion of isolation and of the reading process itself. The other mode is related to Clegg’s *voyeuristic* perversion, which prevents him from reading Miranda properly and which will also serve as a sadistic instrument with which he keeps her in captivity.

2.1 “*Having Her Was Enough*”: Reading as Collecting; the Anal Aspect of Reading

Barthes writes:

[I]t is certain that there is an eroticism of reading [...]. By shutting himself up to read, by making reading into an absolutely separated, clandestine state in which the whole world is abolished, the reader is identified with two other human subjects [...]: the amorous subject and the mystic subject [...]. Yet something more enigmatic is presented for us to read, to interpret in the Proustian episode: reading – the delight of reading – has some relation with anality; one and the same metonymy connects reading, excrement and – as we have seen – money.⁶

⁶ Roland Barthes, “On Reading,” *The Rustle of Language*, ed. Francois Wahl; transl. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 38–39.

As we can see, he draws a strong parallel between the sense of isolation and the process of reading, in which the linking concept is anality. This is justified by the Freudian theory concerning pregenital sexual organisations. The conjunction of the idea of isolation with the reading process can be traced back to primitive fantasies originating in childhood. *The Collector* suggests that Clegg's ego-development has been arrested at an infantile stage and so he is apt only to read in a "perverse" way. There are at least five factors that give justification for Clegg being an "anal" reader: (1) the place of reading (2) Clegg's hobby of collecting (3) his self-control and sense of precise timing (4) his orderliness, and (5) his money-complex.

In *The Dynamics of Literary Response*,⁷ Norman N. Holland suggests that every literary work is informed by core fantasies. Following Freud, he classifies fantasies as oral, anal, urethral, phallic, oedipal and genital ones. He assumes that there exists a characteristic "anal" writing, of which the most common characteristic features are images of dirt, smell and disgust.⁸ The place of reading, the house in the country, has obvious connotations of anality. The reader will recall that the cellar Clegg confines Miranda into is wet and dark. "It was cold out of the sun, damp, nasty" (18); "This crypt-room is so stuffy, the walls squeeze in" (126); "Hateful primitive wash-stand and place" (128). It is not difficult to associate these descriptions with Holland's anal images.

Clegg's reading strategy can also be seen as fundamentally anal. Anal fantasies stem from a certain phase of ego-development, at about one year of age, when the child encounters two conflicting pleasures: the elimination and retention of excrement. Moreover, the child tends to regard this material as a sort of treasure and excretion as the giving up of this treasure.⁹ Freud and Holland associate the

7 Norman N. Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968).

8 Holland, p. 40.

9 "Children who are making use of the susceptibility to erotogenic stimulation of the anal zone betray themselves by holding back their stool till its accumulation brings about violent muscular contractions and, as it passes through the anus, is able to produce powerful stimulation of the mucous membrane. In so doing it must no doubt cause not only painful but also highly pleasurable sensations. [...] But they have other important meanings for the infant. They are clearly treated as part of the infant's own body and represent his first 'gift': by producing them he can express his active compliance with his environment and, by withholding them, his disobedience. From the 'gift' they later come to acquire the meaning of 'baby' - for babies, according to one of the sexual theories of children, are acquired and born through the bowels" (Sigmund Freud, "Three Essays on the

activities of keeping and collecting things with this period. Clegg applies reading strategies that are similar to typical anal activities: collecting and treasuring. By collecting butterflies, and, eventually, Miranda, he exhibits the same stage of ego-development to which Freud and Holland refer. He obviously regards Miranda as his *treasure* whom/which he is not willing to set free, as it were, eliminate, and thus his reading of her can be regarded a collecting activity.

Another anal activity is also crucial with Clegg, namely, self-control. It is at the age of about one year that a child learns to control and master his own impulses. The reader will recall that extreme self-control is a key word with Clegg. In the beginning he mentions that he "was never once punished at school" (10). He also refers to this principle of his when it comes to the prospect of an affair with Miranda: "I always understood [...] that a gentleman always controls himself to the right moment [...]" (108). All this can be linked to Holland's notion of self-discipline, impatience, procrastination and precise timing (41). Naturally, not only self-control, but also control over other things or people, namely, Miranda, plays an important part here.

Finally, Clegg is characterised by excessive orderliness, which is a result of the sublimation of anal erotism.¹² His mind is also obsessed by the idea of cleanliness and hygiene, which he also projects to Miranda: "She was always clean, too. [...] She hated dirt as much as I do, although she used to laugh at me about it" (60). He performs little rituals that can be seen as symptoms of neurosis: when he buys a necklace for Miranda, he washes it: "When I got home I washed the necklace (I didn't like to think of it touching that other woman's [the saleswoman's] skin) and hid it so that I could get it out at the correct time" (86; precise timing is also present here).

As a result of their parsimony, anal erotics often have money-complex. In their minds, "money is brought into the most intimate relationship with dirt," and unconsciously, with faeces; thus, interestingly, the most precious thing is brought into correlation with the most worthless one.¹¹ They are often unwilling to empty their bowels, as they often refuse to empty their purse. Clegg is also reluctant to let his most valuable object, Miranda, free, as if she was some "refuse"

Theory of Sexuality," *The Pelican Freud Library*, ed. Angela Richards [Reading: Cox & Wyman, 1977], Vol. 7, p. 103).

10 Sigmund Freud, "Character and Anal Erotism," *The Pelican Freud Library*, ed. Angela Richards (Reading: Cox & Wyman, 1977), Vol. 7, p. 211.

11 Freud, "Character," p. 214.

to be kept inside.¹² By confining Miranda in that wet, dark cellar, motivated by his anal fantasies, he wants to provide an ideal place for "reading" his beloved. In this sense Clegg is an anal reader, which means that instead of interpreting and understanding the object read, he is content with possessing, collecting, controlling, arranging and systematising it with extreme precision.

2.2 "*I could sit there all night watching her*": *Voyeurism, Photography, Reading*

The second mode of Clegg's reading can be described as voyeuristic. A certain element of voyeurism can be discovered in every act of reading, and *The Collector* partly dramatises this aspect, but it also dramatises the perverse mode of (mis)reading that is taken to the extreme by Clegg. He, on the one hand, takes a passive role, wishing to enjoy the text/performance without having to act on the literary work, but at the same time he does violence to Miranda by revealing the hidden brutal aspects of his peculiar hobby, photography. Reading Miranda with this technique, he confines, freezes her, she becomes motionless, inanimate; in other words, Clegg kills his text.

It was noted in the introduction that the idea of reading and watching are interconnected in the novel. The first sentence already refers to the activity of watching: "When she was home from her boarding school I used to see her almost every day sometimes [...]" (5). The excessive visuality of Clegg, of which the most explicit metaphor is the fact that he is an amateur photographer, will prevent him from proper reading and will make him a pornographic – and photographic – reader.

The connection between voyeurism and reading has been pointed out by many critics. One key premise of some psychoanalytic theories is that the writer, presenting his own fantasies, allows us to enjoy our daydreams without self-reproach or shame,¹³ to "peer with impunity."¹⁴ This instinct is activated through the reading process or watching a performance. Clegg wants to place himself in the role of the audience, and wants to watch Miranda's "performance," thereby also setting such primal scene fantasies in motion. When Miranda asks him to

12 We should not forget that the money which enables Clegg to buy the house in which he keeps Miranda was won on the pools, so it is also a kind of treasure.

13 Sigmund Freud, "Creative Writers and Daydreaming," *The Pelican Freud Library*. Vol. 14, ed. Angela Richards (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p. 141. See also: Peter Brooks, "The Idea of Psychoanalytic Criticism," *Discourse in Psychoanalysis and Literature*, ed. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (London: Routledge, 1987), p. 6.

14 Holland, p. 172.

“amuse” her, “do something,” he cannot perform anything (79). He plays the role of the audience, and in this instance his expectations concerning the enjoyment of the “literary work” are frustrated. According to Holland, when we take a book in our hands, we expect two things: that the book is going to give us pleasure¹⁵ and that we will not have to take our share actively while reading, that is, we will not have to perform anything, act *on* the literary work: “in the literary situation [...] we know no explosion will occur, for we know we are not going to act.”¹⁶ Clegg is frustrated because he realises he will have to *act on* the literary work he reads or the performance he watches. From the first moment, he would be willing only to watch Miranda, without having to do anything, considering her as an inanimate statue, picture or literary work. In other words, he is not willing to enter a dialogical process of reading, is not willing to risk himself. Therefore, Clegg can only fulfil his role as audience when Miranda cannot communicate with him: when he watches her from the window (5), when he watches his photos of her, when she is intoxicated, and finally, when she is dead. It is only then that he can “enjoy his daydreams” “without self-reproach or shame.” “They [the photos] didn’t talk back at me” (118), he summarises the essence of this pleasure.

Although the notion of voyeurism presupposes passivity, its hidden sadistic quality is revealed by the metaphor of photography. It is useful to quote Susan Sontag here: “[...] having a camera has transformed one person into something active, a voyeur: only he has mastered the situation.”¹⁷ Clegg uses photography both to occupy the role of the passive gazer who can watch people unpunished, and to compensate for his sexual ineptitude by being an active participant. That is, he substitutes gazing and peeping for making love. It becomes a perversion, because “instead of being preparatory of normal sexual aim, it supplants it.”¹⁸ “[I]n scopophilia and exhibitionism the eye corresponds to an erotogenic zone.”¹⁹ The sadistic aspect of voyeurism is obvious in the episode when Clegg ties up the sick Miranda and forces her to pose in front of his camera (121–122). Photographing the other person becomes a punishment, a faint echo of the primal scene when the male “punishes” the escaping female and does violence to her.²⁰

15 Holland, p. 74.

16 Holland, p. 82.

17 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), p. 10.

18 Freud, “Three Essays,” p. 70.

19 Freud, “Three Essays,” p. 8+.

20 This is what Sontag writes about a film: “There is a much stronger sexual fantasy in Michael Powell’s extraordinary movie *Peeping Tom* (1960), which is not about a Peeping Tom but about a

A photo kills the person being photographed inasmuch as it freezes him or her, confining him or her within the limits of the picture, just as Clegg incarcerates Miranda in his house. "When we define the Photograph as a motionless image, this does not mean only that the figures it represents do not move; it means that they do not *emerge*, do not *leave*: they are anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies."²¹ Being photographed, Miranda becomes a dead, inanimate butterfly in Clegg's collection. He can only read Miranda when she is tied, silent, and inanimate. The immobility of the other, in other words, the possession of her, that has already been discussed in the previous chapter, becomes the precondition of Clegg's reading.

Clegg's other mode of reading is perhaps best described by the adjective "voyeuristic." He activates both sides of a voyeuristic perversion, that is, on the one hand he is content with a passive position of an onlooker who seeks to gain satisfaction by mere watching and thus setting his fantasies in motion. Curiously, the polar opposite of voyeurism is represented as one of Clegg's reading modes as well, which is using a camera as a weapon and as a means of compensating for one's sexual inaptitude by satisfying one's sadistic drives. The camera and photographing becomes metaphors of Clegg's keeping Miranda in captivity, and consigning a freezing and immobile status to her, and also of Clegg himself (conceived as a camera, a machine) capable only of mechanistic, word-by-word interpretation.

psychopath who kills women with a weapon concealed in his camera, while photographing them. Not once does he touch his subjects. He doesn't desire their bodies; he wants their presence in the form of filmed images – those showing them experiencing their own death – which he screens at home for his solitary pleasure. The movie assumes connections between impotence and aggression, professionalized looking and cruelty, which point to the central fantasy connected with the camera. The camera as phallus is, at most, a flimsy variant of the inescapable metaphor that everyone unselfconsciously employs. However hazy our awareness of this fantasy, it is named without subtlety whenever we talk about 'loading' and 'aiming' a camera, about 'shooting' a film" (Sontag, pp. 13–14).

21 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, transl. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 57.

3 "CLOSE, BUT NOT TOUCHING": MUTUAL MISREADINGS

From the first pages of the novel, a stable dichotomy is suggested between Clegg's and Miranda's reading strategies. Miranda appears to be the authentic reader, who reads "real books" (157), and is able to perform the act of interpretation, whereas Clegg seems to be the fake, anal, voyeuristic, perverse reader who, in general, only pretends to read. Thus, a clear-cut opposition seems to be drawn between men and women as readers, evidently approving female readings. In the rest of this paper I want to show how both characters read the other in an inappropriate way, and thus to suggest that the obvious dichotomy suggested by the novel becomes highly questionable by the end. There are three factors on which I base my argument, namely (1) the sense of *theatricality* in the novel, which slowly transforms the characters into participants of a meta-play in which they are both actors and spectators, and thus renders the reading process highly unstable; (2) the hidden *similarities* that can be discovered between the non-present character of novel, "G.P.," who is supposed to be the "master-reader," and the apparently "worst" reader, Clegg; and finally (3) an *allegorising* reading mode that is practised both by Clegg and Miranda, and which is the ultimate step towards the mutual misinterpretation of the other.

3.1 "You are only pretending": *Theatricality, Pretence, the Instability of Reading*

"I am no good as a mimic, unlike quite a number of well-known writers. Perhaps that's what makes me feel dialogue, the playwright's skill, so important," John Fowles declared in a 1995 interview to Dianne Vipond.²² Indeed, in *The Collector* dialogues play a significant role, which lends the novel a certain air of theatricality, as if it was performed on a stage. But apart from this superficial resemblance, there are other factors that make this text resemble a play rather than a novel.

One key characteristic of *The Collector* is that pretence and lying pervade the whole of the text. In fact the entire story is built upon one pretence: Clegg acts as if Miranda were staying in the house voluntarily and cherishes this illusion until the very end of the novel. The absurdity of the situation stems from the intermingling of reality and pretence. Finally the misinterpretation of these qualities results in tragedy.

²²Dianne Vipond, "An Unholy Inquisition," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 42 (1996) 12-28, p. 15.

The theatricality of *The Collector* is rooted in the compulsion that both characters have to pretend, which makes the process of reading extremely difficult for both of them. Miranda is bound to act scenes out, to lie, in order to survive. Clegg first pretends while he spies on Miranda, then lies lest his crime be exposed. He tells Miranda, for instance, that he was hired to kidnap her, then he lies that he posted Miranda's letter. Miranda is motivated only by one aim: she wants to escape, so she subordinates nearly all of her acts to this sole need. She pretends to be ill, she pretends to need a lot of things from the town to make Clegg spend a lot of time away so that she could try to escape. So, ultimately, for both of them acting is of existential significance. The idea of acting becomes attached to Miranda in Clegg's mind to such an extent that on one occasion he dreams that when the police comes, he has to kill her and when he takes the cushion away "she was lying there laughing, she'd only pretended to die" (84). When they go upstairs they pretend to have dinner together as wife and husband. When Clegg presents Miranda with a ring, because he wants to marry her, Miranda answers: "I'll pretend they're mine" (89). Thus, like Nicholas in *The Magus*, they become part of a performance within the walls of Clegg's house, which does not have any spectators in the traditional sense: they are the actors and the audience at the same time. As Conchis explains the essence of his own meta-theatre in *The Magus*: "One in which the conventional separation between actors and audience was abolished."²³ This performance in which both of them are involved somehow becomes the ultimate reality/truth for Clegg and Miranda. Both of them seem to be vaguely aware of this peculiar situation. Miranda often puts down her dialogues with Clegg in her diary, in which he calls Clegg Caliban, as if these conversations were scenes in a play. Once she remarks: "I felt unreal, as if it was a play and I couldn't remember who I was in it" (158).

In turn, Clegg (thinks that he) is well aware of the fact that Miranda pretends. He often claims that he "sees through her tricks," and contemplates what she might be up to. This ignorance of what is apparent and "seeing through the trick" become fatal for both of them. One key episode in this respect is the seduction scene, when Miranda, in order to escape, tries to get Clegg to make love to her.

23 Alison Lee, *Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 90.

'Don't be so stiff,' she said.

I was like stunned. It was the last thing. [...]

'*What's up?*' I said.

'You're so unrelaxed. Just relax. There's nothing to worry about.' Well, I tried, she lay still, but I knew *there was something wrong in the situation*. [...]

'Isn't that nice?'

Of course I had to say, yes it was. I didn't know *what her real game was*, it made me nervous, quite apart from me being very nervous anyhow about kissing and all the other business. [...]

'Come on.' *Very coaxing*, she was.

I said, it's not right. You're only *pretending*. [...]

Then she did something really shocking.

I could hardly believe my eyes, she stood back a step and unfastened her housecoat and she had nothing on beneath. She was stark. I didn't give no more than a quick look, she just stood there smiling and waiting, you could feel it, for me to make a move. [...] It was terrible, it made me feel sick and trembling, I wished I was on the other side of the world. It was worse than with a prostitute; I didn't respect her, but with Miranda I knew I couldn't stand the shame. [...]

She stood up. 'You must realize that I've sacrificed all my principles tonight. Oh, yes, to escape. I was thinking of that. But I *do* want to help you. [...] To try to show you that sex – sex is just an activity, like anything else. It's not dirty, it's just two people playing with each other's bodies. Like dancing. Like a game.' [...] *I saw her game*, of course. She was very artful at wrapping up what she meant in a lot of words. (106–111, my emphases)

Clegg always suspects something behind Miranda's acts, supposes that there is some other intention behind the surface. But there is not, there cannot be, because Miranda does not pretend on her own accord: she can do nothing but act. The surface–depth dichotomy becomes questioned, which renders reading very unstable. Clegg's interpretive technique – always looking for the depth, the hidden, a sort of over-interpretation, always suspecting something – becomes fatally wrong when Miranda falls really ill, but Clegg interprets it as: "You could see it was a big act..." (p. 119); "It's not a cold.' She really shouted at me. – Of course it's a cold, I said. And stop acting. I know your game" (121).

We can see that the peculiar sense of theatricality and pretence subverts the conventional methods of reading and makes the characters extremely suspicious of each other, thereby depriving them of the very possibility of adequate reading.

3.2 "People Like You": Social Allegorisation

The metaphor of theatre and the theatrical aspect of misreading in *The Collector*, as in Fowles's other works, can be treated from a sociological point of view as well. Fowles's characters carry "an obligation to discern a basis for personal authenticity. For each of them, the world is a theatre in which his role must be finally substantiated [...]." ²⁴ Their roles are determined by the unconscious (homo psychologicus) on the one hand and by society (homo sociologicus) on the other. This is what we can see in *The Collector*: the two characters, motivated partly by their socially, partly by their psychologically imprinted role-playing techniques and interpretive mechanism act out certain scenes on the stage of the house. The image the reader can have of Clegg is that of the lower-middle class average man, hating the "Few," the arts, the "posh" places, tormented by inferiority-complex. Miranda is the embodiment of the artistic, open-minded, vigorous and erudite type, rejecting all forms of conservatism (yet, evidently enjoying the benefits of this status-quo). These two classes of society seem to be completely isolated from each other, and if the story of *The Collector* had given the promise of a reconciliation or at least an understanding between these two classes, by the end of the novel it is obvious that no possibility of normal communication and reading is possible between Clegg and Miranda, i.e., between the "Many" and the "Few."

Both Miranda and Clegg are present in the novel as representatives of their class, and they also read the other primarily as members of their respective social group (Clegg reads Miranda from the point of view of lower classes, always keeping in mind that she belongs to the upper class, and vice versa.) Both Clegg and Miranda, as creations of their own social class, are moulded and formed by the way of thinking and social habits of their environment. However strongly they want to break free from them, they do not let them be autonomous selves. "The self or subject comes to appear more as a construct: the result of a system of conventions."²⁵

Clegg is brutally imprisoned in his preconceptions and social prejudices. For instance, when he wants to pay by cheque in a shop, "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 had

²⁴ Malcolm Bradbury, "The Novelist as Impresario: John Fowles and His Magus," *Possibilities. Essays on the State of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 261.

²⁵ Burden, p. 22.

spoken in a la-di-da voice and said I was Lord Muck or something, I bet [...]" (86). "[To Miranda] You only got to walk into the room, *people like you*, and you can talk with anyone, you understand things [...]" (198, emphasis mine). According to him, *The Catcher in the Rye* is "not realistic. Going to posh school and his parents having money. He wouldn't behave like that. In my opinion" (216). Clegg is unable to get rid of his socially imprinted reflex-mechanisms; and in this sense he is also a prisoner,²⁶ moreover, he also imprisons, suffocates, and, as it were kills, Miranda by his way of thinking. This attitude is also a kind of reading, based on previous "reading" experiences, which are frozen into mere reading conventions, as Clegg is also a construction of a system of conventions. Clegg, however, despite his loathing of the upper classes, wants to conform: before kidnapping Miranda, he begins to read "classy newspapers" and goes to the National Gallery and the Tate Gallery so that he "wouldn't seem ignorant" for Miranda (17). (And probably to seem like an adult person, in spite of the fact that his development has been arrested on an infantile level.) Throughout the novel he tries to express himself properly, but he knows he cannot speak correct English. This intermingling of loathing and desire to conform results in a schizophrenic state in him.²⁷ He wants to seem "acceptable," but at the same time he wants Miranda to know him as he is.

This schizophrenic state is also characteristic of Miranda. She treats Clegg as someone who desperately needs help, like the sick children she helps in her real life. At the same time she looks down on him, on his "Calibanity," as she also looks down on "the Many." She seems to accept G.P.'s "prescriptions" regarding art, in which he suggests that "you have to be Left politically, because the Socialists are the only people who care, for all their mistakes" and that one has to throw away his/her social class, "because class is primitive and silly" (153-154). That is precisely, however, what she cannot do: "I can't stand stupid people like Caliban [=Clegg], with their great dead weight of pettiness and selfishness and meanness of every kind. And the few have to carry it all. The doctors and the teachers and the artists [...]. Because I'm one of them," she writes (217). In reading Clegg, she begins to mirror his reading techniques and eventually applies those strategies of which she is going to be a victim.

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,

26 Burden, p. 35.

27 Eriksson, p. 133.

interpreting the other as a representative of something else, in this case, of his/her class. In this respect, the seduction scene is of central importance. On the one hand, one way of tearing down the mask would have been a "risk-filled sexual adventure," "an affaire" (as in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*), as Burden suggests,²⁸ when both of them could have got rid of the pressures of role-playing. On the other, that was a moment when the dichotomy of deep and surface structure could have been abolished, as during that scene nothing covered, nothing veiled the depth, or, more precisely, there was nothing but surface for them to interpret. The possibility of the abolishment of surface–depth distinction was offered, but they could not realise this. Seduction for both of them remained a performance.

3.3 Psychological–psychoanalytical allegorisation and the breakdown of hierarchies

Another version of allegorisation as misreading is present in the novel, which is in connection with psychology and psychoanalysis, and is yet another factor that serves to subvert the clear-cut dichotomy set up between the two kinds of reading. Both Clegg and Miranda attempt to interpret each other by stereotyping him or her.

Clegg goes through roughly three major phases in interpreting Miranda. He tries to understand Miranda on the basis of three stereotypes of women: the "virgin," the "whore" and the "mother" – that is, his interpretation is always mechanical. Before the seduction scene, he tends to imagine her as a virgin.²⁹ Ideas of chastity, purity and innocence are associated in Clegg's mind with Miranda. She has to be respected so much that Clegg, for instance, is not willing to tell dirty jokes in front of her (80). She becomes almost like a deity for him, who must not be touched, as if she was under a sort of taboo. It will be recalled that Clegg, if he can manage, does not like to touch Miranda, preferring only to watch her. "We sat on the bed [...] close, but not touching" (71). The most powerful expression of this distance-keeping is photography. "The sense of the unattainable that can be evoked by photographs feeds directly into the erotic feelings of those for whom desirability is enhanced by distance."³⁰ He only touches her when he does violence to her, when she wants to escape and he has to intoxicate her. Even in

28 Burden, p. 31.

29 See also Perry Nodelman. "John Fowles' Variations in *The Collector*," *Contemporary Literature* 28.3 (1987) 332–346, p. 339.

30 Sontag, p. 16.

the seduction scene, when both of them are naked, and therefore, nothing is hidden, Miranda says: "We *can't* be farther apart" (171).

After the seduction scene, Clegg, deprived of the idea of the innocent virgin, interprets Miranda as a prostitute. He cannot respect her anymore, he thinks that "she was like all women, she had a one-track mind" (113). In other words, Miranda offers a kind of relationship, but Clegg is not willing to enter it, because he would have had to risk himself in the reading process (and probably this kind of relationship was discarded by him in fear of symbolic incest). He misinterprets the only instance when he could have known her as a real, flesh-and-blood person, and falls into the trap of another stereotype. He feels that "she had made herself like any other woman" (114, as for Clegg every woman is a prostitute). His reading strategy remains at the level of stereotypes, clichés, like his use of language, his whole behaviour is devoid of any sign of originality.

As it has been pointed out before, Miranda represents a mother-figure for Clegg, too. The most favourable situation he imagines for themselves is when they "would be sleeping side by side with the wind and rain outside or something" (111), which is not altogether unlike a child sleeping beside his mother. It has to be remembered that Clegg's mother, soon after the death of his husband, went off with a foreigner; Clegg's cousin told him that "she was a woman of the streets" (7). If Clegg wants to rediscover her uncorrupted (idealised) mother in Miranda, it is only possible till the seduction, after which Clegg identifies Miranda with her real mother.

One common feature of all these interpretations is that they ignore Miranda as a real, flesh and blood person and treat her merely as an *idea*.³¹ Thus Miranda for Clegg is dead, non-existent (untouchable, for instance), which will culminate in Miranda's actual death, when she becomes biologically non-existent. That is, interestingly, for Clegg, who, as it was shown above, is only capable of literal, word-by-word understanding, Miranda is an exception: he can read her *only* in an abstract way.

So far a clear dichotomy has been suggested by the novel between Clegg as male reader and Miranda as a female reader. 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 the

³¹ See Nodelman, p. 333.

opinion of G.P., Miranda does not articulate her own personality in her pictures, she tends to plagiarise: "You're saying something here about Nicholson or Pasmore. Not about yourself. You're using a camera. Just as *trompe-l'oeil* is mis-channelled photography, so is painting in someone else's style. You're photographing here. That's all," G.P. tells her (170). So, while, compared to Clegg, Miranda seems to be definitely authentic, she is merely "photographing" as compared to G.P. It is suggested that she is on the right track to achieve "whole sight," which G.P., being a mature artist, has already achieved. This seems to be proved by the "list of the ways in which he has altered" Miranda (153), among which the first principle is that "if you are a real artist you give your *whole being* to art" (153, emphasis mine).

However, this clear hierarchy slowly breaks down, as certain hidden similarities can be discovered between Clegg and G.P. When Miranda is once at G.P.'s place, he suddenly cuts her short, and takes her round the room to make her "look at his things" (i.e., his paintings), at his *collection* of paintings, just as Clegg showed Miranda his butterflies (p. 163). Interestingly, like Clegg, G.P. is not willing touch Miranda either. "He didn't ever force me in any way. Touch me. I mean, he's respected me in a queer way" (p. 192). He likens her to Uccello's painting, *The Hunt*, whose secret has not been solved, either. "Now, I see you have the great inner secret, too," he says (185). He, on the one hand, does something similar as Clegg in trying to interpret Miranda: he attempts to discover something essential, some hidden, deep meaning in her, considering Miranda as a "mystery," a "secret." He, on the other hand, performs a misreading similar to Miranda's: it is only that instead of books he tries to interpret the world and Miranda through paintings, that is, he always puts something between his experience and his interpretation. Nodelman claims that while Miranda wanted love without sex from G.P., he wanted sex without love from her.³² This is not entirely true, for it is G.P. who sends Miranda away, because he respects her too much, for he knows that he, as a womaniser, would only corrupt Miranda if they had a sexual relationship. He aspires to the same kind of spiritual love as Clegg does. This can be read in a subversive way: is G.P. not so perfect, after all? With this the notion of "whole sight" is also questioned, and it may become an absolute entity, which can be approximated, but never reached. One thing is certain: both Clegg and G.P. see a virgin in Miranda, but for different reasons. G. P. is not

32 Nodelman, p. 341.

willing to have an “affaire” with Miranda, and Clegg is not able to. Thus Clegg becomes a grotesque parody of G. P.’s misreading, revealing its hidden aspects.

Like Clegg, G.P. also tends to glimpse the prostitute-side of women: “Just that Botticelli moment of the first time of her taking her clothes off. Soon shrivels. The old Eve takes over. The strumpet” (186). He is similarly unable to break free from the allegorisation and stereotypical categorisation of women. He also thinks in allegories (of women), trying to slot Miranda into one of his stereotypes. Thus, his status as a “master-reader” is questioned, and the hierarchy of readers suggested by the novel – Clegg, the worst reader, Miranda, and G.P., the master-reader – is also subverted, and thus the seemingly clear opposition between Clegg and Miranda is also interrogated.

The readings that Miranda applies to Clegg are not consistent, either, and she often changes her mind concerning him. First she interprets him as a madman: “his eyes are mad,” she writes in her first entry (126). But while the concept of madness is firmly placed in the system of ideas in the beginning, signifying the opposite of sanity, by the end of the novel this notion also becomes relativised. It is not easy to decide which of Clegg or Miranda is or has gone mad in the story. This relativisation prevents Miranda from interpreting Clegg “simply” as a madman. She cannot help thinking of him as a queer – of course Clegg denies it (63). She also tries to apply a socio-political interpretation to Clegg, considering him as “uneducated and ignorant,” an “ordinary dull little” person, who is not “ashamed of being dull and little” (218). She regards Clegg as one of “the New People.” She thinks that principally his money is to blame for the given situation: “Persons like Caliban have no head for money” (221). Clegg in her eyes is just one of the Many, the conforming, uneducated, ignorant mass. At other times, however, she cannot help thinking of Clegg as a thrilling mystery, a secret to be solved, as an enigma: “A strange thing. He fascinates me” (126). “‘You’re just like a Chinese box,’ she said” (104). She has to conclude that “he has some secret” (248) (cf. G.P.’s reading of Miranda!). Thus, both Miranda and Clegg serve as enigmas, secrets to be solved for each other.

However, the most prominent way in which Miranda tries to “read” Clegg is the psychoanalytical. She presupposes that she has an authority to know him, to analyse him (based on her social status), often talking to him imitating the atmosphere and methods of a session: “Go on. Just talk” (99); “What sort of dreams did you have about me?” (111); “I have an irresistible desire sometimes to get to the bottom of him, to drag things he won’t talk about out of him” (159).

She supposes that there is something *hidden* in him, which has to be brought out and analysed, or which can break out at any moment. "What I fear in you is something you don't know is in you [...] It's lurking somewhere about in this house, this room, this situation, waiting to spring" (75). This is another version of the surface–depth dichotomy, which, as we have seen, is not valid in the novel, and the interpretive strategy based on it does not work. Miranda supposes a hidden *centre* in Clegg, on the basis of which he can be interpreted.

First she concludes that there is *nothing* in this centre, therefore she has nothing to interpret. The reader will recall that Clegg's most important feature is a pervasive sense of emptiness: he lacks parents, friends, proper education, erudition, imagination, love, and so on. The mask, the persona, the role-playing in fact conceal an emptiness:³³ "He's not human; he's an empty space disguised as a human" (234). Later she revises her reading strategy and finds that there is something in this emptiness: however, she has to realise that it is *herself* that is in the middle of it and therefore she cannot interpret it either: "I could never cure him. Because I'm his disease" (257). That is to say, the object and the subject become one and the same: Miranda should interpret herself. The situation comes full circle, it gets closed upon itself, in the way the prison is closed, and like Clegg's way of thinking cannot break out of his own boundaries. The situation is like the problem of interpreting a photograph: "If the Photograph cannot be penetrated, it is because of its evidential power."³⁴ This is the result of her misreading, with which she tried to allegorise Clegg and construct something else, something other behind him.

There is another basic incongruity, related to the contrast of synthesis vs. analysis, which prevents the characters from the proper reading of the other. Miranda, thinking that she embodies synthesis and union, as it has been shown, wants to apply the same pattern to Clegg – like a reader applying his or her "identity theme" to a text, but she fails. Clegg personifies fragmentation and analysis. Miranda wants to "get" Clegg, that is, have a full picture, a "whole sight" of him, but she cannot: "You're very difficult to get. You're so featureless. Everything is nondescript" (62). "Oh, you're like mercury. You won't be picked up" (80). In fact she wants to carry out a true psychoanalytic reading: to reconstruct the patient's self from traces and fragments, filling in the gaps. However, Clegg (and his environment, too) is characterised by extreme

33 Burden, p. 32.

34 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 106.

fragmentation. It is enough to have a glance at his aunt's letter (196–197). Its syntax is so fragmented that the text is almost incomprehensible. His photos also fragment the world into little pieces: “The camera makes reality atomic, manageable, and opaque.”³⁵ “Photographic seeing, when one examines its claims, turns out to be mainly the practice of a kind of dissociative seeing [...].”³⁶ On the one hand, Clegg wants to fragment Miranda, but she resists. In turn, she wants to see synthesis in him, but he also resists, therefore, no valid interpretation results. The above-mentioned two reading strategies (Clegg: allegorisation and analysis; Miranda: allegorisation and synthesis) are not applicable in the context of the novel: what we have finally is a series of misreadings and misinterpretations, which will have tragic consequences.

4 CONCLUSION

The purpose of this essay was to examine the nature of the intersubjective reading process that is encoded in *The Collector*. The narrative seems to set up a clear-cut gender-based dichotomy, which evidently favours the female position. In this light, the two most important reading strategies of Clegg appear as perverse, sick and futile. These are: a characteristic “anal” reading (which dramatises the reading process as mere possession, selfish collection) and “voyeuristic” reading (which posits the reading process on the one hand as passive gazing and unconditional acceptance, on the other as violent peeping and degrading the other person into a mere object, exposing the cruel aspects of photographing). The novel strongly suggests that these “sick” reading modes prevent the male protagonist from the proper understanding of the other person and the failure of the reading process is due to these “bad” readings.

A pivotal question of the analysis is whether we can take the gender-based stark opposition of “bad male” reading vs. “good female” reading seriously. A careful examination of the theatrical nature of the narrative shows that ultimately both characters' reading strategy is rooted in suspicion and allegorising constructions. Due to the peculiar conditions of Clegg's house, the reading of both characters consists in generating allegorical “others” behind the other person. They always interpret the other as a representative of something else, for

³⁵ Sontag, p. 23.

³⁶ Sontag, p. 97.

instance of his/her social group, or of gender-based stereotypes. What they do not realise is that the alleged surface-depth dichotomy simply does not work within the context of the house. Miranda carries on imagining a hidden centre behind Clegg (in which she either finds nothing or finds herself), and Clegg remains suspicious of her till the end. What contributes to the breakdown of the hierarchy set up by the novel (with G.P. as a "master-reader") is a comparison between him and Clegg: both of them perform an essentialising reading, conceiving the female protagonist as either a mystery to be solved or a prostitute. Thus Clegg's status as the worst reader (and thus Miranda's position) becomes questionable, and finally both principal characters fall victim to their own misreadings. On the basis of all this it can be concluded that the novel approves the reading modes in which the reader enters into a dialogical relationship with the work, and is willing to risk himself/herself in the reading process.