

## Nikol Kovářiková, *Myths and Existential Masks in John Fowles's The Magus*

BA thesis  
Supervisor's Report

John Fowles is one of the British writers who incorporated mythological elements in most of his works. The author of the thesis examines the use of the myth in one of his earlier novels (in fact his first novel he was working on for more than a decade), *The Magus*, in its revised, definitive version of 1977. The novel is very complex, though it revolves around one basic, unusual experience of the hero, and the way in which reality and illusion are conceived can be called postmodernist. As such, it has attracted attention of critics for decades and it still seems open to interpretation. The thesis attempts to interpret its slippery character through the discussion of myths, existentialist positions and feelings and through its use of play, masks and performativity.

The first part of the thesis explains how mythology, virtually absent in the character of the nineteenth-century realistic novel, found its way to the novel and artistic representation, as well as thought in general, in the following century, and especially in the post-war period, in which Fowles started to be active as a man of letters. It includes works of the French existentialists Sartre and Camus and the most important theories of play and game, Huizinga's and Fink's, apparently the most relevant theoretical texts for the student's reading of the novel.

The thesis also presents a chapter on Fowles's books preceding publication of the first version of *The Magus*, the novel *The Collector* and the collection of essays and aphorisms *The Aristos*. While the student quotes occasionally from the latter one, she gives considerable space to *The Collector*, to show how the myth was incorporated in a text of fiction from the same period of the author's career. If she tried to underscore similarities and differences between the two novels in this respect, her attempt seems only partly successful: her discussion of *The Collector* focuses mainly on its structure and intertextual relation to *The Tempest* as a prototextual "myth", but it avoids more detailed confrontation of related motifs.

The core of the thesis, however, lies in her reading of the role of Nicolas Urfe, the narrator-hero, in his confrontation with a strange, enigmatic host of his, Maurice Conchis. The first half of this part is somewhat fragmented, some ideas are left unfinished where more elaboration would be welcome, but in the second part the account is consistent and provides a more detailed (and thus satisfying) analysis.

My reservations, however, concern the assertion that Nicolas went through a kind of ordeal, which may be understood as a rite of initiation, in which Conchis played the role of a mentor whose purpose was to rid Nick of his egoism, especially in the sphere of emotions. This of course implies a noble goal of the whole godgame the protagonist goes through, and a lesson from which he finally benefits, in moral terms at least. I'd like to ask two questions: if Nick is selected (or "elected") as one who deserves this purifying procedure, how does this correspond with the fact that the same godgame takes place each year with every new English teacher in Phraxos? Do all the young English (and American) teachers need this kind of purification to become better? The second question concerns the ending: how does the student see Nicolas at the very end of the novel and what can she say about the final scene (Nicolas and Alison's meeting)? And how does this ending correspond with the ending of *The Collector* (not to mention the ending of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*)?

The thesis is written in a clear, transparent language. Unfortunately, there are occasional errors and typos that remained uncorrected (Nikolasovi existence, strived, Fowles create, missing form – instead of from, the killing of the nymph – instead of satyr, the plea point, a wrong transcription of the Greek word eleutheria). Also, I believe, a brief synopsis of the novel in the introduction would make the thesis more reader-friendly.

I consider this BA thesis to be a very good attempt to approach an uneasy and perhaps rather too long (post)modern novel. I recommend the thesis for defence with a preliminary grade to be either an excellent or a very good (**výborně až velmi dobře**), depending on the character of the defence.

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