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Nicholas Urfe's Masculine Trap or the Construction of Manhood, its Ambivalences and Limitations in John Fowles's *The Magus*

Abstract

Western society and its fiction faces the overwhelming problem of masculinity and its modeling. The era of war, capitalism, the challenges of feminism affect the ideology within which men are constructed both as individuals and as a social group. John Fowles's fiction tackles the crucial issue of male power and control as masculinity is put to test and trial in his 1965 novel *The Magus*. The definition of manhood, male virility and social respectability of the period shape the 20th century male characters in Fowles's fiction. This paper aims to explore how John Fowles investigates the role of masculinity and power myths on the personal level of relationship and a wider scale of war and capitalism in *The Magus*. Notions of masculinity offer the protagonist, Nicholas Urfe, a sense of a superiority and power over women in the course of the novel. Among the goals of the project is to examine the mythical journey of Nicholas, which becomes a testing ground of his masculinity and maturity, as well his trial and 'disintoxication,' which is intended to help him to reevaluate his life and his relationships with women. One of the issues posed is whether Nicholas Urfe is reborn as a new man at the end of his search for redemption or if he remains the same egotistic, 'lone wolf' as he appears in the beginning of the novel.

"It [evolution] allows the duds like me freedom to become a little less imperfect."

(Fowles, *The Magus*)

"A professional rake is rarely a man to be pitied."

(Fowles, *The Magus*)

"Masculinity is a bit like air – you breathe it in all the time, but you aren't aware of it much."

(Dyer, *Sexuality of Men*)

Western society and its fiction faces the overwhelming problem of masculinity and its modeling. Masculinity is a construction "within a gender order; but gender order is neither simple nor static," notes R.W. Connell (2005, 11). Manhood has been

considered an “evolving social construct” which undergoes many changes (Stearns 11). It has a historical development (in the Victorian and later Edwardian culture manliness was “associated with virtuous restraint, self-regulation and obedience to consciousness,” according to David Alderson (15) and is continually adapting to new social categories. The concept of ‘manliness’ became a new moral code as well as a social imperative. Embracing this ideal was a challenging and testing experience for many men as they negotiated power, privilege and status in both the private and the public spheres of life. Old models of manhood passed and men experienced loss of identity and social reference. The era of war, capitalism, the challenges of feminism affect the ideology within which men are constructed both as individuals and as a social group. Until recent years men “have begun to analyze and challenge their own power, values and behavior from within the experience of masculinity,” claims Bruce Woodcock (8). Notions of masculinity offer men a sense of superiority and power over the ‘Other,’ particularly women.

Men’s studies show that problems of male roles are linked to the rise of consciousness-raising groups. Connell argues that “blind spots – race, sexuality, cultural difference, class – are much the same” (1995, 209). Issues of sexuality, control over self and the ‘Other,’ power roles included in the ‘politics of masculinity’ are interconnected in the fiction of many contemporary writers. John Fowles’s fiction tackles the crucial issue of male power and control as Nicholas Urfe’s masculinity is put to test and trial in his 1965 novel *The Magus*. Patriarchy is often defined as the “fragility of masculinity at the psychic level, rather than elaborating on its role as a foundation for man’s social power” (Roper and Tosh; qtd. in Adams 3). Therefore, the construction of masculinity is often in a dichotomy between fragility and social power (3). The articulation “of social power works through as well as against the fragility of masculine identities” (3). Masculine regiments regulate “more than erotic desire; they are multi-faceted constructions of identity and social authority that inevitably situate the private self in relation to an imagined audience” (2). The importance of masculinity is a central issue in both literary and cultural change. When one looks at many tensions of gender, men are marked not “by [...] regulation of the body, but by assignments of gendered identity that circulate outside that discourse” (4). Many men experience the crisis of masculinity, they are “losing, power or privilege relative to their prior status” in places such as family, work, education and many others (8). There is also a shift in men’s “*experiences* of their position *as* men, their maleness, and what it means” to be a man (8). They feel powerless and uncertain, even confused at times.

The masculinity myths imposed on men go back to the Victorian and Edwardian historical period. The definition of manhood, male virility and social respectability of the period shape the 20th century male characters in Fowles’s fiction, specifically his protagonist. His personal background comes out of the same experience. He is aware of the power roles from his life in school and military service as both

institutions “impose an especially rigid form of masculinity” (Benton 19). Fowles recalls his experience as being “totally brainwashed. Little English boys were taught that serving King and Empire – and all that rubbish – was the only true goal in life” (Hall 96). His personal sense of resentment intensifies the ambivalent nature of masculinity, both threatening and simultaneously attractive. The project aims to explore how John Fowles investigates the role of masculinity and power myths on the personal level of relationship between Nicholas Urfe and the women he meets as well as on a wider scale of war and capitalism in *The Magus*. Notions of masculinity offer the protagonist, Nicholas Urfe, a sense of a superiority and power over women in the course of the novel. Among the goals of this project is to examine the mythical journey of Nicholas, which becomes a testing ground of his masculinity and maturity, as well his trial and ‘disintoxication,’ which is intended to help him to reevaluate his life and his relationships with women. One of the issues posed is whether Nicholas Urfe is reborn as a new man at the end of his search for redemption or if he remains the same egotistic, ‘lone wolf’ as he appears in the beginning of the novel.

The novel is often interpreted on multiple levels: an existential search for *eleutheria* (freedom); the fool’s quest through the “major arcana of Tarot” (McDaniel 247–260) and a hero’s quest for independence and selfhood. Despite the various approaches to Nicholas’s character and his male search, it is obvious he has to learn who he is as a man and understand those around him. To correct his perception of the world and rid of the alienation and even impotence, he has to be put through a series of tests, devised by Maurice Conchis, the ultimate artist/magus himself, only then he can achieve a transformation and realize that “truth and reality do not exist objectively but inhere, instead, in the perceiver” (Wolfe 119). As he sets off to discover a new, meaningful pattern of life, he “need[s] a new land, a new race, a new language, [...] a new mystery” (7). In fact, mystery is what draws him to Conchis, Lily and the search for the mystery behind them and at the same time his response is to resist mystery by trying to find reasonable explanations of his experiences.

The Magus in its surreal and mythical journey addresses the male power and control over the self and ‘Other,’ particularly women. As Fowles reveals in the revised version of the novel (1978), Nicholas Urfe becomes the man who “took on, if not the true representative face of a modern Englishman of my own class and background” (9). He applies the technique of the masque throughout the novel to allow Nicholas Urfe to mature and change in his treatment of women. There are scholars who claim that there is “certainly meant to be some progression in Nicholas’s character” (Binns 83). However, by the end of the novel Nicholas remains unchanged “in terms of his attitudes to women and his exploitation of his own social power” (Woodcock 47). Despite him being a stereotypical male the novel revolves around Nicholas as he becomes an embodiment of constructs of masculinity, its ambivalences and limitations which are put on trial.

In his relationships with women, Nicholas Urfe behaves according to his own needs and desires as well as society's expectations of him as the male. He applies the concept of "unpredictability, cynicism, indifference" to women: "Then, like a conjurer with his white rabbit, I produced the solitary heart" (9). He applies this technique to the relationships as if it is a script of a play he writes himself: "I became as neat at ending liaisons as at starting them" (9). Nicholas is marred by a number of inconsiderate sexual feats in this game of pursuit and later abandonment of women: "I didn't collect conquests; but by the time I left Oxford I was a dozen girls away from virginity. I found my sexual success and the apparently ephemeral nature of love equally pleasing. It was like being good at golf, but despising the game" (9). His role model becomes D.H. Lawrence whose visions of sexuality appeal to Nicholas: "the woman inferior to man in everything but that one great power of female dark mystery and beauty: the brilliant, virile male and the dark, swooning female" (214). Having left Janet, "a fundamentally silly girl I knew I didn't love and never would love" (9), Nicholas meets Alison who is unlike others: "I suddenly had a feeling that we were one body, one person [...]. A terrible deathlike feeling, which anyone less cerebral and self-absorbed than I was then would have realized was simply love. I thought it was desire" (23).

Alison is the only woman in his gallery of conquests who does not "fall for the solitary heart; she had a nose for emotional blackmail" (22). It is Alison who openly labels him "a snob, a prig, a twopenny-halfpenny Don Juan" (28). When Nicholas decides to leave for Greece, his reason for the adventure is "real boredom, not my modish ennui" as well as "there was also a girl I was tired of" (6). He lies about his interest in Alison (25) as well as the fact that he is "deceiving her with another woman during the latter part of September. The woman was Greece" (27). His final note is another script he creates to perform: "Oh God, if only I was worth waiting for" (35). Urfe's true reaction is that "the thing I felt most clearly, when the first corner was turned, was that I had escaped" (35). He experiences a sense of "taking wing again [...]" and an agreeable feeling of emotional triumph" (35). Susanna Onega suggests that Urfe presents himself as "spoiled young man who wants to lead a full, creative life, but for the wrong reasons and primarily for the sake of impressing others" (40).

It is significant that Greece becomes a "Circe-like" mythical place with its benignity and potential aggressiveness:

When that ultimate Mediterranean light fell on the world around me, I could see it was supremely beautiful; but when it touched me, I felt it was hostile. It seemed to corrode, not cleanse [...] it was partly the terror, the stripping-to-essentials, of love; because I fell [...] totally and forever in love with the Greek landscape from the moment I arrived. But with the love came a contradictory, almost irritating, feeling of impotence and inferiority, as if Greece were a woman so sensually provocative that I must fall physically and desperately in love with her, and at the same time so calmly aristocratic that I should never be able to approach her. (36)

In a way, Greece is the symbol of an “ever-enticing, ever-denying woman...of the changeable Lily/Julie/Vanessa figure with Greece” (Onega 42). From the time of his arrival to Greece, Urfe leads a life of depression and loneliness, occasionally thinking of Alison: at “moments of sexual frustration, not regretted love” (41). By December he decides to “erase [Alison]” from his life (43). He finds a new friendship in Demetriades, who assists him in a pursuit of sexual satisfaction and provides a temporary distraction from his solitude.

John Fowles claims that Urfe is “meant to be a typical inauthentic man of the 1945–50 period” (qtd. in Campbell 466). Nicholas himself acknowledges being a certain type of male identity that attracts Maurice Conchis: “I was not interesting in myself, but only as an example” (76). The juxtaposition of power versus inadequacy in his relationship with women originates from Nicholas’s background. Being a student at Oxford he is “too green to know that all cynicism masks a failure to cope – an impotence, in short” (5). He tries to defend himself and blames “the age, my generation” (132). His family upbringing as well as later training at school and military service are responsible for the shaping of his personality. Society creates the construct of masculinity and assigns certain roles and expectations that men should be subjected to. Fowles shows that “Urfe scripting his life according to socially current models” (Woodcock 52). During his years in Oxford, Urfe

called a certain kind of inconsequential behavior existentialist. Less enlightened people would have called it capricious or just plain selfish; but we didn’t realize that the heroes or anti-heroes, of the French existentialist novels we read were not supposed to be realistic. We tried to imitate them, mistaking metaphorical descriptions of complex modes of feeling for straightforward prescriptions of behavior. (5)

Similarly to many young men of his period, Nicholas confuses fiction with reality and his experiences in Greece make him realize the illusion of his choices. Having entered a myth, Nicholas sees himself as “Theseus in the maze; somewhere in the darkness Ariadne waited; and the Minotaur” (276). However, even after when he is brought to a confrontation with himself, Nicholas continues to see the world from an egocentric position:

all my life I had tried to turn life into fiction, to hold reality away; always I had acted as if a third person was watching and listening and giving me marks for good or bad behavior – a god like a novelist, to whom I turned, like a character with the power to please, the sensitivity to feel slighted, the ability to adapt himself to whatever he believed the novelist-god wanted. This leechlike variation of the superego I had created myself, fostered myself, and because of it I had always been incapable of acting freely. It was not my defense; but my despot. (467)

The essential trial scene reveals Nicholas as a man under “a mask of cynicism that cannot hide more or less paranoiac sense of having been betrayed by life” (440). Bruce Woodcock suggest that “this is directly linked to Urfe’s form of masculinity is left in no doubt by the terms of the psychoanalytical report delivered during the trial” (49). The trial becomes a testing of Urfe’s psychology and identity as a man. He is found “normal” according to his answers to tests and treated according to his “disease,” which he identifies early as a “technique”: “The subject has preyed sexually and emotionally on a number of young women. His method, according to Dr. Maxwell, is to stress and exhibit his loneliness and unhappiness—in short, to play the little boy in search of the lost mother” (438). One of his ‘defects’ is the lack of ‘the social content’:

the subject shows characteristic symptoms of mingled fear and resentment of authority, especially male authority and the usual accompanying syndrome: an ambivalent attitude towards women, in which they are seen both as desired objects and as objects which have betrayed him, and therefore merit his revenge and counterbetrayal. (438)

His behavior is explained in pseudo-Freudian terms (Oedipal complex) and the report of the assessment of his “selfishness and social inadequacy have been determined by his past [...]” (441) clearly echoes the valid explanation of male identity of the period.

Andrew Tolson claims that Urfe is “the typical product of that post-war crisis of masculinity” (172). He wishes to control and exercise his fantasy of power on women. In his defense, Nicholas claims that “they had been wrong, at the trial. It was not that I preyed on girls; but the fact that my only access to normal humanity, to social decency, to any openness of heart, lay through girls, preyed on me. It was in that that I was the real victim” (535–536). He does become a victim of the construct of masculinity and its expectations, being trapped by the ideology of power and control. The use of the masque device in the narrative “are the means by which Fowles shows the manipulator being manipulated” (Woodcock 53). The masque itself and the figure of Conchis invoke the expectations and anxieties of masculinity, which Urfe is familiar with and subjected to. Conchis is therefore becomes the force that allows Urfe to get “disintoxicated” of his power of self and others. Conchis is like a coin of two sides: on the one hand, he teaches Nicholas about the morals, ethics and freedom of choice, on the other, he manipulates everyone and everything in his carefully planned Godgame (431).¹

The Godgame is a social experiment to test the possibility of the transformation of Urfe. Nicholas wants to win the game at all costs, in his mind “the game is an ego-satisfying competition for power, rather than a civilized celebration of life” (Lorenz 74). It is significant that Fowles uses another male character, Conchis, to deconstruct his own sex’s ideas of power. Gender theory denaturalizes both femininity and masculinity as gender is a “free -floating artifice” (Judith

Butler 6); if status of gender is theorized as independent of sex, it is an artifice; with that said, *man and masculine* “might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman and feminine* a male body as easily as a female one” (6). Woodcock suggests that Conchis acts “evasively as the surrogate for the myth that Lily and Mrs. De Seitas represent – a woman as repository of higher truth” (54). He goes on arguing that Conchis possesses ‘female’ traits that allow him to expose the male values. He becomes an instrument of “reawakening of Nick’s conscience, especially that feminine moral consciousness that lies buried deep” in Urfe’s family (Lorenz 75).

Gender is structured “into the very fabric of social regulations and institutions,” claims Ava Baron (148). War is often seen as a masculine activity, a part of men’s nature (including genetics); sex role theory explains it as a result of socialization, known as sex role learning (51). Early in life men learn socially appropriate actions and attitudes and violence is seen as a part of men’s maintenance of “power over women and over the entire planet” (58). Men do not constitute a homogenous category and often tend to oppress, and indeed violate, other men as well as themselves and women. Identity is often questioned at the level of doing and failed to problematize identity at the level of being.

War and its consequences is directly linked to the construct of masculinity and manhood in the novel. Conchis tells Nicholas a story of horrors committed by the fascists during the war: “because these events could have taken place only in a world where man considered himself superior to woman. [...] That is, a world governed by brute force, humorless arrogance, illusory prestige and primeval stupidity” (356). He exposes male power roles and ideology during the war:

Men love war because it allows them to look serious. Because it is the one thing that stops women laughing at them. In it they can reduce women to the status of objects. Men see objects, women see the relationship between objects [...]. War is a psychosis caused by an ability to see relationship. Our relationship with our fellowmen [...]. (357)

In a sense his speech becomes a critique of society that encourages wars as a male power exercise. Urfe perceives life as a “disaster. So defeated. So pessimistic” (128). He follows the pattern of masculine behavior which is expected of him and in order to change (568) he has to “be ‘feminized’ out of his masculine behavior” (Woodcock 56). Conchis’s story of the village massacre is an example of the male absolute power and violence. This story becomes a manifestation of Fowles that war is “lethal blend of machismo, braggadocio, and hypertrophic sense of honor” that characterizes the society of the period (1982b, 7). In the face of death man often comes to reject his individual freedom and face the ultimate moment of truth about his life. In Nicholas Urfe’s search for identity through the maze Conchis sets up for him, lies hope for men in general as a social group.

Conchis with the magic of myths reenacts what masculinity represents and stands for Nicholas, mostly through his relationship with women. The word “myth” has a different meaning in different fields but all myths are “communicable ideogrammatic structures in literature” and in all cultures it merges with literature (Frye 195). Being a form of verbal art, myth deals “with the world that man creates” (Frye 412–413). Nicholas accepts Conchis’s mythology as valid when he meets Lily and Rose, the twin sisters who are a source for his “disintoxication”; they are “complimentary” of each other. Nicholas sees in them what attracts men: the innocence and purity as well as passion and sexuality. He is confused by the roles they play and the masque technique is just as ambiguous as his own desires. In a way they “were nothing but a personification of your [Nicholas’s] own selfishness” (529). Nicholas feels as if he “entered a myth; a knowledge of what it was like physically, moment by moment, to have been young and ancient, a Ulysses on his way to meet Circe, a Theseus on his journey to Crete, an Oedipus still searching for his destiny” (140). He compares himself with the two mythical searchers, even though he “is most real mid-search” (Wolfe 100). He has to create his own myth and confront his fate; this self-exploration is painful yet essential to his growth as a man.

From the first moment of seeing Lily Nicholas assumes he attracts her and that she will become a part of his conquest plan. The line between reality and fiction is blurred when he enters the game:

I found something a shade patronizing in her attitude, and I interpreted it as an attempt to upstage me; perhaps to test me, to see if I was worth playing against [...]. In any case, I found her far too pretty, both in repose and in action, or acting, to care. I thought of myself as a connoisseur of girls’ good looks; and I knew that this was one to judge all others by. (152)

Nicholas is so intrigued by Lily’s mysterious nature, he tries to grasp her ambiguity and solve the mystery behind her character. He admits playing a game with a female sexuality: “but all games, even the most literal, between a man and a woman are implicitly sexual; and I was clearly meant to feel that. If it was her job to seduce me, I should be seduced. I couldn’t do anything about it. I was a sensualist” (184). Nicholas becomes so entwined in his quest for solutions of her mystery that he is trapped by his own illusions. When Lily kisses him, it confirms the illusions under which spell he falls: “I thought I finally knew her. She had abandoned all pretense” (276). The masque is not so simple – the woman he kisses appears to be Rose – Lily’s twin. Nicholas does not give up easily: “I smiled, to show her I was totally unfooled; but prepared to play a part in this new variation” (278). Woodcock suggests that in the search for a perfect woman, he is in “pursuit of an idea, the product of male desire appropriate to male needs” (59). His fantasy is juxtaposed in his attraction to Lily and his treatment of Alison who later comes to visit Greece.

Before he meets Lily, the image of Alison reappears in his mind as a "standard to go by" (99). Nicholas wishes her to share the mystic experience at Conchis's place yet after meeting Lily he no longer fantasizes about Alison. Writing to her is still a pose as his letters have the "right balance between regretful practicality and yet sufficient affection and desire for her to still want to climb into bed if I got half a chance" (142). Urfe becomes torn between the two women - he lies to Lily about "the other girl" and later to Alison about his lack of attraction to Lily and a fake syphilis "to make her sorry for me [Nicholas]" (191, 217). Nicholas tries to be honest with Alison and tell her the truth: "that my real disease was not something curable like syphilis, but far more banal, and far more terrible, a congenital promiscuity" (236). He picks the time to tell her after they make "not sex, but love" (241), hoping that she will understand his feelings for Lily: "I had chosen the worst of all possible moments to be honest, and like most people who have spent much of their adult life being emotionally dishonest, I overcalculated the sympathy a final being honest would bring" (241). He wishes for Alison to sympathize and pity him, a "confession is central to his use of the women in his life as absolvers of his guilt" (Woodcock 60). When the 'truth' fails, Nicholas decides to "get her back into the hotel, make love to her, [...] and why not, let her see that I might be worth suffering, just as I was and always would be" (243). Alison confronts him with the accusations of being an 'emotional handicap,' afraid of his true feelings:

I think you're so blind you probably don't even know you don't love me. You don't even know you're filthy selfish bastard who can't, can't like being impotent, can't ever think of anything except number one. Because nothing can hurt you, Nicko. Deep down, where it counts. You've built your life so that nothing can ever reach you [...]. (245-246)

When Alison is gone, he feels the same feeling of relief as he did earlier in the novel: "I drank a mouthful neat, and made a sort of bitter inner toast. I had chosen my own way; the difficult, hazardous, poetic way; all on one number" (250). Once again, he writes Alison a letter hoping to hear back from her: "*it's so likely that one day I shall need you terribly, I shall come crawling to you, and you can have all the revenge you want then*" (251; emphasis mine). As the masque intensifies, so does the Nicholas's quest for the real Lily. When he finds out of Alison's suicide, he blames himself and his selfishness as he "imposed the role I needed from Alison on her real self" (345). Lily becomes a substitute for his feelings to Alison, she is "a total necessity. Not only marriage with her, but confession *to her*" seems to be his solution (345). Nicholas's chances with Julie - Lily's real self - increase with Alison being out of the picture. At the same time Nicholas's guilt about Alison intensifies his self-pity and he goes from a sense of "true remorse to disguised self-forgiveness" (342). He later will discover it was another trick necessary to confront his values of his whole being.

Some scholars² see the connection between the fascism as a social ideology and male power in the novel. The fascists (e.g. Wimmel) manipulate the chaos and order to achieve the ultimate authoritarian power. For Conchis war is a “brute force,” a “psychosis caused by the inability to see relationships” (357). Urfe has the same desire for power yet he is subjected to his own delusions. His problem with women is that he fails “to see relationships – he merely sees stereotypes of the ego” (Woodcock 63). Conchis’s stories within the masque are applied to provide a moral lesson for Nicholas: e.g. a story of De Deukans, a sensual materialist and a misogynist (157); or a story of Foulkes, a victim of law and a molester (124–126). All the men in these stories stand for male power and desire to control self or the ‘Other.’ As Nicholas fantasizes about both real and imaginative women, the novel is charged with sexual energy – from erotic art objects in Conchis’s house (74, 86–89) to Conchis’s own love story with Lily Montgomery who becomes ‘real’ and alive for Nicholas (98–105). All of the sexual imagery contributes to the male gaze and construction of women by men and the ‘trial’ is the only way to wake Nicholas up. Woodcock suggests that the crucial chapters were heavily revised by Fowles in the 1977 version of *The Magus* and in those chapters Urfe “undergoes a symbolic castration in which he is rendered powerless” (64).

Julie-Lily has been acting up till this point of the novel as a submissive meek woman. Yet when Urfe gets a chance to make love to her, he fails as a man and as a result is humiliated at the most personal, sexual level. Julie is playing another role in this “sexual guessing-game” (416) and Nicholas’s male ego is completely destroyed when he begins to beg her: “Julie. Come on. For Christ’s sake.” When he is “dying for her” the mask falls off and the male becomes the submissive and weak one: “Julie?” I saw her pale figure against the faint rectangle; watching me for a moment. Her right hand reached sideways. She spoke. The strongest voice; as hard as glass. ‘There is no Julie’” (417). Urfe’s idealistic love for Lily-Julie shatters as she is becoming “Circe” – a threatening and dangerous woman who causes “the vile and unforgivable, the ultimate betrayal” (415). He desires revenge to gain back his lost power over a woman: “some equal humiliation of Lily. It made me furious that I had not been more violent with her before” (417). Lily-Julie has the power over him now and even during the trial she is the one who returns the male gaze and regains control: “a woman surgeon who had just performed a difficult operation successfully. Peeling off the rubber gloves; surveying the suture” (418).

As Urfe undergoes the “cruel vivisection of the mind” (416) during the ‘disintoxication’ part of his trial, he is given a chance for a change as a man on various levels of identity. The pornographic movie and the love-making of Lily and Joe penetrate the sexual aspect of his insecurities and illusions as a male. It allows all the masks and role-playing to disintegrate as Nicholas “suddenly knew her real name, behind the masks of Lily, of Julie, of Artemis, of the doctor, of Desdemona [...]. I knew her real name. I didn’t forgive, if anything I felt more

rage. But I knew her real name" (459). Fowles never reveals her real name in the novel, Bruce Woodcock suggests that she is Eve – a woman who is responsible for the fall of men and expel from the Paradise (66). It is significant that the trial makes Nicholas realize the "normality" of Alison and appreciate her honesty: "her crystal core of nonbetrayal; her attachment to all that Lily was not" (482). At the same time Nicholas begins to suspect Alison being alive and a part of the masque built by Conchis. He starts to desire vengeance on both women: "to let her [Alison] know how vile her betrayal was. To let her know that even if she crawled round the equator on her knees I would never forgive her [...]" (493). As he imagines Alison playing a part of the Conchis's script, Nicholas decides not to search for her.

However, he longs to meet Alison and in his quest for answers he is introduced to Mrs. De Seitas whose 'job' is to direct Nicholas in the right direction of rebirth, maturity and moral growth. He begins to realize that Alison is an embodiment of everything he is looking in a woman: "I could swallow her theory, but it lay queasily on my stomach. It flouted something deeper than convention and received ideas. It flouted an innate sense that I ought to find all I needed in Alison" (559). Mrs. De Seitas with her liberating sexuality reminds Nicholas about 'fragility' of women – 'thou shall not commit pain' (567). Nicholas's new relationship with Jojo, a Scottish art student, emerges his old selfish self. She is merely a temporary 'safety' that keeps him from seeing other women. He regains his power, trying to construct her according to his script: "she slipped perfectly into the role I cast her for [...] she fulfilled her function very well [...]. I cultivated a sort of lunatic transferred fidelity towards her" (561–562). Young, inexperienced and without money, Jojo is a perfect submissive woman. She confesses her love to Nicholas who decides for the first time not to hurt her and 'commit no pain.' His best solution is to leave and only his landlady Kemp confronts him about his actions: "she's head over fucking heels in love with you, you act like a real gentleman. You kick her out" (570). Her honesty 'wakes' him up as he realizes that "something in me [Nicholas's] changed. Conchis's truths, especially the truth he had embodied in Lily, matured in me. Slowly I was learning to smile" (572).

The scene of meeting Alison is the crucial one in the novel, anticipated by both the readers and Nicholas himself. Nicholas is angry at Alison yet emotionally needy, as he tries to persuade her to get back together. Alison is changed as well, she is an independent mature woman now who does not need a man's support or control. As Urfe confronts Alison, he receives the same coldness and distance he encounters with Lily-Julie: "I want to know what the hell went on that day in Athens. What the hell's been going on since. And what the hell's going on now. 'And then?' Those grey eyes; her strangeness made them colder. 'We'll see'" (574). Nicholas wishes to see Alison come back to him, when the angry confrontation speech does not work on her, he tries pleading: "you're the only person I've ever

felt that about” (575). He has to realize that Alison is a new person, mysterious and different from the Alison he first met.

Nicholas remains suspicious of Conchis’s design in his game of magic, his sense of manhood tells him to take over the situation:

’Now listen.’ I stood there at her shoulder, with my meanest expression. It was not a difficult part to play. That bruised face, very near to tears, but not in tears. I thought, I will get her on a bed and I will ram her, the cat will fall and fall, till she is full of me, possessed by me. (579)

The link between sexual desire and violence is a part of Nicholas’s nature. He has to find a way to control ‘his woman.’ At the same time Urfe tries to present himself to Alison without any pretense or show. He admits learning an essential lesson out of his trial and ‘disintoxication’: the ability to see relationships, to see women as human beings, not just mere objects to satisfy and gratify his selfish desires: “That’s all I can offer you. The possibility that I’m beginning to see it” (579), which is an important step in his reevaluation of life’s goals. However, after this revelation, Urfe keeps on controlling Alison as he tells her to do exactly as he plans to distract Conchis, still believing him and Alison are playing a part of the game. He decides to take on a role of director of his own script and a part of the script includes slapping Alison as they make a scene in the park. Alison does not act like a puppet and despite the scenario, goes after Nicholas who in response does slap her. Woodcock suggests that the slap resembles the bedroom scene in Athens and that “Nicholas is fundamentally unchanged” (73). The slap ‘wakes’ Urfe up as he realizes that “there were no watching eyes [...] the theatre was empty. It was not a theatre” (581). He continues to play the dominant role he has always performed in his relationship with women. Urfe’s role as a controlling male gives him no other choice but to leave Alison and walk away never looking back.

The slap scene is a controversial one for many readers and critics. Some scholars³ do not see it as Urfe’s remaining oppressor but rather a symbol of freedom and liberation for both characters. Huffaker argues that “the slap may show her that he is no longer wearing a mask but is honestly and *beyond reason* acting upon his anger, defying the Godgame crew he supposes to be watching; the slap is also his way of choosing Alison, while leaving her free to choose” (67). Wolfe suggests that “Urfe’s slapping Alison’s face instigates new life [...] signals new faith” (116). At the end Alison “is silent, she will never speak, never forgive, never reach a hand, never leave this frozen present time. All waits, suspended” (Fowles 1978, 571). The novel ends ambiguously as both Nicholas and Alison are frozen in time as if no change is ever being possible for men or women; men will retain their dominance and power, while women will continue being voiceless and submissive.

John Fowles examines the problem of masculinity at the multiple levels in the novel – personal, political and social. Nicholas Urfe’s desire for power in sexual and

social terms reflect the virility and force that men exercise in the public arena such as politics or war. Urfe begins the battle of the sexes through the mythical quest and journey for his identity in order to find meaning and order in his relationship with the self, women and the world around him. He has to learn through the 'trial' his mistakes and turn them into the positive: love, concern, understanding and care. As Frye reminds us, myth presents a writer with "a ready-made framework and [...] allows him to devote all his energies to elaborating its design" (411). Fowles uses mythology as a backup for his argument on masculine ideology and its ambivalence. He himself calls it "a young man's first novel [...] this sort of adolescent book has a curiously sharp edge to its expose of masculine violence which invites a suspicion that it bears some sense of personally felt guilt about being a man" (qtd. in Campbell 457–458). Fowles does not associate himself with the character of Nicholas as another male, however, he mentions that his "personal experience in Greece" forms the core of the novel (1982a, 146). The biographical aspect of the novel is not relevant but rather an interest in the whole issue of masculinity and manhood, its aspects and limitations. As Mrs. De Seitas tells Nicholas, "if there was a Department of Young Men I should certainly take you to it. I would like to have you identified" (550). The idea of identification of male's ego and solving the mystery behind it remains the preoccupation for both the novelist and his audience.

Notes

- 1 A number of critics discuss the Godgame and myth in the novel, including Ralph Beret in "The Magus: A Study in the Creation of Personal Myth" in *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 19: 2 (1973), 89–98.
- 2 For example, Bruce Woodcock in *Male Mythologies, John Fowles and Masculinity*.
- 3 See for example Robert Huffaker's *John Fowles* or Peter Wolfe's *John Fowles, Magus and Moralist*.

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