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NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN THE NOVEL OF “THE COLLECTOR”

Submission Date: June 20, 2024, Accepted Date: June 25, 2024,

Published Date: June 30, 2024

Crossref doi: <https://doi.org/10.37547/ajps/Volume04Issue06-24>

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ABSTRACT

As a historical meta-narrative, the novel "The Collector" contains features such as realism, a mixture of memoir genres, thematically focuses on the ideology of fascism and Darwin's theory, existentialism and psychopathic behavior, and some of the features of postmodernism are shown in this novel.

KEYWORDS

Collector, mixture of genres of realism, fascism, theory, mention , an amateur lepidopterist, parody, novel.

INTRODUCTION

“The Collector” is Fowles' first novel published in 1963, quickly became a big success, enabling him to give up his teaching job. «The Collector» is the story of the abduction and imprisonment of Miranda Grey by Frederick Clegg, told first from his point of view, and then from hers by means of a diary she has kept, with a return in the last few pages to Clegg's narration of her illness and death.

Clegg's section begins with his recalling how he used to watch Miranda entering and leaving her house, across the street from the town hall in which he worked. He describes keeping an "observation diary" about her, whom he thinks of as "a rarity," and his mention of meetings of the "Bug Section" confirms that he is an amateur lepidopterist. On the first page, then, Clegg reveals himself to possess the mind-set of a collector, one whose attitude leads him to regard

Miranda as he would a beautiful butterfly, as an object from which he may derive pleasurable control, even if "collecting" her will deprive her of freedom and life.

Clegg goes on to describe events leading up to his abduction of her, from dreams about Miranda and memories of his stepparents or coworkers to his winning a "small fortune" in a football pool. When his family emigrates to Australia and Clegg finds himself on his own, he begins to fantasize about how Miranda would like him if only she knew him. He buys a van and a house in the country with an enclosed room in its basement that he remodels to make securable and hideable. When he returns to London, Clegg watches Miranda for 10 days. Then, as she is walking home alone from a movie, he captures her, using a rag soaked in chloroform, ties her up in his van, takes her to his house, and locks her in the basement room.

When she awakens, Clegg finds Miranda sharper than "normal people" like himself. She sees through some of his explanations, and recognizes him as the person whose picture was in the paper when he won the pool. Because he is somewhat confused by her unwillingness to be his "guest" and embarrassed by his inadvertent declaration of love, he agrees to let her go in one month. He attributes her resentment to the difference in their social background: "There was always class between us."

Clegg tries to please Miranda by providing for her immediate needs. He buys her a Mozart record and thinks, "She liked it and so me for buying it." he fails to understand human relations except in terms of things. About her appreciation for the music, he comments, "It sounded like all the rest to me but of course she was musical." There is indeed a vast difference between them, but he fails to recognize the nature of the difference because of the terms he thinks in. When he shows her his butterfly collection, Miranda tells him that he thinks like a scientist rather than an artist, someone who classifies and names and then forgets about things. She sees a deadening tendency, too, in his photography, his use of cant, and his decoration of the house. As a student of art and a maker of drawings, her values contrast with his: Clegg can judge her work only in terms of its representationalism, or photographic realism. In despair at his insensitivity when he comments that all of her pictures are "nice," she says that his name should be Caliban-the subhuman creature in Shakespeare's The Tempest.

Miranda uses several ploys in attempts to escape. She feigns appendicitis, but Clegg only pretends to leave, and sees her recover immediately. She tries to slip a message into the reassuring note that he says he will send to her parents, but he finds it. When he goes to London, she asks for a number of articles that will be difficult to find, so that she will have time to, try to dig

her way out with a nail she has found, but that effort also is futile.

When the first month has elapsed, Miranda dresses up for what she hopes will be their last dinner. She looks so beautiful that Clegg has difficulty responding except with clichés and confusion. When she refuses his present of diamonds and offer of marriage, he tells her that he will not release her after all. She tries to escape by kicking a log out of the fire, but he catches her and chloroforms her again, this time taking off her outer clothing while she is unconscious and photographing her in her underwear.

Increasingly desperate, Miranda tries to kill Clegg with an axe he has left out when he is escorting her to take a bath upstairs. She injures him, but he is able to prevent her from escaping. Finally, she tries to seduce him, but he is unable to respond, and leaves, feeling humiliated. He pretends that he will allow her to move upstairs, with the stipulation that she must allow him to take pornographic photographs of her. She reluctantly cooperates, and he immediately develops the pictures, preferring the ones with her face cut off.

Having caught a cold from Clegg, Miranda becomes seriously ill, but Clegg hesitates to bring a doctor to the house. He does get her some pills, but she becomes delirious, and the first section ends with Clegg's recollection: "I thought I was acting for the best and within my rights."

The second section is Miranda's diary, which rehearses the same events from her point of view, but includes much autobiographical reflection on her life before her abduction. She begins with her feelings over the first seven days, before she had paper to write on. She observes that she never knew before how much she wanted to live.

Miranda describes her thoughts about Clegg as she tries to understand him. She describes her view of the house and ponders the unfairness of the whole situation. She frequently remembers things said by G. P., who gradually is revealed to be a middle-aged man who is a painter and mentor whom Miranda admires. She re-creates a conversation with Clegg over, among other things, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. She gets him to promise to send a contribution, but he only pretends to. She admits that he's now the only real person in her world.

Miranda describes G. P. as the sort of person she would like to marry, or at any rate the sort of mind. She lists various ways he has changed her thinking, most of which involved precepts about how to live an authentic, committed life. Then she characterizes G. P. by telling of a time that he met her aunt and found her so lacking in discernment and sincerity that he made Miranda feel compelled to choose between him and her aunt. Miranda seems to choose his way of seeing, and he subsequently offers some harsh but honest criticism of her drawing, which seems to help her to

become more self-aware and discriminating. Her friends Antoinette and Piers fail to appreciate the art G. P. has produced, and Miranda breaks with her Aunt Caroline over her failure to appreciate Rembrandt. Miranda describes her growing attraction to G. P., despite their age difference and his history of sexual infidelity. In the final episode about him, however, G. P. confesses to being in love with her and, as a consequence, wants to break off their friendship. She is flattered but agrees that doing so would probably be for the best.

Miranda says that G. P. is "one of the few." Her aunt and Clegg are implicitly among "the many," who lack creativity and authenticity. Indeed, Miranda associates Clegg's shortcomings with "the blindness, deadness, out-of-dateness, stodginess and, yes, sheer jealous malice of the great bulk of England," and she begins to lose hope. She gets Clegg to read "Catcher in the Rye", but he doesn't understand it. Miranda feels more alone and more desperate, and her reflections become more philosophical. She describes her reasons for thinking that seducing Clegg might change him, and does not regret the subsequent failed attempt, but she fears that he now can hope only to keep her prisoner.

Miranda begins to think of what she will do if she ever gets free, including revive her relationship with G. P. on any terms as a commitment to life. At this point, Miranda becomes sick with Clegg's cold, literally as well as metaphorically. As she becomes increasingly ill,

her entries in the journal become short, declarative sentences and lamentations.

The third section is Clegg's, and picks up where his first left off. He tells of becoming worried over her symptoms and over her belief that she is dying. When he takes her temperature, Clegg realizes how ill Miranda is and decides to go for a doctor. As he sits in the waiting room, Clegg begins to feel insecure, and he goes to a drugstore instead, where the pharmacist refuses to help him. When he returns and finds Miranda worse, Clegg goes back to town in the middle of the night, to wake a doctor; this time an inquisitive policeman frightens him off. Miranda dies, and Clegg plans to commit suicide.

In the final section, less than three pages long, Clegg describes awakening to a new outlook. He decides that he is not responsible for Miranda's death, that his mistake was kidnapping someone too far above him, socially. As the novel ends, Clegg is thinking about how he will have to do things somewhat differently when he abducts a more suitable girl that he has seen working in Woolworth's.

From the point of view of narrative technique, the novel is striking because it features not a coherent account of what happens when Clegg (the novel's anti-hero), having won a large amount of money in the lottery, decides to capture Miranda, a beautiful girl from the neighbourhood, and imprison her in the cellar

of a countryside house which he managed to buy with the money he had won. What the reader is presented with are two narratives, one by Clegg and one by his victim, Miranda. It is by virtue of this narrative technique, as we will see, that Fowles achieves an opposition of the two points of view which results not only in pointing out the respective motives and goals that can be seen as the determining factors for the specific ways in which those narratives are structured, but also in confusing the reader's moral response to the novel as such.

As the subsequent discussion will show, the politics of representation form what we may call one of the major postmodernist constituents of the novel, but representation is also critically examined from a slightly different perspective. While the novel points out to what degree a personal account (Miranda significantly writes in form of a diary) might be determined by the interests of the narrator, and to what degree the narrator is able to structure and influence what is being represented as text, the two main characters are as well shown as victims of the representative process: highly personal in their own contributions, they tend to misread and misinterpret the narratives of the respective other.

On the level of meaning, as we will argue, the novel presents the reader with two characters. While the reader would expect a condemnation of Clegg as the moral monster he is, the open ending and Miranda's

apparent snobbism work to question her morally superior status from the very beginning of her narrative, while it sometimes seems that the novel is more apologetic for Clegg's behaviour than we might be willing to expect.

As said above, the novel is divided in two parts, both commenting on the general theme of Miranda's imprisonment in very different ways. While both depict from the perspective of an insider the events that are connected to her abduction, it is clear from the start that both narratives also are diametrically opposed to one another.

Clegg, on his behalf, tells us a lot about his social background, how he won the pools, how he first met Miranda and how the idea of abducting her gradually grew within him, as well as providing us with a detailed account of the preparations for the crime. Throughout, the reader may watch his obsession to justify himself, and one of the questions that remain unanswered is before whom does he want to justify himself? As far as the depiction of facts is concerned, Clegg is significantly silent about his own or other people's emotions, concentrating on describing the 'safety measures' he installs to prevent her escape. For him, two more events seem to be worth mentioning: first, Miranda's trying to coax him into having sex with her (C; 94 ff.) marks for Clegg the turning point of their relationship; it is literally the point that makes him lose all respect for her, thus justifying him in his decision to

force her to pose for the pornographic photos he'll later take of her; second, he misinterprets Miranda's illness, thinking (or rather hoping) that it's a simple cold while in fact it's pneumonia that results in her death. The death of her gives him a new opportunity to develop strategies about what to do now, and he pictures with a lot of detail his plans after her death.

On the other hand, while Clegg is being very technical about Miranda's imprisonment, her account concentrates on the depiction of her emotional dilemma of being torn apart between hating Clegg and feeling sorry for him. Miranda starts her diary at the seventh day of her imprisonment, and in contrast to Clegg, she does not bother the reader with technical details. As in the case of Clegg, the reader is informed about some of the facts about her past, but the intention that hides behind the two narratives is a completely different one: while Clegg writes about his childhood partly to explain and justify his present behaviour, Miranda introspectively explores her past to come to terms with herself as a person, and her account thus appears to be more honest.

Because the interplay between the use of specific narrative techniques and modes and the critique of representation and its politics is very intricate in this novel, I will give each of the two protagonists one subsection of their own.

When confessing that part of the inspiration about how to keep a prisoner comes from a book called 'The Secrets of the Gestapo', not only does this mentioning link him with a fascist ideology of power, but it also undermines the apparently altruistic justification he tries to convince others with: 'The first days I didn't want her to read about all the police were doing, and so on, because it would have only upset her. It was almost a kindness, as you might say. While the validity of Miranda's descriptions and attitudes might be questioned on the grounds of her apparent snobbism, on which I will comment later on, it is clear from the beginning that Clegg is the morally guilty party of the two. While both suffer some form of a representational failure, or a state of mind that does not always allow them to see realistically, it is mainly Clegg who has problems with realistically evaluating the nature and content of his own plans: "I don't know why I said it. I knew really I could never let her go away. It wasn't just a barefaced lie, though. Often I did think she would go away when we agreed, a promise was a promise, etcetera(C; 57).

The sense in which it might be claimed that Clegg suffers from a representational failure is that he fills the cherished concepts of humanism with perverted meanings and all the wrong associations. Having gagged and bound Miranda, he comments: 'It was very romantic, her head came just up to my shoulder.' (C; 50) This false identification happens on the moral side

as well, and already the language Clegg uses shows that he is unable to differentiate between what concepts and ideals are valid for him, and what are valid universally. In an almost characteristic shift of pronoun, Clegg blurs the distinction between what he feels he has to do and what he thinks is generally advisable: 'Perhaps I was overstrict, I erred on the strict side. But you had to be careful' (C; 57). It is as well conspicuous that Clegg's representation and evaluation of the facts serve his own ends most; in trying to shun the responsibility for forcing Miranda to pose for pornographic photos, he is trying to appeal to every ever so minor circumstance that might lessen his guilt, a train of thought that can be but the bitter parody of a moral argument: I never slept that night, I got in such a state. There were times I thought I would go down and give her the pad again and take other photos, it was as bad as that. I am not really that sort and I was only like it that night because of all that happened and the strain I was under. Also the champagne had a bad effect on me. And everything she said. It was what they call a culmination of circumstances (C; 57).

«The Collector» values the outward appearances of objects more than their intrinsic value: butterfly collectors are interested in the beauty of certain specimens, not in their biological function as put into praxis. Miranda effectively characterizes this mentality as desiring something both living and dead at the same

time: '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.' (C; 203) This corresponds to Clegg's own confession that it is mainly the outward and superficial qualities of his 'object' Miranda that interest him: 'She smelt so nice I could have stood like that all the evening. It was like being in one of those adverts come to life'. (C; 82)

«The Collector» mentality that Clegg exhibits also corresponds to his criterion for reality; faced with two real events (Miranda's attempt to coax him into having sex with her and him nursing her when she's ill) he defines as real only the second one, largely on the grounds that it comes a lot closer to the ideal he has set up for himself: As Clegg's own discourse reveals, «The Collector» mentality is closely linked with the wish to dominate people and to have power over them: I don't know why I didn't go then, I tried, but I couldn't, I couldn't face the idea of not knowing how she was, of not being able to see her whenever I wanted. (C; 271, my emphasis) I couldn't do anything, I wanted her to live so, and I couldn't risk getting help, I was beaten, anyone would have seen it. All those days I knew I would never love another the same. There was only Miranda for ever. I knew it then. (C; 273)

His concept of love is thus one structured by his wish to dominate, and as such exemplifies the Politics of

Representation at its most obvious: his descriptions do not reveal anything factual about the outside world, but rather tell us something about his psychological make-up and his interests. The consequence of such an attitude is to appropriate existent patterns of explanation for one's own personal ends, such as when Clegg invokes the discourse of behaviourism to justify his unwillingness to assist his disabled sister Mabel: It was like when I had to take Mabel out in her chair. I could always find a dozen reasons to put it off. You ought to be grateful to have legs to push, Aunt Annie used to say (they knew I didn't like being seen out pushing the chair). But it's in my character, it's how I was made. I can't help it. (C; 271)

While it seems clear at first sight that Clegg is, in fact, the moral monster of the present novel, and that his own efforts of justifying what he did ultimately reveal only his egoist motives, there is nevertheless a sense in which both the novel and its author seem to exculpate Clegg. After all, much stress is laid on his spoiled childhood. Without positively justifying him, the novel at least mentions some of the sad events of his childhood that might be described as factors over which Clegg has no control (his being nearly orphaned, the psychological terror that his aunt sets up by using his sister Mabel to discipline him and make him feel guilty). Further, any unified interpretation according to which Clegg alone is the morally reprehensible party is foreclosed by the fact that Miranda as well is subject to

the Politics of Representation, and by her snobbism, a point I will comment on in the following section.

There is also the suggestion (voiced by Clegg) that more people would do what he has done had they both the means and the opportunity. In this context, it is significant that Clegg has the opportunity by virtue of his winning the lottery. This is by no means a justification of his conduct, no more than his own explanation of why things ended as they have at the end of the novel. Comparing Miranda with his future guest Marian, Clegg sees his former 'failure' as being conditioned by the social border that separated him from Miranda:

She isn't as pretty as Miranda, of course, in fact she's only an ordinary common shop-girl, but that was my mistake before, aiming too high, I ought to have seen that I could never get what I wanted from somebody like Miranda, with all her la-di-da ideas and clever tricks. I ought to have got someone who would respect me more. Someone ordinary I could teach. (C; 282)

Far from being a justification, for his conduct, these comments allude to one of the minor themes of the novel, which consists in opposing the different social strata that Clegg and Miranda belong to. While their social backgrounds are manifest in their respective characteristic ways of using language, there is also a fundamental inability (as well as lack of will) to enter (even linguistically) the world of the other in order to

understand him - a point I will comment on again when discussing Miranda in the following section.

Speaking about Miranda we may say the following. Clegg is the morally reprehensible party of the present novel, it is small wonder that Miranda is its heroine. But as in the case of Clegg, this is a characterisation that, in spite of all its convincing power at first sight, is not reversed, but questioned and undermined in important respects. While Clegg's first comment on Miranda's snobbism is certainly out of place when uttered by a person who has captured her some days before, the second part of his argument (in italics in the following quote) tells us something about Miranda.

She wasn't la-di-da, like many, but it was there all the same. You could see it when she got sarcastic and impatient with me because I couldn't explain myself or I did things wrong. Stop thinking about class, she'd say. Like a rich man telling a poor man to stop thinking about money. (C; 41)

As it is clear that Clegg's discourse is structured by his interests, so is it obvious that Miranda is likewise unable to adopt the point of view of someone who does not come from the same social strata as she does. Voiced in meta narrative terms, she adopts a paternalistic attitude towards Clegg because of her superior intelligence, thus exemplifying the exclusion of unreason or idiocy from those who think themselves

as belonging to the community of rational humans, an exclusion that betrays the use of reason as power.

While we might criticise Miranda's apparent snobbism and the paternalistic attitude she adopts when dealing with Clegg, this is not the only interpretation possible. We might as well interpret her insistence that Clegg change his life along existentialist lines. I won't try to paraphrase the structure of the existentialist interpretations here, suffice it to say that most critics see Clegg as a hopelessly inauthentic individual for whom it is almost impossible to achieve personal authenticity while this possibility is principally open to Miranda - possibly at times foreclosed because of her snobbism, but in the end simply not attainable because she doesn't live long enough. She thus possesses the ability that is necessary to take authentic decisions: she can identify what's wrong with both her life as that of other people: "You have money - as a matter of fact, you aren't stupid, you could become whatever you liked. Only you've got to shake off the past. You've got to kill your aunt and the house you lived in and the people you lived with. You've got to be a new human being." (C; 76) On the other hand, as she becomes aware that her former boyfriend, the artist G.P., is just another instance of «The Collector» mentality (as is argued by Woodcock 1984; 34 f.), she also realizes that she as well has been leading a life of appearances, a situation she cannot change while being confined to Clegg's estate. While she reproaches herself for simply

taking over the positions endorsed by G.P. as well as for her snobbism, she seems also unable to overcome it, while on the other hand Clegg really gives her every reason to feel superior to him, and consequently her position as an authentic person is questioned, but never abandoned: He makes me change, he makes me want to dance around him, bewilder him, dazzle him, dumbfound him. He's so slow, so un imaginative, so lifeless. Like zinc white. I see it's a sort of tyranny he has over me. He forces me to be changeable, to act. To show off. The hateful tyranny of weak people. G.P. said it once. The ordinary man is the curse of civilization. (C; 127)

I'm so superior to him. I know this sounds wickedly conceited. But I am. And so it's Ladymont and Boadicea and noblesse oblige all over again. I fell I've got to show him how decent human beings live and behave. (C; 130) It is interesting that Miranda here voices an argument similar to one of Clegg's, viz. that the divide between them is of both a social and an economical nature.

In contrast to Clegg, Miranda is very aware of the Politics of Representation and this (despite her snobbism) even when it comes to analysing her own preferences and aspirations. Voicing her disgust for the 'ordinary man', she realizes that this disgust is to a large extent motivated by the desire to belong to the supposedly superior social strata: 'I'm vain. I'm not one of them. I want to be one of them, and that's not the same thing' (C; 209 - emphasis in the original). Being

aware of the Politics of Representation also makes her recognize Clegg's inferiority complex and the desire to exculpate himself, which hides behind his supposed 'explanations': He loves me desperately, he was very lonely, he knew would always be 'above' him. It was awful, he spoke so awkwardly, he always has to say things in a roundabout way, he always has to justify himself at the same time.' (C; 122)

The narrative technique used in the respective contributions of both Clegg and Miranda appear not only on the level of speech, attributing Clegg to a working-class background with a general lack of education, and linking Miranda with the upper social layers. As demonstrated, they also help to characterise the fundamental principles of the Politics of Representation, and especially so in the case of Miranda. In the present context, it is significant that she writes in the form of a diary, a genre where writer and reader traditionally coincide and which is not meant for other eyes. What is important here is that this form also allows Miranda to denigrate and to ridicule Clegg, since he has no way of reacting to the discourse of her diary, and the diary thus constitutes one of the last domains where Miranda effectively stays in power while betraying at the same time her personal shortcomings and pre judices.

For Clegg, the only purpose of a story is its capacity to explain (and he always uses 'explain' in the sense of 'justify') what has happened. 'I've always hated to be

found out, I don't know why, I've always tried to explain, I mean invent stories to explain.' (C; 32) This is in keeping with his collector mentality, while for Miranda, as we will see, aesthetic categories, as well as personal free dom and authenticity, play a much more important role.

The important fact to be remembered here is that both characters suf fer from a distorted perception of reality, due in both cases to their interests and preferences. But it is not always clear that every misinterpretation that Clegg advances is really due to his interests. For example, he says about the severely ill Miranda: 'It was not my fault. How was I to know she was iller than she looked? She just looked like she had a cold' (C; 110), and the reader is in no privileged position to ascertain whether this evaluation is due to his desire to keep Miranda, or due to an already obvious paranoia that he has doubtlessly by the time he writes his retrospective account. There are two further metanarratives which structure the respective accounts of Clegg and Miranda in ways similar to the processes of the Politics of Representation.

As already mentioned, Clegg's language is often cold and devoid of emotional content, and this has certainly a connection with «The Collector» mentality he exhibits. Miranda, on the other hand, is very conscious about the Politics of Re presentation, and she does adopt a rather aestheticist attitude to life (which, in existentialist terms, might be seen as a sign of her in

authenticity) and positively confesses cheating over some parts of the dialogues in her diary: '(I'm cheating, I didn't say all these things - but I'm going to write what I want to say as well as what I did).(C; 133)

As we have seen, Fowles is very considerate in trying to realize the Politics of Representation on the formal level of language as well, hereby ad hering to his statement that he wrote «The Collector» in the strictest possible realism'. This might go for the organization of the two main characters ways of using language (and especially for Clegg's violations of the rules of grammar), but on the level of content, it remains doubtful what realism actually is. Miranda is very aware of the danger that the reality that surrounds her during her imprisonment might soon become the only reality that she can remember, thus pushing out of the way other realities. She tries to counter this danger by thinking about G.P. who is not with her in reality, but in some sense is much more a real presence to her than Clegg, but on the other hand, Clegg is her reality in the last two months of her life: His inhibition. It's absurd. I talked to him as if he could easily be normal. As if he wasn't a maniac keeping me prisoner here. But a nice young man who wanted a bit of chivvying from a jolly girl-friend. It's because I never see anyone else. He becomes the norm. I forget to compare. (C; 189)

As a last point, I'd like to mention that not only the two protagonists of the novel have to face problems of

representation and of determining what sort of phenomena might hide behind the appearances. Throughout the whole novel, and while it is clear that Clegg bears the moral responsibility for Miranda's death, the reader does not know why exactly Miranda died: the most likely answer is that he gave her an overdose of sleeping tablets, but because he himself is unsure about the quantity, as readers, we simply don't know: I never had a worse night, it was so terrible I can't describe it. She couldn't sleep, I gave her as many sleeping tablets as I dared but they seemed to have no effect, she would doze off a little while and then she would be in a state again, trying to get out of bed (once she did before I could get to her and fell to the floor). (C; 267)

CONCLUSION

Fowles' «The Collector» adopts once again an attitude of complicity and critique: while the anti-hero can sometimes be identified with, the character of the novel's heroine is at least questioned. While literary modernism projected the difficult-to- identify-with hero as a safeguard against identificatory strategies of reading (in order to fully reveal the status of the work of art as such), literary postmodernism plays with the identificatory strategies in a way that leaves no doubt that those strategies have at least lost their innocence. As a consequence, the reader has to think for herself whether or not to take her initial evaluation of the main characters at face value. The critique of

representation is here imminently linked with a critique of interpretation, which may belie the same Politics as the former.

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