

## Gothic Healing under the Mediterranean Sun: *The Magus* by John Fowles as a Gothic Novel

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**Abstract:** The present paper aims at interpreting the novel *The Magus* by John Fowles within the framework of the Gothic genre. The argument shall be founded on a close analysis of chosen characteristics of the Gothic convention which can be identified within the text, such as the theatricality, the motif of insanity, as well as the issue of repressed sexuality. It shall also be argued that the novel presents the therapeutic role of fear, intrinsically linked to the Gothic mode of expression. The boundary between the rational and the irrational is suspended to the point that the protagonist is unable to tell whether the apparitions he sees in the Magus's shadowy estate are of supernatural provenance or they constitute mere figments of his imagination deluded by the elements of the Mediterranean ambience. Remarkably, it is the experience of terror that ultimately heals Nicholas, an embittered and disillusioned young man, from the state of apathy and emotional handicap.

**Key words:** outcast, emotional handicap, psychic make-up, illusion, Gothic

### Gotyckie uzdrowienie w śródziemnomorskim słońcu. *Mag* Johna Fowlesa jako powieść gotycka

**Streszczenie:** Celem niniejszego artykułu jest próba interpretacji powieści Johna Fowlesa *Mag* pod kątem obecnych w niej motywów gotyckich. Analizie poddane zostaną takie elementy konwencji gotyckiej jak: teatralność wydarzeń, motyw szaleństwa czy kwestia tłumionej seksualności. Autorka pragnie zwrócić uwagę na nieodzowny dla stylu gotyckiego element lęku, który w powieści pełni funkcję terapeutyczną. W powieści granica pomiędzy racjonalnym i irracjonalnym zostaje zatarta do tego stopnia, że główny bohater nie jest w stanie stwierdzić, czy wydarzenia, które mają miejsce w mrocznym domostwie tytułowego maga, dzieją się w rzeczywistości, czy też są dziełem jego omamionej śródziemnomorską rzeczywistością wyobraźni. Towarzyszący doświadczeniom Nicholasowi strach ostatecznie uzdrawia zgorzkniałego mężczyznę ze stanu apatii i upośledzenia emocjonalnego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wyrzutek, irracjonalność, dysfunkcja emocjonalna, konstytucja psychiczna, gotyk

The objective of the present paper is to interpret the novel *The Magus*<sup>1</sup> (1965), by John Fowles, as a Gothic narrative. It also aims to present therapeutic function of fear, induced by ‘the Gothic experience’ in the novel’s protagonist. Fowles’s work is set on an idyllic Greek island, which is untypical of Gothic literature; it can, nonetheless, be read as a Gothic novel given that it is characterised by motifs which are fundamental to the genre, namely, a strange and threatening milieu, the figure of an outcast, visions and phantoms, the issue of sexuality and desire, as well as the presence of Gothic monsters. Rather than a set of hard-and-fast rules, the Gothic is a convention comprising diverse kinds of narratives unified by certain reappearing features, the most elemental of which is the function of eliciting terror in readers<sup>2</sup>. Subject to several revivals characterized by “reappropriation and reinvention of previous forms rather than a straightforward repetition”<sup>3</sup>, the Gothic genre presents a non-homogeneous structure, similar to that of Frankenstein’s monster itself<sup>4</sup>.

The eighteenth-century Gothic functioned as an “exorsive force” for a particular kind of fear – the one induced by a dynamically changing world in which science gradually supplanted faith and led humans to redefine their condition<sup>5</sup>. Ironically “power of science, godlessness and social anarchy of the ‘age of reason’”<sup>6</sup> sparked strong emotional responses, one of which was Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, a novel which discusses all of the vital elements of the period listed above. *The Magus* appears to be an apt example of a XX century Gothic novel, as it shows the qualities which distinguish it from the works of the XVIII and XIX century Gothic. These include emphasis on human psychology, historical themes and references to cultural and gender issues, all of which shall be discussed throughout the article.

The author strives to show the way in which the ‘Gothic experience’ reveals, sometimes only implicitly, psychological changes within the protagonist of *The Magus*. The psychological quality of the main hero’s experiences, which is stressed in the paper, reflects the general tendency of the twentieth-century texts whose “haunting differs from that of nineteenth-century ghost stories, and takes on a more psychological (perhaps also a more metaphorical) dimension”<sup>7</sup>. Catherine Spooner, referring to Chris Baldick’s definition of literary Gothic, argues that any fearful return of the past “is compounded by physical imprisonment: the labyrinthine

<sup>1</sup> The author will be referring to the New York: Dell Publishing 1985 edition of *The Magus* throughout the paper.

<sup>2</sup> M. Belville, *Gothic-postmodernism. Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009, p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> C. Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic*, London, 2006, p. 11–12.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> M. Belville, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

underground vaults and torture chambers of eighteenth-century Gothic texts ... [or] the chambers of the human heart and brain in twentieth century writing”<sup>8</sup>. In *The Magus* both these dimensions of literary Gothic are present, as the horrors of the protagonist’s mind are awakened by the uncanny character of the place to which he travels. In Gothic literature, the act of travelling is paralleled by a psychic or spiritual journey which concludes in a profound transformation of the traveller’s morality, philosophical stand or relationships with others. Many of Edgar Allan Poe’s works, may be mentioned as classic Gothic examples of an inward journey into a ‘hypnagogic’ state – the sleep-walker’s state of psychomachia and dream vision – where the psychic conflicts of the soul’s quest toward a higher state are projected”<sup>9</sup>, as Eric Carlson puts it. Several of Fowles’s characters, male and female alike, undertake a journey whose aim is acquiring psychic equilibrium and a sense of integrity, or perhaps we should say, a sense of genuine life. In *The Magus*, archetypal motifs, built on a mythological backbone rich in shamanic elements, set the scene for a Gothic narrative.

The novel presents the story of Nicholas Urfe, a young Englishman who is given the post of an English teacher in The Lord Byron School on the island of Phraxos. There are several reasons why he decides to leave England for Greece. One is his urge to get away from Alison, a woman who Nicholas believes to have become too seriously involved in their relationship. Another one is the urge to get away from the boredom of England and the routine of a teaching job in a minor public school which offers no possibility of development for an ambitious young man who fears stagnation, boredom and the “numbing annual predictability of life”<sup>10</sup>. Finally, Nicholas chooses Phraxos because he needs a new mystery, and the hunger for novelty pushes him to explore a new land. The novel is a *Bildungsroman*, with the protagonist subjected to multiple transformations within his psyche, which result in his acquiring a mature view of the human condition in general, and of his own condition in particular. This maturation process that heals Nicholas from spiritual ailments acquires a Gothic dimension.

The XX century Gothic’s penchant for psychologism necessitates some reference to a particularly important psychological model of the period, namely psychology of depth of Carl Gustav Jung. If examined within the framework of Jungian theory, Nicholas Urfe might be easily diagnosed with excessive rationalism, which leaves no space for emotionality or spirituality and which negatively affects his relationships with women. He lives his life ignorant of the spiritual layer of man’s psyche and is contemptuous of emotionality. The man introduces himself as “an atheist and an absolute non-believer in spiritualism, ghosts and all that mumbo-jumbo”<sup>11</sup>, demon-

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<sup>8</sup> C. Spooner, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> E. W. Carlson, *A Companion to Poe Studies*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996, p. 179.

<sup>10</sup> *The Magus*, p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> *The Magus*, p. 105.

strating an outright lack of sensitivity to any metaphysical dimension of the world. He feels too civilized to become seriously interested in the concepts shown by reason to be mere products of human superstition. The hero no longer fears the wrath of unknown gods nor the subsequent need to beg for their mercy; neither does he feel the need to beg for either their mercy or help to achieve his goals. Nicholas's existentialist attitude, in fact, boils down to selfishness and sarcasm that mark his conduct. He wants to view Greek culture as if from the outside, keeping aloof rather than becoming an active participant. This attitude is pathological according to the psychological theory of Carl Gustav Jung, who argues that contact with the spiritual realm of man's psyche, perceptible through dreams, fantasy, religious experiences, intuition and myth, is necessary for an individual to lead a healthy existence:

The motto "Where there's a will, there's a way" is the superstition of modern man. Yet in order to sustain his creed, contemporary man pays the price in a remarkable lack of introspection. He is blind to the fact that, with all his rationality and efficiency, he is possessed by "powers" that are beyond his control. His gods and demons have not disappeared at all; they have merely got new names. They keep him on the run with restlessness, vague apprehensions, psychological complications, an insatiable need for pills, alcohol, tobacco, food and, above all, a large array of neuroses<sup>12</sup>.

According to Jung, therefore, it is not the man who nurtures a spiritual life that is primitive or sick, but rather the man who is disconnected from any spiritual life, the man who is disconnected from his own unconscious depths enveloped by that spiritual life, he is the one who is primitive or sick<sup>13</sup>. Nicholas does not realize that his rationalism has destroyed his ability to recognize the meaning of universal symbols inherent in his culture, as well as in his own unconscious. He needs to become immersed in an atmosphere of mysticism, which he could not find in London, and go through an experience which exceeds rational calculation in order to be able to reevaluate life and critically examine his own condition.

Jung defined the process of psychological maturation as a gradual and continuous exchange between the conscious and the unconscious spheres of one's psyche. The aim of such an exchange is to restore one's psychological balance by constructing dream material that re-establishes "the total psychic equilibrium"<sup>14</sup>. This is what Jung calls "the complementary (or compensatory) role of dreams"<sup>15</sup> in man's psychic make-up. Dreams are one way through which one becomes aware of those aspects of one's own personality that for various reasons have been consigned to oblivion. This is performed through a process called "the realization of the *shadow*"<sup>16</sup>,

<sup>12</sup> C. G. Jung, *Man and his Symbols*, New York, 1964, p. 82.

<sup>13</sup> M. T. Kelsey, *Myth, History and Faith. The Re-mythologizing of Christianity*. New York, 1974, p. 120.

<sup>14</sup> C. G. Jung, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> M.-L. Franz, *The Process of Individuation*, in: *Man and His Symbols*, Carl Gustav Jung (ed.), New York, 1964, p. 168.

where the content of the unconscious, or the suppressed features of one's personality, enters the conscious sphere of one's mind. For Nicholas, coming to Greece is like finding himself in a dream, full of perplexing visions and supersensory impressions, where rationality proves to be a not particularly useful way of grasping the meaning of events. He is in a hallucinatory state, in which his shadow assumes the shapes of people and events, which changes into nightmare, though one that has therapeutic value. This device of suspending events between reality and dream is not unusual for the Gothic and in some Gothic writings it constitutes the organising principle of the story. The foretelling dreams of the main hero of *The Castle of Otranto*, for example, are as disturbing as the ones of Ambrosio in *Monk* in which "the most voluptuous objects" and "the most lustful and provoking images"<sup>17</sup> act as a catalyst for the hero's corruption. The prophetic dream of Victor Frankenstein is yet another instance of a black reverie that makes the hero's unconscious fears visible to the reader while at the same time foreshadowing future events. Also, many of Poe's stories are described by Carlson as being allegories of dream-experience, which occur "within the mind of a poet"<sup>18</sup>. Similarly, Nick's experiences at times seem to exist exclusively in his own mind. The process of his healing comes in stages which are projections of his psyche and which at the same time constitute Gothic turns of plot.

Indeed, the very idea of a journey to an alien and threatening land gives a Gothic dimension to the book. Anything alien is Gothic by definition, since the unknown arouses man's primal fear. The shift in the setting which takes place in the novel is particularly telling. It exemplifies one of the important features of the XX century Gothic, and that is referring to the findings of new academic disciplines, such as Cultural Studies<sup>19</sup>. Gothic, critics claim, "has become a means of reading culture, not just a cultural phenomenon to read"<sup>20</sup>. Nicholas is naturally not immune to the oppressive conditions of the culture he was brought up in, which requires man to display certain qualities such as physical and mental strength, limited expressiveness and deadened emotions. Since these features are stereotypically associated with manhood, lack of them results in low self-esteem and distorted personal identity, which can be observed in the protagonist. Moving from England to Greece, Nicholas migrates not only between two different cultures, but he also travels between his own human faculties. Nick's life in England is characterized by logical perception. Rationalism is the bedrock of his upbringing and of the education that has shaped his no-nonsense attitude towards the world around him.

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<sup>17</sup> M. G. Lewis, *The Monk*, e-book published by Xist Publishing, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Carlson, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

<sup>19</sup> L. Armit, *History of the Gothic: Twentieth-Century Gothic*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011, p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

The sun-flooded island is a striking contrast to his comparatively grey and dismal homeland. Nicholas arrives in a country bursting with exotic vegetation, a perfect setting for ever-lasting holidays, a land shrouded in mythical atmosphere: “There, was absolute solitude: three hidden cottages at one small bay, a few tiny chapels lost among the green downward sea of pines and deserted... The rest was sublimely peaceful, as potential as a clean canvas, a site for myths”<sup>21</sup>. However, it is common in myths that the charm of a place or a person is just a cover obscuring their sinister nature and so the island reveals a dark underside to its ‘sublime’ nature as well. Edmund Burke claimed that the notion of sublimity relies on the emotion of fear: “terror is in all cases whatsoever . . . the ruling principle of the sublime”<sup>22</sup>, and soon Nicholas does learn that the experience of terror has taken root in the very heart of Phraxos. Thus the protagonist discovers a dark aspect to Phraxos: during The Second World War Nazi Germans tortured local guerrillas there, and slaughtered over eighty villagers. As previously mentioned, the novel is representative for the XX century Gothic as it shows how “the real-life horror of the two world wars takes over from the imagined horrors of the supernatural and/or superstition”<sup>23</sup>. Extensive descriptions of dramatic events taking place in Greece during the Second World War function as no mere flashbacks, instead they actively contribute to the atmosphere of gloom encountered by the protagonist on Phraxos. That bleak dimension of the place, the island’s dark history, recurs in the narrative and contributes to the extraordinariness of the events in which Nicholas takes part. Those events are referred to when one night Nicholas is captured by German soldiers on his way back from Bourani; he is made to realize the monstrosity of wartime and faces a profound existential fear as he experiences man’s inhumanity.

Andrew Smith says that “Gothic creates an uncanny mood in which characters become doubled with places”<sup>24</sup>; this can be observed in *The Magus*, as Nicholas also has two faces, one of a gentle and self-confident intellectual, and the other of a selfish man capable of sophisticated emotional violence. However, the similarities between the young man and the island go further than that. Nicholas also has his own infamous history of abusing and humiliating women, a history which he is desperately trying to consign to oblivion. As the truth about Phraxos is gradually revealed to him, so is the reality of his own debauchery and ruthlessness in achieving his aims; the protagonist’s unease about the island’s obscure past is paralleled by the growing awareness of his own skeletons in the cupboard.

<sup>21</sup> *The Magus*, p. 66.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 59.

<sup>23</sup> L. Armitt, *History of the Gothic: Twentieth-Century Gothic*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011, p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> A. Smith, *Gothic Literature*, Edinburgh, 2013, p. 15.

Apart from the geographical distance separating him from his homeland, Nicholas is also isolated from the people among whom he lives; unable to speak proper Greek and knowing little about Greek customs and history, he remains detached from the inhabitants of Phraxos mentally and culturally. He admits:

I seemed to have no place in it, I could not use it and I was not made for it. I was a townsman; and I was rootless. I rejected my own age, yet could not sink back into an older<sup>25</sup>.

The language barrier makes it impossible for him to communicate with others, which earns him the status of an outcast, a figure frequent in Gothic narratives. As Nicholas experiences linguistic and cultural deprivation, his solitude makes him turn into an introvert, a lonely roamer, immersed in gloomy musings which eventually lead him to contemplate suicide. It is during one of those lonely, hallucinatory walks that the young man finds an anthology of modern English poetry with certain excerpts marked in it, a book which has been planted for him to find and initiate his transformation.

The book has been dropped for Nicholas by Maurice Conchis, a wealthy inhabitant of the island and an eccentric character, who plays various roles in the novel. Sometimes he acts as a Gothic villain – treacherous, cunning and cruel; on other occasions, however, his behaviour is benevolent, full of compassion and understanding. The man's extraordinariness both attracts Nicholas and fills him with terror: "The most striking thing about him was the intensity of his eyes; very dark brown, staring, with a simian penetration emphasized by the remarkably clear whites; eyes that seemed not quite human"<sup>26</sup>. The ambiguous ontological status of Conchis as well as Nicholas's inability to gain an insight into his intent, result in Nicholas's becoming even more baffled. Initially, he has the impression that the extraordinary man is insane: "He was slightly mad, no doubt harmlessly so, but mad. I had an idea that he thought I was someone else"<sup>27</sup>. On realizing, however, that what Conchis says is not only logical, but also reveals shrewdness of thought, he abandons the surmise.

The motif of insanity is another Gothic element in the novel. It does not apply to the character of Maurice Conchis only, but recurs in the behaviour of Nicholas towards the end of his stay on the island, when the multiplicity of bizarre events finally overwhelms him. Insanity does not have to be always associated with brutality and violence as it is in the case of Mr Rochester's mad wife, Bertha, but it can also take the form of the quiet hypersensitivity of Poe's Roderick Usher's which yet motivates the plot. An obscene statue of Priapus and an offer to swim naked in the pool make Nicholas suppose that Conchis might be a homosexual and seeking bodily satisfaction by attracting young men into his solitary estate. However, a story about

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<sup>25</sup> *The Magus*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 81.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 82.

a woman he loved as a young man makes Nicholas re-think this assumption. Finally, taking into consideration Maurice's wealth, Nicholas decides that his host is simply an eccentric millionaire who enjoys confronting people with riddles and mysteries.

Conchis is purposely elusive and his intent unspecified so as to bewilder the young man and spark his curiosity. He stages his bizarre dramas by arranging circumstances to create an environment which is to facilitate Nicholas's discovery and understanding of certain truths: "There are so many things I'd like to ask you. Would have liked to ask you'. He stood at the doors for me to pass, smiled. 'The most important questions in life can never be answered by anyone except oneself'"<sup>28</sup>. Thus from the very beginning Maurice Conchis is trying to inure Nicholas to existing in a state of confusedness from which there is no other way out but through a thorough examination of his own values and attitudes. The state of uncertainty the protagonist experiences lies at the heart of the Gothic convention, as it is indeed the very object of fear: "To be terrified is to be in a state of hesitation or suspension. Terror merely hints at unimaginable horrors and the mind is left to wander, while it waits to uncover what will happen next"<sup>29</sup>.

Encounters with the spiritual, which is another Gothic turn in the story, constitute a necessary step in the protagonist's transformation. It takes place in the world Nicholas is introduced to the very moment he meets Maurice Conchis, the world which he has so far been ignorant of and disdainful towards: the world of visions and phantoms, ghosts and metaphysical impressions. The young man takes that step during his first stay at Conchis's mansion, Bourani, when he is confronted with the apparition of a young girl playing the violin. On another occasion Nick sees the spirit of Robert Foulkes, a XVIIth century preacher and murderer, whose story Conchis told him before. Another evening his host tells him the story of Lily, a girl whose photographs are scattered here and there throughout his house; she had been his beloved who died young, from typhoid. The next evening Lily, unchanged by time, joins them for dinner. Due to these experiences Nicholas's sense of reality becomes vague. The people he meets constantly change their identities, their behaviour alters overnight and so does their attitude towards him. Lily, alias Julie, for example, plays various roles: first she is a Victorian girl, then a twentieth-century Cambridge graduate and finally a young psychologist carrying out research on Nicholas. The people he meets suddenly appear and disappear while ordinary men reveal supernatural features. As any attempt to predict the course of events proves to be futile, Nicholas learns to live in a state of uncertainty, where very little depends on him. He learns to perceive others as mysterious creatures of complex nature, which needs to be discovered. It is not Nicholas

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 111.

<sup>29</sup> M. Belville, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

who manipulates people now; he is the one awaiting another lesson and another piece of instruction. That state of uncertainty introduces a very gothic atmosphere which permeates the young man's ambience. Since the ontological status of the people Nicholas encounters is often ambiguous and their ghost-like elusiveness intermingles with the immediacy of their bodily appeal, the protagonist becomes immersed in Gothic obscurity of the place and of the creatures that surround him.

Issues of choice and risk are what Nicholas has to deal with from the very beginning of his adventure with Maurice. His host gives him a single dice and expresses his opinion that people go to war not out of social or political motives, but in order to get 'salt' for their life, to appreciate its true worth. Nicholas is offered to experience 'an entire war in one second'; if he throws a six he will have to take a cyanide pill. Although the offer may seem farcical, Conchis is the kind of man who does not mince words and Nicholas has no doubt that he is serious: "With ninety-nine persons out of a hundred, I would have known it was a bluff; but he was different, and a nervousness had hold of me before I could resist it"<sup>30</sup>. The intermingling of seriousness and play, of reality and farce, which is instrumental for structuring the atmosphere of uncertainty in the novel, leaves the protagonist perplexed and lost. Nicholas takes the dice and throws a six; the terror he experiences in the next few seconds is as irrational as it is unexpected, for he has to face the prospect of the consequences he has sworn to bear. Finally, Conchis reveals that the dice is loaded and the poison pills are fake, but the experience has a profound impact on the protagonist. It appears that the young man realizes that each decision bears potentially irreversible consequences and so nothing he does is without meaning. Throwing a dice for one's life becomes a metaphor for everyday choices, which each and every individual makes during their life and which are critical for the development of any given personality. It seems that Conchis tries to make it clear to Nicholas that in order to develop as a mature human being, one needs to be ready to make hazardous choices which require putting one's reason, faith and sometimes even life on the line. As the protagonist realizes that avoiding decisions has been his mode of living, this lesson cuts across the pride Nicholas has previously taken in being able to deal with life's existential dilemmas. The dice-casting test therefore constitutes one of numerous puzzling rites of passage that Conchis thrusts upon the main hero.

Drama is the most significant artistic device used by Maurice Conchis. Emphasis on the theatrical and the falsity inherent in the theatrical is yet another Gothic feature: "From its beginnings in the eighteenth century, in the 'Gothic revival' in architecture or the 'Gothic Story' [...] the modern 'Gothic' as we know it has been grounded in fakery"<sup>31</sup>. One of several

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<sup>30</sup> *The Magus*, p. 128.

<sup>31</sup> J. E. Hogle, *The Gothic Ghost of the Counterfeit and the Progress of Abjection*, in: *A Companion to the Gothic*, D. Punter (ed.), Oxford, 2000, p. 293.

masques which Nicholas views takes place during his first stay at Bourani. The dinner Nicholas is having with Conchis and Lily on a terrace is interrupted by a bizarre spectacle which takes place in the garden below. A naked man, some sort of Apollo, blows a horn; at the sound of this horn there appears a fleeing nymph-like girl chased by a satyr; as soon as the girl disappears in the bushes, Artemis emerges and shoots the satyr with an arrow. Although the drama is not commented on by Conchis, who pretends not to see it, it has obviously been designed and performed for Nicholas in order to disturb his rational perception. It also foreshadows one of Nicholas's future experiences: while pursuing one woman, Nicholas will be emotionally destroyed by another. On another night, when Nicholas is returning from Conchis's estate, he is captured and kept prisoner by German soldiers. Recovering from the shock of that, he realizes that he has found himself in the middle of the Second World War and that the events reflect Conchis's war experiences, about which he has heard before. Not only are original uniforms and equipment used, but also native German actors are involved in the spectacle. It is obvious that Conchis is going to great lengths to make his plays as lifelike as possible in order to show the fluidity between life and fiction. Nicholas realizes that he has entered a land where there is no borderline between the past and the present, where reality and fiction are interconnected and where resorting to reason is futile because the events that await him are supposed to be experienced intuitively and emotionally rather than rationally. He learns that he is taking part in a play which has an established scenario, setting and cast, in which he himself is included, and yet should not question, though he does not know the script:

At last it began to seem plain. All that happened at Bourani was in the nature of a private masque; and no doubt the passage was a hint to me that I should, both out of politeness and for my own pleasure, not poke my nose behind the scenes<sup>32</sup>.

In the uncanny Gothic atmosphere of Bourani, Conchis's mysterious estate, even basic concepts become blurred because "every truth in his world was a sort of lie; and every lie a sort of truth"<sup>33</sup>. Indeed, Fowles's *The Magus* embodies the framework of a play, whose aim is to examine the nature of spiritual transformation and of catharsis. The theatrical performances do not function as separate events but are inextricably linked with the course of events to the extent that it is hard for Nicholas to distinguish reality from fiction. At the beginning, this new world he finds himself in seems to be an artificially crafted environment with an obstacle course, designed to titillate the whim of an eccentric. Only later does he realise that the play in which he has inadvertently found himself is an imitation of life itself in its deep, emotional structure. It seems that the purpose of all the events happening on improvised stages is to re-unite ordinary and sacred aspects

<sup>32</sup> *The Magus*, p. 169.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 299.

of Nicholas's life by revealing his hidden self and giving form to feelings which accompany his shadow<sup>34</sup>.

One of the underlying themes of the novel is the distinction between male and female attributes and investigation into the sexual motivation of the protagonist. Just as Roderick Usher's sexual impulses constitute the latent reason for his madness, so Nicholas Urfe's amoral sexual practices result in his breakdown. Unlike some Gothic novels, *The Magus* does not depict women as helpless creatures, oppressed by malevolent male characters. The novel contains well-developed strong female characters, who also constitute vital components of many Gothic stories. Fowles emphasizes the intuition, independence and mysteriousness of his female characters whose strength derives from the ability to see the world in terms of relationships:

Men love war because it allows them to look serious. Because they imagine it is the only thing that stops women laughing at them. In it they can reduce women to the status of objects. That is the great distinction between the sexes. Men see objects, women see the relationship between objects. Whether the objects need each other, love each other, match each other. It is an extra dimension of feeling we men are without and one that makes war abhorrent to all real women – and absurd. I will tell you what war is. War is a psychosis caused by an inability to see relationships<sup>35</sup>.

Through their emotional constitution, women have a direct access to knowledge about the nature of reality and they can teach it to men by exposing them to new experiences. Female wisdom is mysterious and uncanny because it is not related to rationality, neither is it based on cold facts, and yet it reaches to the very core of the human condition. Fearing that aspect of femininity, which transcends his understanding, Nick downgrades the status of women reducing them to mere sexual partners.

Nicholas is unable to resist his erotic passions, which makes him similar to dark Gothic villains like Ambrosio or Schedoni. However the difference between them and Nicholas is that his transgressions create an understanding of his vices, and so in a sense, precede moral advancement, precede it and so lead to it. The twin sisters, Lily and Rose or, as they are called later, Julie and June, act as a catalyst for Nick to realise the complexity of desire. Almost identical physically, and differentiated only by a scar on Julie's wrist, the women stand for contrasting concepts of femininity. Julie, who personifies the archetype of a virgin, fascinates Nicholas with her purity, mysteriousness and innocence. She is fragile and inexperienced, but her perception is insightful and knowledgeable. The other sister, June, is the embodiment of sensuality, eroticism, danger and unexpectedness, and as such she attracts Nicholas as well. June is the exemplar of the 'ideal woman' which dominated Nicholas's life in England. Physicality counts most for Nicholas and so, although he declares his love for Julie, the young man

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<sup>34</sup> O. Ichim, *Dramatic Elements in Two Novels by Mircea Eliade and John Fowles*, "Philologica Jassyensia", 2006, An. II, No.1, pp. 129-134.

<sup>35</sup> *The Magus*, p. 420.

cannot help feeling intrigued by the other sister, June. It seems that Nicholas's idea of woman has been split into two categories: he either classifies them as potential sexual partners or as unattainable soul mates. When it turns out that the twins have deceived him, acting out their characters as part of a performance, Nick realizes that the two ideals of woman cannot be taken separately. They coexist in a symbiotic connection, reflecting the dual nature of femininity, one which has two faces: a malevolent, cruel one that inflicts pain on one's soul, and a caring, benevolent one that helps and supports man in his efforts to gain emotional equilibrium. The lesson these female characters give Nicholas is about an important human faculty, unfamiliar to him thus far: the ability to understand the language of emotions. What Nicholas comes to comprehend is why he failed in his relationship with Alison: a woman displaying the two aspects of femininity in equal proportions, for Alison is Julie and June in one person.

This emotional handicap is one of the illnesses Nicholas suffers from and is the one to be treated during this journey. The treatment, however, is going to be painful, performed by the spirits of darkness. The Greek name of Maurice Conchis's estate, Bourani, as Nicholas discovers, means both 'death' and 'water'. The name foreshadows the ritual death which he will experience, as well, eventually, as his re-birth of sorts. It is significant that in the shamanic tradition, water apart from symbolising the unconscious, is strongly associated with femininity, and womb-waters. The young man's journey into the land of dark spirits, where he is plunged into his own unconsciousness in order to face his 'shadow', is at the same time a journey into the core of female nature. He learns how to walk in the land of the female psyche, and feels the pain of being torn to pieces by conflicting ideas, struggles with visions dark and bright, and faces the darkness of his own female demons.

The fallibility of his reasoning and perception becomes apparent to Nicholas shortly before the novel's culmination point, during the trial, which is at the same time the most terrifying part of the young man's experience. Julie, the virginal goddess-like woman he has desired for so long, finally offers herself to him. Nicholas is certain that this sexual act is the reward and the ultimate sense of his Bourani experience. He feels exhilarated and victorious. As soon, however, as they achieve climax the woman puts on her dressing gown and, like a professional actress after a completed scene, utters her exit line: "My name isn't Julie, Nicholas. And I'm sorry we can't provide the customary flames"<sup>36</sup>. She looks at Nicholas like a surgeon would who has just successfully performed a difficult operation, "peeling off the rubber gloves, surveying the suture"<sup>37</sup>. Within a few moments Nicholas is thrown from the pedestal of a victorious Don Juan and becomes a ridiculed

<sup>36</sup> *The Magus*, p. 495.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

and humiliated wretch. The young man has been exposed to the core of femininity: sweetness, eroticism, fragility, wisdom, cruelty, intelligence, power, etc. Lights go up, figures in black burst in, Nicholas is hogtied, gagged and given an injection which induces ghastly visions. He is then kept in a dungeon for an undetermined time. Then, left with nothing but a bed linen clutched tightly around his hips, Nicholas is dragged to an eerie hall where he is given a 'trial'.

The trial is a psychological dream allegory in which different creatures symbolise Nick's personality. It takes place in a shadowy chamber 'stinking of ritual', with cabbalistic emblems on the walls. Both the Gothic ambience of the place and the judges' ghastly ensembles, which at the first sight seem farcical, introduce Nicholas into a state of terror while he experiences a "vivisection of the mind"<sup>38</sup>. The fear he feels, however, is not of the appearances themselves, but of the intention behind the appearances. He comes to realize that it is not the mask he is afraid of, because in his century one is accustomed to science fiction and too sure of scientific reality ever to be truly scared by the supernatural. He is afraid of what lies behind the mask, which is the "source of all fear, all horror, all real evil, man himself"<sup>39</sup>. Nicholas learns that the demons he confronts are there not to judge him, but to let him judge himself; as they constitute embodiments of his vices, fearing the beasts he in fact fears himself. A "blue film", which presents detached organs: bared breasts, legs, hands, genitals symbolizes the way Nicholas has separated sexuality from love in his past relationships with women<sup>40</sup>. He feels as though he is being watched by an omnipresent Ethics, which, though not connected to any kind of religious or moral system, forbids certain actions, the worst of which is the defilement of love. Having dived into the depth of his unconsciousness, Nicholas faces the darker aspects of himself and learns to understand the true nature of his deeds: "My monstrous crime was Adam's, the oldest and most vicious of all male selfishnesses: to have imposed the role I needed from Alison on her real self. Something far worse than lèse-majesté. Lèse-humanité"<sup>41</sup>.

Returning to London, easy as it may appear, is indeed the most difficult part of Nicholas's transformation process. Although Phraxos has been left behind, the Gothic atmosphere does not cease to surround him; it intrudes upon his everyday life. He is accompanied by a sense of being watched all the time and thus remains in a state of constant tension. Alison, with whom he now desires to reunite, becomes Poe's symbol of the supernal, "dream maiden": mysterious, passionate and elusive, a woman who disturbs a young

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 501.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 508.

<sup>40</sup> E. McDaniel, *The Magus: Fowles's Tarot Quest*, "Journal of Modern Literature", 1980-81, No. 8.2, p. 256.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 406.

man's mind<sup>42</sup>. Finally, Nicholas discovers that a man named Maurice Conchis in fact died during the Second World War. And so his psyche becomes haunted by memories of the past episodes, which seem more and more hallucinatory. Surprisingly, however, it no longer matters to him whether the bizarre events took place in reality or were mere figments of his imagination. What matters is that he recognizes the futility of his 'pre-Greek' approach and understands that, quite paradoxically, the ultra-realistic attitude with which he once approached the world and himself, does not, in fact, allow man to access human reality. Nicholas desires a complete recovery of his emotionality-spirituality just as he yearns for the 'resurrected' Alison.

The Gothic, while apparently easily characterized by its setting and characters, is a genre of great complexity. It can be accurately defined as "a multi-dimensional force, [...] an aesthetic experience and a mode of cultural expression that traverses genres, forms, media, disciplines and national boundaries"<sup>43</sup>. The last element of the definition is particularly significant in *The Magus*. Undoubtedly, some peculiar 'Gothic aura' travels with the protagonist from England to Greece and then back to England, easily adapting to changing geographical and cultural surroundings, which indicates multifaceted nature of the convention. That is because it is not what appears in a Gothic novel that is of prime importance, but what effect it has on the novel's characters and simultaneously on the reader. In *The Magus* specific emotional stimuli are employed to such a degree as to create a fear reaction in the protagonist who, through this, is expected to undergo a profound transformation of personality. While farce constitutes the underpinnings of the plot, it is always accompanied by an underlying sense of terror and that mixture seems to be the most effective Gothic device to induce the state of tension. The reader might not believe in the supernatural, just like Nicholas, and yet one's hands sweat at the thought that maybe, just maybe, ghosts exist. Even if they do not, what John Fowles might want us and his protagonist to learn from his lesson is that the apprehension of the uncanny dimension of one's existence is indispensable to the living of a fulfilled life. Quite surprisingly, it seems that the Gothic experience of the main hero may emerge as therapeutic, enabling Nicholas to change from Mr Hyde back into Dr Jekyll.

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<sup>42</sup> Carlson, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

<sup>43</sup> G. Byron, D. Townshend, *The Gothic World*, London: Routledge, 2013, p. XXXVIII.

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