

# **Fantasy vs. Reality in *The Magus* by John Fowles**

by Tove Phillips

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## Introduction

The struggle between reality and fantasy is an interesting aspect of human psychology. It is also one of the major themes in John Fowles' novel *The Magus* and moreover the essential ingredient of this essay.

*The Magus* was first published in 1966, later (in 1977) to be replaced by a revised version, upon which my essay is based. In short, the novel is about a young, middle-class intellectual, Nicholas Urfe, who leaves a spiritually unstimulating London and his 'common' girlfriend Alison in order to work as an English tutor on the Greek island of Phraxos. On this island he becomes involved, or rather, is made involved, in a mysterious world of metatheatre, mindgames and magic, set up by the fascinating character, Maurice Conchis. The purpose of this game is partly to open Nick's science-craving mind to the inexplicable and partly to teach him a lesson about himself and his failure to acknowledge his real self. One of the members of Conchis's considerably sized crew is the enigmatic, beautiful and perpetually role-switching Lily/Julie, with whom, all according to Conchis's plans, Nick falls madly in love. Thus, Lily/Julie comes to represent the unreal, the fantasy of Nick's poetic would-be self, while behind-the-surface-ever-present Alison takes the role of reality, of real love and of Nick's actual self.

Nick's subconscious self-denial is in real life shared by a great number of people, whose blinkers prevent them from appreciating their real needs. Why is it that common is ugly and Jane is plain? Why do people voluntarily trade the real thing for an unattainable fantasy? And what exactly do I mean by that? My intention here is to draw parallels between Nick's pseudo-poetic behaviour and that of the everyday person in everyday life by looking into the ideas of 'narcissism' and 'escapism'. I find this kind of behaviour highly disturbing, although I cannot claim total innocence myself, and that is one of two reasons for my writing this

essay. The other reason is the fact that I adore *The Magus* and Fowles' ability to weave beautifully simple truths about human nature into a magnificent web of mysteries.

After this brief introduction, I shall proceed in my first chapter by exploring the literary implications of the key conflict, i.e. how the battle between reality and fantasy is reflected in *The Magus*. Following this, a second and final chapter will discuss the expressions and causes of the same issue in real life according to some psychological theories

## Chapter 1

For the sake of clarity, I shall begin this chapter with an introduction of the three main characters discussed in this essay: Nick, Alison and Lily/Julie.

Nicholas Urfe, to start with, is a 25-year-old Englishman with a middle-class background and an upbringing founded on “Discipline and Tradition and Responsibility”(15). He has studied at Oxford, where he “began to discover I was not the person I wanted to be” (15), which is why he started to build up an imaginary image of himself; an image based on literary fantasies and poetic aspirations. One of his ‘poetic qualities’ is that of not being able to love, something he proves to himself by preying on women to fulfil his massive need of self-gratification, without taking any responsibility for the other person’s feelings. Looking back on his behaviour, he says: “This sounds, and was, calculating, but it was caused less by a true coldness than by my narcissistic belief in the importance of the lifestyle. I mistook the feeling of relief that dropping a girl always brought for a love of freedom”(21). Nick is a man who needs total control over life in order to maintain the role that he has cast for himself, which is why he refuses to accept anything but the ‘truth’ and the real meaning behind Conchis’s game. His narrow-mindedness makes him sceptical, critical and cynical – excellent defence mechanisms for an insecure, would-be poet, whose greatest fear is that his guard will drop and that someone will catch a glimpse of his real self.

Alison, then, is a pretty Australian girl that Nick meets at a next-door party in London. They start a relationship which more or less ends when Nick leaves for Greece. Alison, who is on her way to become an airhostess, is a slightly promiscuous, free-spoken and down-to-earth kind of girl with a lot of common sense. She is very perspicacious, and she sees through Nick’s mask rather easily: “Nicholas, you know why you take *things* too seriously? Because you take yourself too seriously”(32).

Thirdly, we have Lily, who becomes Julie, who becomes Lily again; all under the directions of Conchis, who has placed this fabulous woman within Nicholas's reach (or so he thinks). Lily/Julie, whom Nick meets during his frequent visits to Bourani, is a classic beauty with a classic education from Cambridge who, in Nick's eyes, has got a lot of class (as opposed to Alison). An interesting fact is that Lily/Julie has got a twin sister, Rose/June, who appears in the story every so often and who plays the part of Nick's sexual fantasies. Rose/June is just as beautiful and intelligent as Lily/Julie, but she is a flirt who plays with Nick's more primitive drives. Thus, Nick can satisfy his mental sexual needs without staining Lily/Julie's innocence.

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On the subject of the intention, or meaning, behind the novels of John Fowles, Larry Verburg writes:

The power of...Fowles's fiction in general – is threefold and arises chiefly from: plot, which is associated in the author's works the archetype of the hero's quest and with his love for Nature: existentialism, which is equated with the psychological journey of the protagonist toward self-identity and authenticity: and the author's existential humanism, which is tied to his romantic belief in the ultimate power of love (both of Eros and *âgapé*) to change mankind for the better. (Verburg Ch. 1)

This quote pinpoints the message behind Fowles' novels in general, and perhaps *The Magus* in particular, since the hero's quest for maturity is very conspicuous and Fowles' concern for, and belief in, humanity and reality shines through the rather pessimistic façade.

Up until the point when Nick meets Lily/Julie, his thoughts evolve around Alison, with whom he has had sporadic contact by mail, and his desires towards her; desires that are mostly sexual: "...there were still times when I knew I wanted her very much, and would have given anything to have her in bed beside me. But they were moments of sexual

frustration, not regretted love. One day I thought: if I wasn't on this island I should be dropping this girl"(54). What he loves about Alison while he is on the island is the fact that she is not there. Remote love is somewhat more poetic than everyday love. When things become too complicated at Bourani, however, he sees her in a totally different light: "I could imagine her beside me, her hand in mine; and she was human warmth, normality, standard to go by"(111). When he gets to 'know' Lily/Julie, though, Alison is reduced to being an irritation on the periphery, as well as in his conscience.

A great part of the novel is devoted to 'freedom of choice', which is also symbolised in Nick's choice between Alison and Lily/Julie, and which Verburg explains in the following quote: "As they participate in the archetypal quest, Fowles's heros and heroines come to know themselves existentially. They therefore understand their choices and by exercising their right to choose, they achieve freedom and the authentic life." (Verburg Ch. 1). By choosing Lily/Julie's world before Alison's, Nick denies reality and fails to find the door to freedom.

The reason why Lily/Julie does not let Nick get too close to her physically is, apart from her being the chaste woman, that her role is entirely symbolic and therefore should stay impersonal. Although her roles, as well as her behaviour towards Nick, change constantly to indicate that she is not real, he keeps trying to see her as a real woman with whom he can have a relationship. She sometimes brings up the subject of Alison to make him see her value, but on Nicholas this has the reversed effect:

"You...lived together as man and wife?"

"If you must put it in that absurd way. For a few weeks."

...

"I haven't been very happy on Phraxos. Not until I came here, as a matter of fact. I've been, well, pretty lonely. I know I don't love...this other girl. It's just that she's been the only person. That's all."

“Perhaps to her *you* seem the only person.”

I gave a little sniff of amusement. “There are dozens of other men in her life. Honestly. At least three since I left England.” (207)

When Nick receives a letter from Alison, saying that she is going to spend a few days in Athens and that she would like to see him, he reluctantly decides to go there, but only because the weekend at Bourani has been called off. This meeting is something of a turning point in the story; this is where Nick is supposed to make up his mind about what he wants and show us whether he has learnt anything from Conchis’s lessons. He certainly enjoys the long walk they take up the mountain of Parnassos – the beauty of the landscape, the beauty of Alison and the closeness between them – but as usual, he sees it all from a literary perspective:

She did not know it, but it was at first for me an intensely literary moment. I could place it exactly: *England’s Helicon*. I had forgotten that there are metaphors and metaphors, and that the greatest lyrics are very rarely anything but direct and unmetaphysical. Suddenly she was like such a poem and I felt a passionate wave of desire for her. It was not only lust...but because I was seeing through all the ugly, the unpoetic accretions of modern life to the naked real self of her. (269)

All through the weekend, Nick tries to keep her away from him, since he feels that his fidelity towards Lily/Julie is much more important than another bedding of Alison. He keeps referring to their relationship as a sister-and-brother one, but Alison, who is just as straightforward as always, talks about love and reality. In the end, after having given in to her attempts at seduction, he tells her about his adventures at Bourani, about Conchis and Lily/Julie and the latter’s small, but fascinating, part in the godgame and once again, Alison sees through his façade:

“All that mystery balls. You think I fall for that? There’s some girl on your island and you want to lay her. That’s all. But of course that’s nasty, that’s crude. So you tart it up. As usual. Tart it up so it makes you seem the innocent one, the great intellectual who must have his experience. Always both ways. Always cake and eat it. Always –“(274)

Of course, Nick still does not understand that all his ‘mystery balls’ are in fact ‘mystery balls’. He simply draws the conclusion that Alison is not on the same spiritual/intellectual level as him and the Bourani crew and returns to Phraxos with a sigh of relief. This brief reencounter with reality in the midst of the masque does not have any effect on Nick, and when he hears about Alison’s alleged suicide a few months later, he undoubtedly receives a ready supply of poetic pleasure from it. His sorrow is obviously genuine, but it is to Lily/Julie and Conchis’s world of fantasy he turns for comfort and sympathy - a bout of heavy grief is somewhat romantic, and moreover a lighter burden to bare when dealt with in an artistic manner. Peter Wolfe describes Nick’s tendency to turn reality into fiction in the following way:

...he reduces life to a literary game, particularly in times of stress; an artistic problem is easier to cope with than a human one. It gives wide berth to the things we live by; like any other abstraction, it can be shelved or even forgotten. Thus acting like a character in a novel or a play eases many of the tensions in Urfe’s life. Referring to this escapism, he mentions “this characteristically twentieth-century retreat from content into form, from meaning into appearance, from ethics into aesthetics.” (Wolfe 90)

‘Escapism’, meaning ‘flight from reality’, is a key word in this essay, and it will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 2. Another key word is ‘narcissism’, of which Nicholas is truly guilty, since this unhealthy self-obsession of his is the underlying cause of all his problems. Lily/Julie is de facto no more than a reflection of his ego or, as Lily de Seitas, her mother,

says towards the end of the novel: “My daughters were nothing but a personification of your own selfishness”(601). Nick’s self-obsession is further symbolised in the scene where he is masturbated by Lily/Julie – an act which to him means mutual love, but is merely another example of his egoism.

After a mock trial and other scenes of humiliation set up by Conchis, Nick returns to London with the knowledge that Alison is still alive and that he wants her back. A few months of waiting are meant to give him an opportunity to reflect over the events on Phraxos. The novel’s final scene is set in Regent’s Park, where he at last stands face to face with Alison. Her entry is one that befits not a heroine, but a Real Girl: “...this was the only possible way of return: her rising into this most banal of scenes, this most banal of London, this reality as plain and dull as wheat.” (647). But is he worthy of her? Has he learnt anything? The results of Conchis’s lessons are open to interpretation, but I find the following quote from their confrontation rather suggestive:

“Now listen, Alison. I know who is watching us, I know where he’s watching, I know why we are here. So first. I’m nearly broke. I haven’t got a job, and I’m never going to have a job that means anything. Therefore you’re standing with the worst prospect in London. Now second. If Lily walked down that path behind us and beckoned to me...I don’t know. The fact that I don’t know and probably never shall is what I want you to remember. And while you’re about it, remember she isn’t one girl, but a type of encounter.” I paused a moment. “Third. As you kindly told me in Athens, I’m not much good in bed.”(653)

Now, does that not sound very much like an inadequate speech for the defence from a self-pitying, narcissistic would-be poet? In my view, Nick is not yet ready to face himself, but an interesting aspect of the book is his narration, which takes place some time after these events, and which clearly shows that he has reached a point of understanding.

*The Magus* can at times be very confusing, even ambiguous, in what the message behind the story really is. Fowles puts his readers through the same maze as Conchis does with Nick; he disorients them until they are stripped of their trust in reason, and the mind again becomes open to new impressions, just like the catharsis of Nick is meant to peel off old conventions in order to make him more receptive. This is how Susana Onega puts it in *Form and Meaning in the Novels of John Fowles*:

Urfe's incapacity to accept responsibility for his free acts, his tendency to turn life into fiction, rejecting the real in favour of the unreal...is Urfe's major sin, generated by his shortsighted interpretation of reality. If Nicholas is to be healed he must learn to distrust his senses and to foster his imagination. This part of his training will be achieved through his involvement in the masque. (Onega 59)

I believe that Nick's "shortsighted interpretation of reality" is more than just shortsightedness; I believe that he suppresses reality because he does not bear to face it and I shall return to this discussion in Chapter 2.

The ambiguity of the story is partly due to Nicholas himself who, in spite of his being an atheist who needs facts and figures to believe, falls for the mysteries at Bourani like a child for a fairy tale. He needs to justify this fascination to himself and therefore he comes to see the masque as an intellectual challenge. By explaining the inexplicable to himself, he does not only secure himself from uncomfortable truths, but also flatters his own brilliant intellect as an extra bonus. As Bruce Woodcock puts it: "He shows his attempts to impose a recognisable script on each situation that he meets and, equally, his opportunistic inclination for self-indulgence"(Woodcock 59). Another ambiguity is the masque itself – is Conchis trying to teach him to appreciate and acknowledge reality by means of fantasy? Nick is constantly drowned in mysteries, and obviously trained to open his mind to them, so why is he not

allowed to fall in love with Lily/Julie? When he tries to see through the masque, he is wrong (since there is no end to the masque) and when he tries to play along, he is wrong again. The problem is that he fails to see himself and that the given hints are meant as criticism of certain streaks in his personality, the hows and whys of which I shall discuss in the following chapter. To further emphasise the complexity, or openness to interpretation, of *The Magus*, I would like to end this chapter with a quote from the foreword by Fowles himself:

I sometimes despair of ever extirpating from the contemporary student mind [sigh!]. If *The Magus* has any 'real significance', it is no more than that of the Rorschach test in psychology. Its meaning is whatever reaction it provokes in the reader, and so far I am concerned there is no given 'right' reaction. (9)

## Chapter 2

Nick's difficulties in separating fantasy from reality ultimately stem from his narcissistic personality. The fact that he is only slightly narcissistic, and not a pathological freak, makes him a realistic character, which is why a lot of people find it easy to identify with him. I believe that a lot of us suffer from very mild narcissism, but since few are likely to get involved in a game like Conchis's, it hardly ever becomes exposed. When narcissistic tendencies become dominant, however, they can cause severe damage to the individual's mental health as well as his (read his/hers) relations with others.

The narcissist does not, as is widely believed, love himself, but the image he has produced of himself. Nick, for example, who formed his adult self in an academic, yet rebellious, environment, creates a self-image based on literature and bittersweet cynicism. Without being prejudiced, I would like to claim that narcissism is most common among the type of people that Nick represents – poets, artists and their likes. Most people, however, have ideas of what they really would like to be, and sometimes the ideal self speaks and acts in lieu of the real self, but the gap between this and actually creating a new self is vast. The reason for building up a false self-image is simply that the real self is not good enough; a true narcissist detests his real self so immensely that he will do everything to suppress it. The reason why his real self-esteem is so low is, according to Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Reich and other representatives of psychoanalytical theories, that he did not get sufficient amounts of love and attention as a child. Shmuel Vaknin expresses these ideas in his book *Malignant Self Love – Narcissism Revisited*:

The child learns that the only one he can trust to always and reliably be available – is he.

Therefore, the only one he can love without being abandoned or hurt – is again he. Other

meaningful others were inconsistent in their acceptance of the child and the only times they paid attention to him were when they wished to satisfy their needs. (Vaknin introduction)

In Nick's case, we can clearly see that his ever-absent father, the brigadier, and his reserved mother play a part in his narcissistic development. In other cases, narcissistic parents often breed narcissistic children, since they direct most of their attention to themselves. Christopher Lasch finds controversial causes in today's society:

Three lines of social and cultural development stand out as particularly important in the encouragement of a narcissistic orientation to experience: the emergence of the egalitarian family, so-called; the child's increasing exposure to other socializing agencies besides the family; and the general effect of modern mass culture in breaking down distinctions between illusions and reality. (Lasch 185)

In the end, the narcissist is going to face a lot of problems, most of them on the relationship front. The choice of partner, for example, is likely to be unfortunate, as he is looking for someone to match his created self and not someone who would suit his real self (since he despises his real self, he is likely to look for someone as far from that as possible). This is the dilemma Nick encounters when he is to choose between Alison and Lily/Julie – he is instinctively drawn to Alison, but the prospect of having by his side the beautiful equal of his false self, Lily/Julie, makes his real instincts fade to nothing. The consequences of picking the wrong partner are disastrous. The life of a narcissist is full of paradoxes, and one of them is that his need of uniqueness is constantly threatened, especially if he has a relationship with someone who is good enough or better than his false self. Therefore, he will often try to get the upper hand in the relationship, and if his partner is not willing to accept this, she will leave. This is where the disaster lies, since the narcissist's greatest fear is to be abandoned. Alison is clearly a threat to Nick, since she sees through his mask right from the beginning

and is keen to find the real Nick. One of the first things she says to him is: “Let’s cut corners. To hell with literature. You’re clever and I’m beautiful. Now let’s talk about who we really are.”(26). This straightforwardness frightens Nick - relationships create intimacy, but intimacy, too, is one of his greatest fears. Vaknin explains this fear with these words:

...intimacy pulls the proverbial rug under the feet of uniqueness – it eliminates information asymmetries, cancels superiority and demystifies. The Narcissist does his damndest to avoid intimacy. He constantly lies about every aspect of his life: his self, his history, his vocation and avocations, his emotions. (Vaknin Ch. 2)

His emotions, in fact, are under such control that they could almost be considered non-existent; he cannot love himself, let alone someone else, and his need to be loved is really just fear of failure and fear of being the loser. Thus, Nick is quite content being the one who leaves hurt women behind: “...that she loved me more than I loved her, and that consequently I had in some indefinable way won.”(48). Although the narcissist is incapable of loving, he is superb at manipulating and can often fool his surroundings with his charm and his intellect, something that Nick is very good at. Moreover, he, and other narcissists with him, uses people in order to bring out themselves. Again, this is something we all do to a certain extent – to be loved by someone is the ultimate proof of our uniqueness – but we usually do it in a healthy way.

The narcissist’s idea of reality is deformed, since he chooses the reality that suits him and that often is a mere fantasy. He will not accept reality if it threatens to remind him of his real self; instead he will suppress it or replace it with a pure lie. If, for example, he is seeing a therapist for his problems, he might not refuse to co-operate, but he will refuse to accept the painful and embarrassing truth about himself or talk about himself as a third person. Likewise,

Nick enjoys observing and analysing the masque, but he fails to see his own part in it. At one of his first meetings with Conchis, the following conversation takes place:

“[Conchis:]...There comes a time in each life like a point of fulcrum. At that time you must accept yourself. It is not any more what you will become. It is what you are and always will be. You are too young to know this. You are still becoming. Not being.”

“Perhaps.”

“Not perhaps. For certain.”

“What happens if one doesn’t recognize the...point of fulcrum?”

But I was thinking, I have had it already – the silence in the trees, the siren of the Athens boat, the black mouth of the shotgun barrel. (109)

Of course, Conchis knows that Nick is far from reaching his ‘point of fulcrum’, but Nick, who has to recognise and identify everything according to his own script, silently refers to the realisations he made after a suicide attempt and feels satisfied with this imaginary maturity and wisdom.

Narcissism is closely linked to the notion of escapism, since its inauthenticity demands a certain measure of reality-flight in order to survive. Escapism is nowadays often associated with drug-abuse, ‘virtual reality’, computer games in general and role-playing games in particular, and although Nick cannot be accused of drug-abuse, he is certainly guilty of playing ‘RPGs’. The masque is a safe role-playing game as long as Nick can play the part of Orpheus or Candide or Crusoe, who are some of the literary characters he keeps comparing himself to, but it becomes very hard to handle when the part he plays is that of Nicholas Urfe. Not only does he escape in a psychological sense, but he also strengthens his guards with the means of physical escapism; he escapes from London, he escapes from the dull duties of a steady career and he escapes from the responsibilities that accompany steady relationships. These behavioural traits are increasingly common among young people today; they travel,

they move around and they avoid getting stuck and settled. Does this, along with the enormous popularity of computer games, indicate that many young people reject the cruel and complicated reality in favour of a world of fantasy and fiction?

Since there are no computer games around in Nick's days, he escapes into the world of art; aesthetics become reality and the morals behind them are forgotten. He acts as if "...to impress an invisible observer"(Wolfe 90). At one point he even intends to take his life, but puts the gun down when he realises that a suicide to him would be nothing but another act of art without moral content. To further emphasise Nick's aesthetic hunger, *The Magus* is crammed with art and symbolism: Conchis's impressive collection of *objets d'art*, the aptness of names (Lily-innocence, Rose-vulgarity etc.) and especially the pompous trial in which Nick is faced with a jury dressed up as religious and mystical characters. After having been given a humiliating diagnosis at this trial, Dr Vanessa Maxwell (former Lily/Julie) sums up her thoughts on the subject (Nick) with a slightly more sympathetic tone:

In my view the subject's selfishness and social inadequacy have been determined by his past, and any report which we communicate to him should make it clear that his personality deficiencies are due to circumstances outside his command. The subject may not understand that we are making clinical descriptions, and not, at least in my own case, with any association of moral blame. If anything our attitude should be one of pity towards a personality that has to cover its deficiencies under so many conscious and unconscious lies. We must always remember that the subject has been launched into the world with no training in self-analysis and self-orientation; and that almost all the education he has received is positively harmful to him. He was, so to speak, born short-sighted by nature and has been further blinded by his environment. It is small wonder that he cannot find his way. (513)

This also sums up my own reasoning behind the problems of self-obsession and reality-flight; humans are not born with an automatic ability to analyse themselves, and a harsh society that

encourages us to use defence mechanisms in order to cope does not make the facing of ourselves and reality easier.

## Conclusion

People have always found ways to escape the dull reality; fairy tales, drugs, computer games – they all serve to take us somewhere more pleasant. The majority of us manage to leave the world of fantasy as soon as we put the book down or switch the computer off, but some prefer to linger in their imaginary world where they are safe from reminders of the reality that they abhor.

In Nicholas's case, the imaginary world has become so thoroughly integrated with reality that he cannot even see his own problem. His narcissistic personality makes him perceive reality in a way that suits his needs; he avoids uncomfortable truths, he objectifies himself and he uses people in order to satisfy his ego. The symptoms of his problems are so subtle they are difficult to separate from 'normal' angry-young-man-problems, but added up they create a more complex picture. What might seem to be plain inconsiderate behaviour and innocent lies is in fact severe denial, of himself as well as of his surroundings.

Fowles has managed to capture a growing problem among the young generation, a problem of which Nick is a clear example. Nick's story took place some forty years ago, when the possibilities to escape from reality often were restricted to mental escapism. Young people of today, however, have no difficulties in getting drugs, travelling the world and, with today's advanced technology, disappear in front of a computer screen and thereby escape in a physical sense too. Besides, travelling, drug use and computer gaming are considered normal, positive, or even 'cool' activities. The escalating problems of anorexia and bulimia are other signs of a self-oriented society. But of course, it is in to be thin. Therefore, symptoms of escapism and narcissistic tendencies are difficult to discover and recognise these days.

The more I read *The Magus*, and the deeper I look into Nick's deficiencies, the more clues I find to complete the pattern of a narcissistic personality. When applying Nick's behavioural

patterns to the everyday person in everyday life, I come to the conclusion that we all carry a streak of narcissism and that the individualisation and hostility of today's society encourage self-obsession and reality flight, whether it be by getting stuck in an eating disorder, smoking hash or bumming around India.

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