

INTERPRETATION OF "THE MAGUS" AS A STORY OF INITIATION

Sodikova Bakhtigul Ibodullaevna

Doctoral Student, Denau Institute of Entrepreneurship and Pedagogy

ORCID ID- 0009-0008-1553-9849

UO’K-821.111.09-31

E-mail: baxtigulsodikova88@gmail.com

Abstract

The novel “Magus” illustrates such postmodern techniques as intertextuality (“Robinson Crusoe” by Daniel Defoe and Twelfth Night - a play, William Shakespeare's comedy), existence and the extremes of human sufferings, historical events like: an apparition of the Reverend Robert Foulkes, executed in 1679 for murdering his unborn child; Conchis’ desertion of his trench-bound military unit during the First World War; a mythic masque depicting Apollo and Artemis; and finally, the execution of Greek villagers, where, during the German occupation, Conchis had, he implies, been mayor. In this article, The Magus is primarily classified as an origin story. Its main character, Nikolai Urfe, graduates from higher education, takes a teaching position in Greece, meets Maurice Konchis, and engages in immoral acts in emotional relationships.

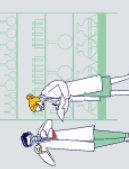
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Introduction

“The Magus” is first of all classifiable as a story of initiation. Its protagonist, Nicholas Urfe, has just about finished his higher education as he encounters the opportunity of getting a teaching post in Greece. In keeping with his rather inconsequential and irresponsible behaviour towards women, he accepts the post, which also offers him a comfortable way of dropping his girlfriend Alison. He has little contact with his colleagues, but he meets the fascinating Maurice Conchis, definitely the character that is implied by the novel's title. In a series of riddles and sometimes occult experiences, Conchis is trying to teach Nicholas what existential authenticity is about (something that Nicholas has profoundly misunderstood, as we will see in the following section), and that the general mystery of this world can never be captured in whatever categories we consider appropriate. At the end of the novel, there is continuing uncertainty about whether Nicholas has really achieved existential authenticity, while there is no doubt that he knows very well what it is all about.

Materials and Methodology

The Magus is told from the point of view of Nicholas Urfe, who is bored with life. Having attended Oxford and taught for a year at a public school, he decides to take a position as the English teacher at the Lord Bryon School in Greece, on the island of Phraxos. Nicholas looks



up a former teacher there, and is warned to "Beware of the waiting-room," without explanation. Nicholas is not deterred, but during the last few weeks before he leaves, he meets Alison Kelly, an Australian girl who is about to begin training as an airline stewardess. They are both sophisticated about sex and somewhat cynical, but each experience some regret as they go their separate ways.

During his first six months on Phraxos, Nicholas finds the school claustrophobic but the island beautiful. He realizes that he cannot write good poetry and that he is having difficulty forgetting Alison. In a funk, he visits a brothel in Athens and contracts a venereal disease. He seriously contemplates suicide. The first of the novel's three parts ends at this point.

The mysteries begin as Nicholas goes swimming and someone leaves a book of poems, evidently meant for him to find. As he looks in the woods nearby, he finds a gate to a villa with a nearby sign Salle D'Attente, French for "waiting room." One of his colleagues at the school explains that the villa is owned by a rich recluse named Maurice Conchis. Nicholas decides to look him up and finds, inexplicably, that he is expected. After some conversation, as Nicholas is leaving, he finds an old-fashioned glove on the path and surmises that someone has been watching them.

Invited back for the next weekend, Nicholas is astonished by Conchis' collection of art and by his claim to be psychic. After dinner, Conchis tells Nicholas about an episode in his boyhood when he was fifteen and met a fourteen-year-old girl named Lily Montgomery, whose image haunted him afterward. They were both musically inclined and fell in love, but in 1914, she led him to feel that he ought to volunteer for the army. Conchis explains that he deserted at the battle of Neuve Chapelle, and offers Nicholas a chance to gamble with his own life by rolling a die and promising that he will take a cyanide pill if the die comes up six. It does, but Nicholas refuses to take the pill; Conchis seems to approve his decision, and reveals that the die was loaded against the roller--as was World War I against the soldiers. That night, as Nicholas is going to sleep, he hears voices singing a war song and smells a foul stench.

The next day Conchis encourages Nicholas to read a pamphlet by Robert Foulkes, written as he was waiting to be hanged in 1677. Nicholas takes it with him on a walk, falls asleep, and awakes to see a man in 17th-century dress staring at him from across a ravine. The man disappears before Nicholas can reach him.

At dinner that night, Conchis tells of his wartime pretense to be on leave so that he could return to England to visit Lily. As Nicholas retires, he hears a harpsichord accompanied by a recorder, and investigates, to find Conchis and a beautiful girl dressed in Edwardian clothes, but he declines to interrupt them.

The next weekend "Lily" joins them after dinner and speaks in the language of the early 1900s. Their conversation is interrupted when a horn sounds, a spotlight illuminates a nymph who runs by, pursued by a satyr, and another woman seems to shoot the satyr with an arrow. Nicholas is bewildered but decides that Conchis must be re-creating masques for his own amusement. Lily refuses to explain, and Conchis talks in parables. He describes an attempt to found a Society for Reason after the war, and he tells the story of a rich collector whose mansion is burned by a resentful servant. Nicholas begins to fall in love with Lily, who

professes to be as mystified by what Conchis may be up to as Nicholas is. Conchis explains that she is a schizophrenic whom he indulges by letting her manipulate men in the controlled environment at Bourani, but that Nicholas must not believe what she tells him. For the weekend's culminating experience, Conchis hypnotizes Nicholas, who experiences the separateness of himself from everything else. Nicholas leaves eager to return for more adventures.

Alison has invited Nicholas to Athens the next weekend. Nicholas finds the villa closed up, so he meets her and falsely tells her that he is suffering from syphilis. They have an enjoyable weekend climbing in the mountains, at the end of which, back in Athens, Nicholas confesses his lie and tells her about Bourani and Lily. Alison is hurt, and gives him an ultimatum: She will quit her job and join him on Phraxos, or she will leave him. When Nicholas hesitates, a violent argument ensues, and she refuses to let him back in their hotel room.

When Nicholas returns to the villa, Conchis drops the pretense that Lily is a schizophrenic and tells him that she and her twin sister are actresses named Julie and June, whom Conchis has hired for a theatrical experiment. The first evening, Conchis tells Nicholas the story of Henrik Nygaard, a blind madman who believes that he talks with God. Afterward, Nicholas goes to a passionate rendezvous with Julie in the woods, where he is shocked to discover that Julie has sent her twin sister instead. June explains that they feel like prisoners, always watched by Conchis' black valet, Joe, repeatedly told to learn lines and to prepare for improvisations, but never told what it all means. The next day the twins tell Nicholas their backgrounds and show him documents to support their statements. After a day of being shadowed by Joe, even while they are inside an empty chapel, the twins leave with Conchis on his yacht, vowing to insist that he begin to be forthright with them all.

The next Wednesday the yacht returns, and Julie meets Nicholas at night to assure him that there will be no more pretense of schizophrenia; however, Nicholas is to join the twins in the improvisation the next weekend, after which all will be explained. Julie again avoids sex with Nicholas, pleading her menstrual period. On his way back to school in the dark, Nicholas is stopped by a patrol of soldiers in Nazi uniforms, who proceed to beat up a captured partisan. To Nicholas's dismay, he receives a letter on Friday that he will not be welcome, after all, at the villa that weekend.

Nicholas receives two letters the next Thursday, one from Julie indicating that Conchis has told her that Nicholas was sick and the other from Alison's roommate telling Nicholas that Alison has committed suicide. He does not reveal this to Conchis the next weekend, but demands to know the truth. Conchis explains that he is experimenting with a new form of theater, without audience, in which everyone is an actor.

Conchis continues the supposed story of his life with the narrative of the German occupation, when he served as mayor of Phraxos. A crucial event, interpreted differently by different characters in the novel, occurred after the killing of three Austrian soldiers by guerrillas. Conchis was told that the lives of eighty villagers about to be executed in reprisal would be spared if he would club the guerrilla leader to death; he refused, and took his place with the hostages, but managed to survive the mass execution.

Conchis then explains that Julie is his mistress and that they are all about to leave. When Nicholas tries to confront Julie, she disappears, playfully demonstrating one of their hiding places in an old bunker. Inside, she denies what Conchis has said, but as she climbs out of the bunker, she is grabbed and Nicholas locked in. When he gets out, he finds the villa shut up and a skull and a doll hanging from a nearby tree. Nicholas does not know what to think and returns to school.

Several nights later, June appears at the school in distress, concerned about Julie. She says that they have lied to Nicholas and falsified documents about who they are. Nicholas explains that their games have cost the life of Alison. She apologizes, and explains that Conchis is really a psychiatrist doing research and that Julie is at his house in the village, to which June offers to take Nicholas. When he arrives, Nicholas and Julie make passionate love, after which she tells him that Julie is not really her name, and walks out. Three men walk in and restrain Nicholas as they administer an injection that makes him lose consciousness.

Some days later, Nicholas revives, is dressed in ritual garb, and is taken to a chamber decorated with symbols, where he is seated on a throne facing 12 figures in bizarre costumes. As they unmask, they are introduced as psychiatrists, including the former Lily as Dr. Vanessa Maxwell, who reads a clinical diagnosis of Nicholas's psychological problems. She is then stripped to the waist and tied to a flogging frame, as Nicholas is handed a cat-o'-nine-tails and invited to judge her--and the others--by choosing to flay her or not. He declines. Then Nicholas is tied to the frame, to watch Lily and Joe make tender love in front of him. Afterward, he is again made unconscious.

Nicholas awakens on the mainland, alone. He returns to the school and gets himself fired. He goes back to the villa and searches for clues. Although he finds a typescript of a story about how a prince learns to become a magician by accepting that life is full of illusion, Nicholas goes on looking for explanations. The second part of the book ends with his discovery that Alison is still alive, her supposed suicide evidently part of the charade.

In the last part, Nicholas continues his research. Nicholas finds no record of Conchis' supposed credentials in psychology. He interviews one of his predecessors at the Lord Byron School, now living as a monk in Italy, but the monk is not interested in helping Nicholas. He finally succeeds in locating a house in which a Montgomery lived during World War I and the inhabitant directs him to one of the Montgomery daughters, a Mrs. Lily de Seitas. At first, she toys with Nicholas, but when he finds out that she has twin daughters of her own, she admits that she is a friend of Conchis--and of Alison. Nicholas is angry, partly over her refusal to tell him where Alison is, but he gradually overcomes his resentment and they meet again.

Nicholas begins to appreciate what has happened, and even declines to discuss it with his immediate predecessor at the Lord Byron School. Finally, Alison appears when he least expects her, and they have a confrontation in Regent's Park, where he at first imagines that they are being watched from Cumberland Terrace. Nicholas issues her an ultimatum--"them or me." She rejects the ultimatum, and Nicholas walks away from her. When she follows him, he slaps her without understanding why. Then he realizes that they are unobserved and asks forgiveness. The novel ends at that point, with their future relationship uncertain.

Result and Discussion

So much for the content of the novel. Any full analysis of the novel's complex content would come close to simply paraphrasing it, and the above summary is meant only to set the frame for the discussions. Other elements of the content of *The Magus* will be mentioned only when they are pertinent to the interpretation.

Having some literary ambitions of his own, it is small wonder that there are a lot of characters that Nicholas Urfe describes as he tells us about one important period of his life, the time he spent of Phraxos. Significantly, the two characters that he spends the majority of time on depicting in a very detailed manner are both men: himself and Maurice Conchis. From the point of view of narrative technique it is striking that while he is obsessed with women, the really important person for Nicholas (other than Alison, as he will realize only later) is another man. One explanation for this curious concentration might be found in the temporal organization of the novel. It is quite obvious that Nicholas is writing about his life retrospectively, i.e. after he has presumably learnt the lesson that Conchis is trying to teach him. Consequently, there are always two points of time that are explicitly or implicitly referred to in the novel: the time of the events he is describing, and the time of the writing itself. It is because of this temporal organization that Nicholas has a chance at all of adopting a critical attitude towards his former behaviour, but he seems honest enough to allow us some glimpses into his former way of thinking and talking about women. Talking about his then girl-friend Alison, he ungallantly tells a acquaintance that he had stayed with her because she is '[c]heaper than central heating' (M; 36), thus trying to create a mask of emotional detachment for the benefit of both himself and the 'London friend' he was talking to.

In contrast to Nicholas, Alison not only behaves according to her own ideas and values instead of trying to cast herself in a preconceived role for the benefit of others, but she also sees through the pretences of Nicholas:

I drove some way before she spoke again.

'You treated me as if I didn't really belong to you.'

'Don't be silly.'

'As if I'm a bloody abo.'

'Rubbish.'

'In case my pants fell down or something.'

'It's so difficult to explain.'

'Not to me, sport. Not to me.' (M; 36)

By the time he is writing, however, Nicholas has learnt to adopt a more critical attitude towards his past behaviour. Talking about the fascination that existentialism had for him in his student days, Nicholas is aware that they didn't understand what existentialism was all about, for they tried to simply imitate the heroes of the existentialist novels they were reading, 'mistaking metaphorical descriptions of complex modes of feeling for straightforward prescriptions of behaviour.' (M; 17) During his stay on Phraxos, one of the things that Nicholas will learn is that such an attitude is not apt to promote the existential authenticity he is striving for. The theme is recurrent in Fowles' fiction: the fact that a character is taking the hero of a novel as a

role model is a sign of his/her inauthenticity in existential terms. As we have seen, a like analysis is pertinent for Miranda in *The Collector*. After the experiences on Phraxos and later on in Europe, Nicholas has not only realised that his existentialist orientation had been misguided, but he also admits that it served the purpose of justifying his technique of first seducing and then dropping a woman or a girl: 'Only in retrospect does he see that he was perverting existentialism to his own ends, and that in doing this he was mistaken.' (Acheson 1998; 21) The existentialist mask is only one of the various roles that Nicholas adopts to justify his own behaviour. Unable to see through his own pretences, he continues in a similar vein during his first days in Greece: At half-term I went with Demetriades to Athens. He wanted to take me to his favourite brothel, in a suburb. He assured me the girls were clean. I hesitated, then - isn't it a poet's, to say nothing of a cynic's, moral duty to be immoral? - I went.' (M; 54) In contrast to Nicholas, Alison is a lot more aware of the realities that surround them both. When she comes to Athens to meet him, and he tells her about the mysterious experiences he had on Phraxos, she advances a very plausible explanation for the fact that Nicholas considers his experiences to be mysterious: '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 -' (M; 274)

During his stay on Phraxos, Conchis will try to make Nicholas learn what greater personal authenticity is all about - a goal that seems to be only attainable if Nicholas learns that being authentic means to see through the roles and masks that are commonly adopted in 'real life'. For this purpose, Nicholas' still naive concept of representation has to be shattered, it seems. Conchis employs three procedures to do so: first, he provides Nicholas with literary clues during his stay in Phraxos; second, he mounts special experiences for him, often of an indeterminate symbolic nature, which Nick will mistake for riddles to be solved; and third, Conchis tells him significant episodes from his own life. I will analyse the literary clues when it comes to discussing the intertextual elements of the novel.

From Nicholas' own perspective, the experiences he undergoes on Phraxos have a most baffling nature indeed. This becomes especially obvious at the hand of the two twins, first introduced as Lily and Julie, later on referred to as Julie and June. First, he doesn't know that there are two young women on the island, which gives Conchis a good opportunity of playing some tricks on Nicholas' behalf, thus paralleling a strategy with which we are familiar from Shakespeare: the theme of the two twins who are mistaken for each other.

Nicholas, at the beginning of the novel and through most of its development, shows himself to believe in a naive representational scheme, in which riddles can be solved and symbols stand for something definite and definable; but at the same time, he exhibits, as we have already seen, some of the basic characteristics of the Politics of Representation. The purpose of Conchis' game, then, seems to be to discourage Nicholas from using his usual conceptual scheme: "Mr Conchis, I don't know what you're trying to tell me." .. "Not to jump to conclusions." (M; 170) He does so by baffling him with explanations that violate Nicholas' criterion of reality, and

sometimes inducing him to believe that Conchis has indeed supernatural powers: ' "I have lived a great deal in other centuries." "You mean in literature?" "In reality."' (M; 105 f.) In combination with the various other tricks employed by Conchis and his crew, it is hardly surprising that Nicholas' sense of reality is profoundly disturbed by the middle of the novel: 'It's just that over there ... I sit in class and wonder whether this side of the island even exists. If it isn't all a dream.' (M; 362)

Within the novel, there is at least some sense of progress in the development of Nicholas as a character. If we accept Huffaker's thesis that '[I]ike Jung's methods, various ancient rites confront an initiate with so many symbols that he becomes aware of what is in his unconscious mind' (Huffaker 1980; 63), by the middle of the novel, Nicholas has learned at least in theory what the Politics of Representation are all about: So we talked about Nicholas: his family, his ambitions, his failings. The third person is apt, because I presented a sort of fictional self to them, a victim of circumstances, a mixture of attractive raffishness and essential inner decency. (M; 347)

As he later investigates almost all the possible clues he can gather about both Conchis and his crew, as well as the persons referred to by them, he has to learn that a good deal of what he had taken to be authentic and real is but forged (e.g. M; 578). On the other hand, his investigations yield some results, and he is at least able to find Lily de Seitas, mother to June and Julie. Since a lot of his detective work consists in examining texts, the point will be taken up again in the next subsection.

Here, it needs to be pointed out that, as some of the interpretations of the symbols and experiences he's confronted with collapse while others again are confirmed, it becomes obvious that he believes some of the interpretations that he advances not because of their inner plausibility, but because they are in keeping with Nicholas preferences. Rommerskirchen has analysed this phenomenon for the exemplary situation of Julie's revelation that both she and her sister are actresses hired by Conchis. Nicholas is prone to believe this explanation because it comes close to his own preconception of seeing women in terms of the madonna/whore complex (a very prominent theme in Fowles' fiction): [H]e uses his images of Lily-Julie and Alison to confirm the images he has created of each other: in Alison's behaviour he always sees the complete opposite of the way he believes Lily-Julie would behave.

The theme of psychiatry and psychology is taken up once again in the trial scene at the end of the book, and once again it has a double status. While the diagnosis he is given is explicable in terms of the emotional insecurity and the objectifying attitude he adopts when confronted with women, and thus sustains the impression that not only Conchis, but his fellow 'actors' as well have some psychological knowledge, nevertheless the trial scene is a bitter parody of psychological jargons and an instance of the very same Collector Mentality exhibited by the patient himself.

Conclusion

Hence, the novel illustrates such postmodern techniques as intertextuality ("Robinson Crusoe" by Daniel Defoe and Twelfth Night - a play, William Shakespeare's comedy), existence and

the extremes of human sufferings, historical events like: an apparition of the Reverend Robert Foulkes, executed in 1679 for murdering his unborn child; Conchis' desertion of his trench-bound military unit during the First World War; a mythic masque depicting Apollo and Artemis; and finally, the execution of Greek villagers, where, during the German occupation, Conchis had, he implies, been mayor.

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