# THE BUTTERFLY (D)E(F)FECT OR CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN JOHN FOWLES'S *THE COLLECTOR*

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*Abstract: Starting from the premise that it is invariably oneself that one collects, the present paper will investigate the issue of identity in John Fowles's 1963 novel "The Collector" from the perspective of the collector's mentality, using as a theoretical backbone Jean Baudrillard's theory on systems of collecting.*

*Keywords: body, collecting, difference, identity, self vs. other*

## Introduction

In his 1963 novel *The Collector*, John Fowles explores the issue of identity from the perspective of the collector's mentality. The novel tells the story of Frederick Clegg, a Town Hall Annexe clerk and entomologist, who had a failed relationship to his parents and who has been raised by his aunt Annie and his uncle Dick together with his 'crippled' cousin Mabel.

A sexless, nondescript young man, Clegg fantasizes about a young woman, art student Miranda Gray. After having won the pools and after having meticulously kept an observations diary in which he has gathered information about her, what has been a daydream comes true as he is now able to kidnap and take Miranda to a secluded cottage in the countryside where he imprisons her in a cellar. Miranda tries to escape on various occasions, but none of her attempts works: neither her trying to run away, nor her writing a small note she places in the envelope together with the letter for her parents, nor her pretending to have appendicitis, nor her trying to dig a tunnel into the outer cellar while Clegg is away, nor even her attempt to seduce him and have sex with him.

The young woman catches a cold from Clegg and develops pneumonia. As Clegg does not call a doctor to treat her, Miranda dies. The novel ends with Clegg's stalking Marian, another young woman he will probably kidnap as well.

As the choice of the novel's title suggests it, collecting is central to the understanding of the novel as it places emphasis on an activity that Clegg performs throughout the novel, an activity that John Fowles associates with everything that is "anti-art, anti-life, anti-everything".

A collector of butterflies since his boyhood, Frederick Clegg kidnaps Miranda Gray and treats her as if she were a "rarity", making her become the first in his collection of butterfly-women.

## Self vs. Other

*"I mean, he has that hate of other things and other people outside his own type. He has that selfishness."(Fowles, 1963:241)*

At the beginning of the novel, the reader may notice the asymmetrical relationship between Miranda and Clegg. Since Miranda is up and Clegg is down, the latter tries to tip the



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scales in his favour, kidnapping and imprisoning Miranda, making use of power, depriving her of information from the outside.

The two characters of the novel are constructed on a series of differences[1] (gender, class, educational, linguistic, religious) which set them apart and which are perceived as barriers since neither is willing to accept or respect the values of the Other[2]. We could say that, in Hegelian terms, these differences are at the heart of their continuous struggle for recognition.

"An aloof and ogre-like monster" (Onega, 1996: 40) who makes impossible "his own and Miranda's self-maturation", Clegg is Fowles's revised version of Caliban; he is neither Shakespeare's "misshapen" half-animal, nor the 3rd world inhabitant in some postcolonial literary texts. He is Fowles's embodiment of the Other, just as Shakespeare's is Caliban – a "crippled" Other, whose beastliness seems much more dangerous than that of Shakespeare's Caliban[3].

Marginal in Miranda's real world, Clegg becomes central and thus dominant in his underworld, as he becomes "the norm" (100).

Having no expression in his eyes, being "absolutely sexless" (131), "nondescript", "featureless" (62), Clegg is, for Miranda, rather an object, a "freak" (110), "a queer" (63), "just a dirty little masturbating worm" (120); he is, for her, the embodiment of the "so slow, so unimaginative, so lifeless" (136) collector who suffers from class and sex neurosis (207) and whose sense of reality, whose representational senses are blurred.[4]

Referred at first in the text as *she, X, M* , then Miranda, the female protagonist of the novel is, from Clegg's perspective, "elusive, sporadic, very refined" (6). A butterfly, "a rarity", "a Pale Clouded Yellow", Clegg tries to represent Miranda to himself as also sexless and, when Miranda displays her sexuality trying to have sex with him in order to escape, he is disappointed, considering she has killed "all the romance", making herself "like any other woman" (114). As a matter of fact, she only ceases being a sexually neutral object, no longer regulating his castration anxiety. This is why he has to kill her or to let her die on the threshold of becoming an imago[5], before leaving her cocoon and become sexually mature.

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[1] Centred around the issue of *difference*, the concept of the Other cannot be neglected when it comes to approaching the problem of identity.

[2] Symbolically speaking, the reader may notice the Self's inability/impotence, even unwillingness, to enter the realm of the Other. Miranda's and Clegg's troubled relationships to their respective Other seem to stem from a troubled relation to their mothers or from their failure to locate the (m)other figure. Well aware of this in Clegg's case – "I told him he was looking for the mother he'd never had" (129), Miranda is less aware of her paralyzing fear she will become a mother and a wife instead of a great artist or, to put it in her own words, which echo Clegg's vocabulary, she "would just become a Great Female Cabbage" or "a bitchy ginny misery like M" (151).

[3] The beastliness of Shakespeare's Caliban probably arises from his half-animal origin as he is the son of witch Sycorax and of a devil. A "mis-shapen knave" (V.i.268), he is physically, and not psychologically deformed as Clegg.

[4] He considers Miranda to be his guest; the cellar is for him "cosy", "snug", "homely" whereas for Miranda it is cold and damp; it offers her neither warmth, nor comfort, nor a feeling of intimacy, not to mention that it is underground and Miranda sees it as a "crypt". There is nothing out of the ordinary that Clegg finds in this situation as for him "it was just like having a wife, an invalid one you had to do shopping for" (51).

[5] The life cycle or metamorphosis of butterflies consists of four stages: egg, larva or caterpillar, pupa or chrysalis and imago. Imago (the adult stage) is the last stage in a butterfly's metamorphosis, the only stage the insect is sexually mature and has functional wings (http://www.ansp.org/explore/online-exhibits/butterflies/lifecycle/).



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Miranda metaphorically becomes the mirror placed in front of his real impotent self.[6] She is Woman and, even more, she is the woman who has shown him plainly, even if unintentionally, that he is not Man, or that he is not man enough. Miranda understands now the nature of Frederick Clegg's secret– a secret that he has been hiding even from himself, behind notions such as proper, moral, good etc.

**Modification of the body / the other as erasure of differences**

Throughout the novel, Frederick Clegg makes efforts to erase the differences between them and be worthy of Miranda; he begins reading "classy newspapers" or Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*; he visits the National Gallery and Tate Gallery which he doesn't enjoy (17). But, when he realizes these things do not please Miranda, he tries to erase the differences that set them apart by abusing her body. Some of the means meant to erase these differences that involve body modification are: the use of chloroform and CTC to make her lose consciousness and thus weaken both her body and her mind; gagging and tying her in order to "silence" her female voice[7] and her female body; undressing her; photographing her against her will, forcing her to pose in certain positions, or when she lies unconscious.

Each and every time Miranda tries "to flutter out of line"[8], showing any form of personality, showing she is different, Clegg tries to show Miranda who the master really is, "to teach" her a lesson by acts of violence: "I had the cords in my pocket and after a bit of a struggle I got them on her and then the gag, it was her own fault if they were tight, I got her on a short rope tied to the bed and then I went and fetched the camera and flash equipment. She struggled of course [...]. I got her garments off and at first she wouldn't do as I said but in the end she lay and stood like I ordered (I refused to take if she did not co-operate). So I got my pictures" (122).

Besides helping him photograph butterflies as well as couples having sex – "Nothing nasty. Just couples" (21) [9], Clegg's camera helps him objectify her, on the one hand, becoming, on the other, the surrogate of the phallus he does not possess. He uses it without Miranda's knowledge when he takes the first photographs of her almost entirely naked body; he uses it now, against Miranda's will, to pay her back "for all the things she said and thought about me. [...] she was the one who was going to stay below in all senses and even if it wasn't what she deserved in the beginning she had made it so that she did it now" (118-9).

[6] A 'castrating' woman, Miranda doesn't send back to him a desirable image of himself; the self reflected in this metaphorical mirror is a "castrated" self, one that does not possess the phallus as an embodiment of power.

[7] Symbolically voiceless, Clegg has to disable Miranda's voice as well: "My tongue is my defense with him" (146).

[8] "I am one in a row of specimens. It's when I *try* to flutter out of line that he hates me. I'm meant to be dead, pinned, always the same, always beautiful. He knows that part of my beauty is being alive, but it's the dead me he wants. He wants me living-but-dead. I felt it terribly strong today. That my being alive and changing and having a separate mind and having moods and all that was becoming a nuisance" (215).

[9] According to Brooke Lenz, photography serves "an important voyeuristic function" in *The Collector*, "stimulating" Clegg "through the exercise of control over others, whose private spaces he penetrates and whose intimacy he violates." (Lenz, 2008: 70). In the same line of thought, Catherine Tarbox considers that Clegg possesses "camera eyes" and that he sees "everything from a distance, voyeuristically" (Tarbox, 1988: 48-9).



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Miranda herself is not willing to accept Clegg as he is. She tries to erase the differences between them by "teaching" him. She cannot understand his passion for his collection of butterflies.[10] Nor does she succeed in accepting he is linguistically different.

She lacks many of the means Clegg possesses, but she does have at hand language and the power of language, language which she artfully manages, according to Clegg: "She was very artful at wrapping up what she meant in a lot of words. Making you feel you really did owe her something, just like she never started it all in the first place" (111).

Whereas Miranda's language is more sophisticated, the language Clegg uses and which Miranda mockingly refers to as "Calibanese" (207) is rather clichéistic: "What irritates me most is his way of speaking. Cliché after cliché after cliché" (172). It is "suburban", "stale", "dead" (59) because, as Miranda observes, he uses words only in their literal meaning: "he meant literally what he said" (193). In a world where he cannot master and control too many things, clichés and stereotypes[11] are Clegg's manner of imposing a little bit of order.

Despite some efforts from her part to understand and justify Clegg's actions, Miranda seems to always end up despising and considering him inferior in every aspect each and every time: "I always seem to end up by talking down to you. I hate it. It's you. You always squirm one step lower than I can go." (83).

Considering him "absolutely inferior" to her "in all ways" (233), she hates him for "his beastliness. His vile cowardice. His selfishness. His calibanity" (231).

She hates the "beastly Calibanity" (217) of her "warder" as much as she hates the calibanity of all those belonging to the category of the Many. She feels she is "a martyr. Imprisoned, unable to grow", a representative of the Few "at the mercy of this resentment, this hateful millstone envy of the Calibans of this world" (218).

The inability of understanding the Other, of accepting the inherent differences in the Other leads to a discourse of hatred, which is more obvious in Miranda's case:[12] "I *hate* scientists," she said. "I *hate* people who collect things, and classify things and give them names and then forget all about them." (58) or

"Because they all *hate* us, they *hate* us for being different, for not being them, for their own not being like us. [...] I *hate* them. I *hate* the uneducated and the ignorant. I *hate* the pompous and the phoney. I *hate* the jealous and the resentful. I *hate* the crabbed and the mean and the petty. I *hate* all ordinary dull little people who aren't ashamed of being dull and little. I *hate* what G.P. calls the New People" (218)

[10] "Blind. Blind. Other world." (141) are Miranda's words to refer to Clegg; yet, to some extent, they also apply to her and to her inability to understand Clegg. After her having advised him to collect pictures, Clegg goes to his room and he concludes: "I knew all the time it was silly; I'd never collect anything but butterflies. Pictures don't mean anything to me. I wouldn't be doing it because I wanted, so there wouldn't be any point. She could never see that." (83)

[11] Usually "a sad affair", the stereotype is constituted, according to Barthes, by "a necrosis of language, a prosthesis brought in to fill a hole in writing" (Barthes, 1977: 199).

[12] Clegg uses words such as *hatred*, *hate*, *hateful* to a lesser extent, but this may be due to the fact that he finds it difficult to verbalize what he feels as his mastery of language does not allow him.



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**From collected objects to collectors**

Involving "activities of seeking out, categorizing, gathering and disposing" (Baudrillard, 1994: 10), collecting is a human activity by means of which human beings try to organize and exercise control over the outer world.[13] "Alienated or lost within a social discourse whose rules he cannot fathom", the collector is compelled, Baudrillard argues, "to construct an alternative discourse that is for him entirely amenable, in so far as he is the one who dictates its signifiers – the ultimate signified being, in the final analysis, none other than himself" (*ibid*: 24).

And this is what Frederick Clegg attempts to do in *The Collector* with his collection of butterflies and, then, with Miranda whom he tries to treat in the same manner he treats his butterflies.

As long as Miranda is a human being and not an object, she cannot be possessed.[14] The first step to take in order to transform her into a collectable is kidnapping her in an effort to "divest" her of her function and to abstract her from any practical context, thus objectifying her, turning her into an object of passion so that she should not be able to gaze back.[15]

Kidnapped, confined in the cellar, Miranda ceases to be a woman for Clegg, becoming an object of desire, a collectable. His taking photos of her and his then preferring the ones "with the face cut off" (122) together with all his other attempts at modifying[16] Miranda's body (tying, gagging, chloroforming, etc.) are means of making her nondescript as well and they are meant to lessen Miranda, to "de-structure" her, reducing her, in Baudrillard's terms, to "an abstract set made up of the various erotic parts of its anatomy" (Baudrillard, 1994: 19).[17] The female protagonist's body is thus reduced to a set of separate signifying elements "whose true signified" is, to use Baudrillardian terms once more, "no longer the beloved, but the subject himself" who, thus, "collects and eroticizes his own being, evading the amorous embrace to create a closed dialogue with himself" (*idem*). Thus, Miranda and Clegg come to stand, according to Mahmoud Salami, for "a conflict not only between but within each other, and not only between minds but within a mind" (Salami, 1992: 46-7).[18]

Offering "a paradigm of perfection" (Baudrillard, 1994: 8), collecting can thus be seen not only as Clegg's way of exercising control over the outer world, but also as a means of completing his incomplete self. Incapable of establishing normal human relationships, Clegg creates around himself a narcissistic territory which he populates with the objects he collects,

[13] From the point of view of their material organization, collections are series of "successive and homologous terms". Being series of like items, they offer their possessor a sense of security, a sense they are unable to obtain from ordinary relations which are "such a continual source of anxiety" (Baudrillard, 1994: 10).

[14] Baudrillard asserts that any given object can have two functions which are "mutually exclusive": it can be either utilized or possessed and that "once the object stops being defined by its function, its meaning is entirely up to the subject" (*ibid*: 8).

[15] According to Baudrillard, people invest in objects all they find impossible to invest in human relationships because they are able to gaze on them without the objects gazing back at them (*ibid*: 11).

[16] It is not only Clegg that modifies Miranda's body. Miranda herself produces modifications of Clegg's already malfunctioning, defective body by attacking him with the axe, by scratching his face, by undressing him, etc.

[17] Miranda herself tries to valorize herself as a set of separate anatomical parts when she attempts to seduce Clegg: standing in front of the fire, she first shows her bare feet "for his benefit" (251), then she kneels half-naked by the fire and lets her hair down "just to make it quite obvious" (252).

[18] We may, for instance, consider that the female characters in *The Collector* are Clegg's feminine counterparts. Thus, Mabel stands for his cripple, impotent Other; Miranda is his desirable Other, whereas Marian is closer to his real self.



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objects that emerge, according to Baudrillard, as "ideal" mirrors in that they reflect "images not of what is real, but only of what is desirable" (*ibid*: 11).

**The Butterfly Defect**

At the heart of the conflict between the two, there are no doubt all the differences Miranda Gray and Frederick Clegg are both aware of (education, class, gender, language use, etc.), but, as paradoxical as it may seem, they also share some less obvious similarities we will group under the name *the butterfly defect*.

Originating in the Latin *defectus*, the word *defect* refers, according to the dictionary, to "a lack of something necessary for completeness, adequacy, or perfection"[19] or to "a lack of or abnormality in something necessary for normal functioning; a deficiency or imperfection".[20]

Bearing the above-mentioned things in mind, we do consider that incompleteness, lack of authenticity, abnormality as well as a necrotizing effect arising from an obsession with collecting, classifying, categorizing, are just some of the characteristics both Clegg and Miranda share.

The first thing to mention among the features they have in common is their obsession with classifying and categorizing everything. Even though she tells Frederick she hates "people who collect things and classify things and give them names" (58), Miranda herself, with her elitism, with her adopting G.P.'s distinction between the Few and the Many, with her considering herself superior to an "inferior" Caliban, with her advising Clegg to give up collecting butterflies and start collecting art pieces, becomes guilty of the same things she accuses him of.

No doubt Clegg is, as his name suggests it[21], a nuisance. But Miranda herself seems to be not only the butterfly we are suggested she is. Metaphorically, she is partially a fly, "a fly in the ointment" (9), a detracting factor or element, according to the dictionary definition, as she herself is a nuisance somehow to Clegg because she interferes with his collection, with his "alternative discourse", making it as uncontrollable as the social discourse of the real world, not allowing Clegg to be the only one to control and commandeer its signifiers.

Considered by most literary critics to be everything Clegg is not, to be endowed with everything Clegg does not have, Miranda proves in the end she is unable to adapt. She also creates "alternative discourses", being as guilty of escapism as Clegg[22], living as inauthentically as Clegg.

[19] http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/defect.
[20] *The American Heritage® Medical Dictionary*, Copyright © 2007, 2004, Houghton Mifflin Company.
[21] Cleg, one of four species of horsefly, regarded as a pest and nuisance to cattle, horses and man. The female is adapted to suck the blood of horses and cattle. The larvae are ground dwelling grubs living carnivorously on other grubs, insects and worms.
[22] Writing, painting or music offer her the possibility of escaping into a less ugly or "nasty" world than the one she inhabits, and less dead, more alive. "I wrote and wrote and wrote myself into the other world. To escape in spirit, if not in fact" (167).



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The criteria by which she lives or judges the others as well as those by which she paints or draws are not in fact her own.[23] She has adopted discourses that are not hers, without dialogically assuming and appropriating them.

Artistically, she is incapable of establishing a discourse of her own; she has borrowed the voices of other artists. She has assumed the discourses of models such as Piero and Berthe Morisot as what she creates is "quite graphic, well composed", but it is not "living art", "a limb of your body" (169). What Miranda does is "photographing", not painting, not "translating personality into line or paint".[24] Or at least this is what G.P., Fowles's "fictional surrogate" (Lenz, 2008: 49), tells her when analyzing one of her abstracts: "[…] a picture is like a window straight through to your inmost heart. And all you've done here is build a lot of little windows on to a heart full of other fashionable artists' paintings. [...] You're saying something here about Nicholson or Pasmore. Not about yourself. You're using a camera. [...] You're photographing here." (170)

What she has to do is to "unlearn", to get rid of her models so that she could "paint with your whole being" (140).[25]

Critically, she has adopted a discourse in which masculine ideology pervades; to be more exact, she has adopted G.P.'s misogynistic conceptions[26] about art and painting, believing she cannot become a great artist because she is not "egocentric enough"; she is a woman and has to lean on something.

Ontologically, she has adopted the discourses of literary characters such as Emma Woodhouse in *Emma* and Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility* with whom she identifies or whom she tries to follow. Literature is also the measure by which she judges Clegg as this is for her, in turns, Mr. Elton in Jane Austen's *Emma*, the Old Man of the Sea that Sinbad carried on his back and that she now has to carry on hers, Arthur Seaton in Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* or Holden Caulfield in J.D. Salinger's *The Cather in the Rye*. Unable to achieve artistic authenticity, Miranda Gray seems thus also unable to gain authenticity as a human being as she always returns to the world of literature just as Frederick Clegg returns to the world of butterflies.[27]

Anticipated by the aberrations[28] he collects, Clegg's abnormality seems to mirror Miranda's. On a very profound level, there is some sort of deformity with Miranda as well.

[23] She thus fails in that which Sarah Woodruff in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* will succeed. It is in here that the difference between the two women resides. Miranda cannot achieve authenticity (neither of voice nor of being) and this is why she doesn't succeed in changing Clegg as Sarah will do with Charles.

[24] Just as Clegg's taking photos and collecting butterflies are means of fossilizing existence, her copying other artists is a means of necrotizing or fossilizing art.

[25] Painting is for G.P. (just as writing is for Fowles) connected with the assertion of one's identity.

[26] "Have a tragic love affair. Have your ovaries cut out" (171) – this is what G.P. tells her.

[27] At a certain moment in the novel, Miranda tells Clegg that, metaphorically, he is the one imprisoned in the cellar, but what Miranda does not get is that she herself is not only physically trapped or "cooped up" in the cellar; she is also confined metaphorically, stuck in her ontologically and artistically inauthentic attempts.

[28] An aberration is a variation in the wing pattern of a butterfly species which is different in some way to the normal pattern. This can occur as a genetic or environmentally produced / induced variation of the usual form of the species. Aberrations are generally very rare.



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Hers is neither physical, nor moral, but artistic and ontological because necrosis[29] does not affect only her body[30], but also her art and her existence.

**Conclusions**

If "it is invariably *oneself* that one collects", if "the final term" of the collection "must always be the person of the collector" (Baudrillard, 1994:12) because each collection is "always first and foremost a discourse directed toward oneself" (*ibid*: 22), the reason underlying Clegg's efforts to continually de-structure Miranda ceases to be blurred.

Sexually and linguistically incomplete, metaphorically dead, Clegg cannot but break everything he will collect.

Collecting Miranda is not enough; affected by the "jealousy complex"[31], Clegg also has to kidnap and imprison her so that no one can enjoy her beauty and perfection. Since collected objects may be seen as "narcissistic equivalents of oneself" (*ibid*: 18)[32], his act of confining Miranda is equal with a symbolic castration meant "to dispel the fear of literal castration" (*idem*).

Clegg ends up destroying Miranda because she is a constant reminder of his incompleteness, of his imperfection or defect. In the very same manner in which he pins his butterflies in his display cabinets, he finally "pins" her dead body in the box he himself made "under the appletrees" (287), making thus Miranda be the first in his new collection of butterfly-women, as his plans with regard to Marian, the woman he now stalks, seem to prove it.[33]

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[29] Caused by external factors to cells or tissues (e.g. infection, toxins, or trauma), necrosis (from Greek *nekrosis* "a becoming dead, state of death," from *nekroun* "make dead," from *nekros* "dead body" according to the Online Etymology Dictionary) refers to the premature death of cells and living tissue.
[30] Ultimately, Clegg's necrotizing effect extends even further, taking hold even of Miranda's body – she falls seriously ill, she has pneumonia, pimples form around the corners of her mouth and her lips, and her body dies slowly.
[31] Baudrillard associates this jealousy complex, "symptomatic of the passion of collecting at its most fanatical", with a "powerful anal-sadistic impulse that tends to confine beauty in order to savour it in isolation" (Baudrillard, 1994:18).
[32] "That which the jealous person commandeers and guards in close proximity is, beneath the disguise of an object, nothing less than his own libido, which he endeavours to neutralize within the system of confinement […]" (*idem*).
[33] Since for collectors "a single object can never be enough: invariably there will be a whole succession of objects, and, at the extreme, a total set, marking the accomplishment of a mission" (*ibid*: 8), it is likely that Clegg will do the same to Marian as well.



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