

Male Obsession and Female Objectification in

The Collector and You

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The objectification and idealization of women in media has a long and perilous history. This objectification stems from male ideas about women that create a false narrative about how women are supposed to behave, based on gendered societal standards. At its extreme, men become dangerously obsessed with their idealized version of a woman, which ultimately leads to extreme violence against her. In our present society, there is a hierarchy that prioritizes male voices and narratives, particularly those of white men, over those of women. In the more recent history of literature and media, authors and artists have taken a more critical approach to the idea of male obsession and female objectification. Two significant pieces that critique this concept are John Fowles's 1963 novel *The Collector* and Greg Berlanti and Sera Gamble's 2018 television show *You*. *The Collector* tells the story of a man, Clegg, who becomes obsessed with a woman named Miranda and after stalking her for a period of time, he imprisons her in his basement in the hopes that she will fall in love with him. *You* depicts the action of a narcissistic and obsessive man named Joe who stalks and murders multiple women that he becomes enamored with, using any violent means necessary to accomplish his goals. Both Fowles's *The Collector* and the television series *You* critique the idealization of women that forces them to adhere to an obsessive male gaze. Both works portray extremely narcissistic male characters who are captured by the fantasy of the perfect woman. These fantasies are reinforced by societal expectations placed upon women involving class, respectability, sexuality, and intellect. These pieces seek to break their female characters out of the mystique of the male fantasy and establish them as complex characters with both faults and virtues, not simply objects intended strictly for male pleasure. Through manipulation of narrative structure, narration, and visual perspective, both pieces critique popular media tropes that glorify and perpetuate male obsession and female

objectification to varying degrees of success. These critiques serve as important contributions to the ongoing discussion about the role of media in glorifying the problematic behaviors of men in ways that ultimately lead to violence perpetrated against women.

The “male gaze” was first coined and conceptualized by feminist critic Laura Mulvey in the 1970s as she observed and analyzed various films through a feminist lens. Mulvey discusses the sense of control that is granted to men through their ability to watch women. She analyzes the manipulation of film and storytelling as it prioritizes male desire, even if that desire turns violent, obsessive, and even deadly. Mulvey asserts that “although the instinct [of the gaze] is modified by other factors, in particular the constitution of the ego, it continues to exist as the erotic basis for pleasure in looking at another person as object.” Essentially, the instinct of enforcing control over an objectified other is natural in human society, as it constitutes as a pleasurable experience that satisfies an erotic desire. “At the extreme,” Mulvey argues, “the male gaze can become fixated into a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms, whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other” (Mulvey 806). Mulvey’s concept of male gaze is portrayed to this extreme degree in both *You* and *The Collector* in order to demonstrate the innate problems with the gaze and how it feeds into dangerous extremes of obsession and violence. These dramatized concepts of asserting control through the use of the gaze and subsequently inflicting tangible violence on the objectified other frame the entire idea behind the stories of *The Collector* and *You*, providing critical context for the characterization of the works’ male characters, Clegg and Joe.

Although the term of the male gaze did not emerge until the 1970s, the fetishistic idealization of women is far from a new development and has origins dating back to ancient Greek mythology. Namely, the myth of Ovid’s Pygmalion, who fell in love with a sculpture he

created and brought to life so he could marry it, provides an early example of male idealization of female subjects that serve to fulfill their narcissistic fantasies. Pygmalion sought out the marriage of his statue as he was dissatisfied with the nature and disposition of the real women around him. Thus, he required an object that conformed to his own ideals and fantasies about women and could then offer him full narcissistic support. The only way this objective could come to fruition was through the creation of a subject that Pygmalion had created himself and over which he exerted full control, thus ensuring that there was no room for his feminine ideal to enact decisions and choices of her own that could ruin the fantasy Pygmalion had set up for himself (Waites 436). Over time, the archetype of Pygmalion and his narcissistic idealization has been translated into more modern forms of literature and media both innocuously and critically. The Pygmalion archetype set the origins for many of the tropes of modern day romantic comedies, in which male characters seek out a woman whom they have idealized and do everything in their power to become involved with her romantically, even if those behaviors are harmful and border on psychotic. The romanticization of the male fantasy has become so standard in media that some modern pieces have sought to criticize this tendency, exposing its flaws and dangers. Namely, the novel *The Collector* and the television show *You* depict characters that take the archetype of Pygmalion and the tropes of romantic comedies to their natural conclusion, revealing their adjacency to behaviors of stalking, narcissism, and violence.

The Pygmalion archetype often manifests itself in narcissistic types in media, as characters that follow this trope paint themselves as faultless individuals who exist at the center of their own isolated universe. The subject's narcissistic inability to empathize with others creates the conditions for obsession with a woman who becomes the source of the man's romantic fantasies. Psychologically, the female object of the narcissistic male's fantasy becomes

separated from the real person that the man is obsessed with, turning into a mere representation of the man's narcissism who bears no resemblance to reality. According to psychology author Elizabeth A. Waites, studies have shown that "in extremely narcissistic individuals...the ideal representation becomes almost altogether detached from a real object relationship" (Waites 436). In other words, this obsession turns the female subject into a mere fantasy that does not resemble the reality of her situation and personality. One exemplary moment of this phenomenon occurs in *The Collector* as Clegg compares Miranda, the woman he is obsessed with, to the butterflies that he collects as a hobby. He narrates his thought process when kidnapping Miranda, saying, "It was like not having a net and catching a specimen you wanted in your first and second fingers (I was always very clever at that), coming up slowly behind and you had it, but you had to nip the thorax, and it would be quivering there. It wasn't easy like it was with a killing-bottle. And it was twice as difficult with her, because I didn't want to kill her, that was the last thing I wanted" (Fowles 41). Clegg finds it necessary to reduce Miranda to a simple specimen to justify his kidnapping or "collection" of her, further enforcing his control over her personality and robbing her of any agency in their relationship. Therefore, Clegg's vision of Miranda becomes detached from her actual self and she is reduced to a mere object, rather than a human being. On the part of the man in power in the relationship, his narcissism shifts his perspective of reality to one that centers his own wants and needs above all, and creates a personality that is devoid of empathy and the ability to form personal relationships. Due to the narcissistic man's privileged status in relation to his gender, he is enabled by society to maintain these narcissistic beliefs. Since white men are already the centered, privileged group in Western/Euro-American society, this concept is translated more specifically in the narcissist's worldview as it justifies his desire to center himself and ignore the needs of others.

These narcissistic traits have been loosely translated into the trope of the “nice guy” in modern-day romantic comedies and love stories. In these pieces of media, the protagonist is often a male character who prides himself in his efforts to obtain love and fails to see the problems with his actions, despite his presentation of narcissistic and obsessive traits. The protagonist of *You*, Joe Goldberg, exemplifies and parodies the trope of the “nice guy” as he rationalizes and justifies his actions with his constant narration. He sees all of his actions as warranted as they further his progress towards the goal of obtaining the woman he is obsessed with. Even when his actions involve extreme acts such as murder, torture, and kidnapping, he justifies these abhorrent acts with the idea that he is doing these things in the interest the woman he is romantically interested in. Joe dictates this ideology during his pursuit of Beck, stating “I’m not a maybe, I’m The One” (“Living with the Enemy”). Joe constantly voices the narcissistic sense of entitlement he feels toward Beck due to his obsession with her. Throughout the show, his obsession progresses and he takes more drastic measures to ensure that his romantic fantasy is brought to fruition. It is his narcissism and the societal attitude towards men and the “nice guy”, however, that sets the conditions that allow him to act violently and feel justified in his actions.

The narcissistic actions and mindset of male characters can often devolve into a fetishization of female characters that dehumanize and objectify these women. The man’s narcissistic focus on the self takes away any focus on the true nature of the woman and turns her into a mere object that can be manipulated to play into the romantic fantasy of a narcissistic man. Through the man’s psychological and physical violence towards her, the woman often comes to embody the trope of the maiden in distress who necessitates saving. This trope requires the woman to take on the role of an objectified victim who is robbed of individual agency and

character. The narcissistic man is then allowed to step in as a kind of knight in shining armor, therefore justifying many of his obsessive and violent actions as he does not see his desired romantic partner as a real human being. Even when the violence inflicted upon the woman is performed by the man in question, he still sees his actions as justified as he believes himself to be saving her psychologically, believing himself to be the best thing for her. The trope of the maiden in distress is particularly exemplified in Fowles's *The Collector*, as the novel critiques and questions the implications of the trope. Fowles shows the true horror of the situation that the maiden in distress is placed in through his exploration of Miranda's character and voice. Miranda notably reflects on her situation to Clegg, stating, "It's despair that there's so much brutality and callousness in the world. It's despair that perfectly normal young men can be made vicious and evil because they've won a lot of money. And then do what you've done to me" (Fowles 134). Miranda's reflection and recognition of the hopelessness of her situation does a lot to humanize her, as the depiction of her voice finally separates her from Clegg's biased narration and speculation about her. According to literary critic Perry Nodelman, "Although we do, in theory, sympathize with Miranda, there is no character inside the role; nor can there be one, for the 'maiden in distress' is merely a pawn in an interesting game. Should we begin to think of her as a real person, should we begin to see the human implications of this horrific situation, then the thriller would no longer be merely entertaining," (Nodelman 334). Miranda's contributions to the novel are extremely important in the critique of the maiden in distress trope, as her perspective forces the recognition that a human being always inhabits this role. Miranda's reflections and recognition that the society she lives in has allowed this to happen to her forces her out of a mystique in which she was merely an object, not a complex human being who is truly suffering through her captivity. Through the character of Miranda and the dual perspective she offers to

the novel, Fowles is able to critique the implications of the maiden in distress, causing his audience to realize the dehumanizing aspect that the use of this trope brings to the story. By fetishizing Miranda and manipulating her to appear in a certain way through his narration, her kidnapper Clegg attempts to turn Miranda into a dehumanized object that only exists to serve his own fantasy.

It is important to note the power differentials in these stories when it comes to the maiden in distress, as both *The Collector* and *You* exemplify the societal expectation that this maiden is a white woman. The fantasy of the narcissistic man therefore continues to be fed by societal norms and expectations, even if the man is unaware of this fact. This is particularly emphasized in *You*, as both women that Joe becomes obsessed with, Beck and Love, are white, upper-class women. While Joe does have flings with various women of color in the show, he does not become obsessed with them in the same manner as they do not fit pre-existing societal notions about what the maiden in distress should look like and represent. Therefore, these tropes continue to perpetuate both racist and misogynistic ideologies about women through their presence in media, and both works seek to parody and critique this fact.

Although the trajectories of both *The Collector* and *You* may seem extreme, they simply carry the tropes of the average romantic comedy to their natural ends. The entire trajectory of the first season of *You* follows that of the average romantic comedy. The show utilizes specific camera angles and techniques to emulate the shot composition of other romantic comedies and follows the basic plotline of a man doing whatever is necessary to get the girl who is of romantic interest to him. In the first scene where Beck is introduced, her framing is extremely deliberate and calculated. Her face is hidden from view until she begins speaking and every part of her body is zoomed in on in a calculated, and exploitative manner. From her first scene, she is

objectified and turned into an object of desire to be commented upon, not a complex human being (“Pilot”). This calculated fetishization of Beck from the moment she is introduced is made to mirror the trajectory of the average romantic comedy, as it emphasizes fetishistic impulses of the male gaze, as defined by Laura Mulvey. As Mulvey stated, these impulses can often be translated into violent action. For Joe, this translates to stalking and the murder of anyone who stands as an obstacle to his desires. Waits argues that, psychologically, men who give into these tropes exhibit more violent traits as there is a “role of heightened aggressive drives in fetishism” (Waits 438). Therefore, it is not surprising that these tropes lead to violence against women as it is an innate part of fetishism. Furthermore, the male character in these stories remains static throughout the plot, as he maintains his sense of narcissistic entitlement and refuses to see the problems with his own actions. Even when his female romantic interest is killed by him, the narcissistic male refuses to acknowledge any fault in the matter as he is uplifted by a society that perpetuates tropes of the “nice guy” and the idea that women should be available to the men who want them. Therefore, while the “nice guy” may seem harmless on the surface, his actions as taken to their natural end result in violence against the fetishized female subject. When the narcissistic romantic fantasy of the man inevitably fails, he retaliates against the woman with use of physical or emotional violence. Both *The Collector* and *You* demonstrate this retaliation as taken to its extreme, as their fetishized female characters both die in the end, due to the violence that the narcissistic male protagonist inflicts on her.

Despite the man’s fetishization and idealization of his female love interest, his romantic fantasy inevitably falls short. Both *The Collector* and *You* expose these fantasies to be inaccurate failings as they center around women with multifaceted personalities and experiences who are unable to fit the narrow mold that the narcissistic male has created for her. When this fact is

inevitably revealed, the man no longer loves and idealizes the woman as he is repulsed by the fact that she does not fit perfectly into the mold he has created. In *The Collector*, Clegg experiences disillusionment with his fantasy of Miranda. Miranda falls short of Clegg's fantasy of her by not living up to the expectations of purity and respectability that Clegg desired in his romantic interest. Clegg views sexuality and intimacy as immoral, and when Miranda attempts to have sex with him, he immediately recoils and expresses disappointment about the failure of his romantic fantasy. Clegg describes the experience saying, "It was terrible, it made me feel sick and trembling, I wished I was on the other side of the world. It was worse than with the prostitute; I didn't respect her, but with Miranda I knew I couldn't stand the shame" (Fowles 99). Clegg emphasizes the respectability aspect of the fantasy he has imposed on Miranda, playing into societal ideals of purity and chastity that are expected of white women. It is significant that Clegg contrasts Miranda with a sex worker, as he reveals that he deems this woman as unworthy of respect. His emphasis on Miranda's virtue further demonstrates the expectation that the maiden in distress and fantasy woman must always be inhabited by a white, upper class woman as their lower class counterparts are not afforded the same admiration or respect. Clegg's status as a man allows him to hold this view of women as is consistently reinforced by the society around him, and his narcissistic personality carries this fantasy out to its extreme. Namely, the disrespectful societal attitudes towards sex workers is translated into Clegg's character when he comments on Miranda's sexuality. When the myth of Miranda's sexual purity is shattered and revealed to be completely constructed by Clegg, Clegg still refuses to see any fault in his actions due to his narcissism. His sense of entitlement bars him from experiencing a catharsis in this moment, and he continues to believe that he is justified in his holding of sexual fantasies about Miranda. Since Clegg is a man in a privileged position in the novel, he has been conditioned to

remain in a state of narcissistic stasis in which he still expects the women he wants to be available to him and fit his mold perfectly. Clegg's resolve as a static character reinforces his narcissism and emphasizes the fact that men in our society are not expected to change their behaviors and values, even when those beliefs are rooted in sexism and violence.

You takes this revelation even further in its second season and portrays a scenario in which the man's fantasy version of his desired woman is completely false to a shocking degree. Joe experiences this moment of revelation with his romantic interest, Love, who reveals herself to be completely different from the nurturing role that Joe had created for her. In reality, she turns out to be violent and somewhat psychotic, as she reveals that she has killed people before. Love even criticizes Joe for his hypocrisy, telling him, "You know why this is happening? Because while I was seeing you, really seeing you, you were busy gazing at a goddamn fantasy. A perfectly imperfect girl. You saw what you wanted to see. But I was always right here the whole time" ("Love, Actually"). As soon as Love reveals herself to be different from Joe's fantasy of her, he immediately falls out of love with her and is repulsed by her actions. Despite the fact that Joe has partaken in similar crimes as he has also murdered people and felt justified in doing so, he is only able to justify his own actions due to his narcissism. Love addresses the hypocrisy of this notion that Joe holds, and her revelation of character goes to show that societal excuses for male violence are not at all excused or justified when these violent acts are committed by a woman. Even in this moment of revelation and criticism from Love, Joe remains a static character, just like his earlier counterpart, Clegg. The show's similarity to the novel proves that societal expectations for men have not changed, even across half a century, as both male characters are allowed to remain static and find it justifiable to regress back into their narcissistic tendencies. Rather than break out of these fantasies, both Joe and Clegg pity

themselves and blame Love and Miranda, respectively, for their shortcomings. Their stasis symbolizes the lack of shift in society as a whole when it comes to the support of male violence towards women.

Through their critique of male violence and narcissism, both *The Collector* and *You* are able to grant their female characters some agency by providing them with their own narration and mode of storytelling. *The Collector* achieves this feat through its form of split perspective, as the first half of the novel is told by Clegg whereas the second half recounts the exact same events but through Miranda's narration as told through diary entries. Miranda's narration turns out to be jarring, as she reveals her true character and it is the first time we see her without the bias of Clegg's voice and beliefs. She is revealed as imperfect, and quite different from the perfect woman that Clegg desired for her to be. She is snobby and condescending, and there are many frustrating moments within her narration. However, her perspective is still essential in establishing her character and adding another layer of depth to the novel's story. Miranda notably reflects on her purpose in Clegg's story that he has created for her, stating, "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" (Fowles 203). Miranda's recognition of her situation and meaningful reflection on what it means for her further goes to show that she is a person who must be taken seriously, not simply a personless trope in a story. She recognizes Clegg's narcissistic desire for control over her, as he does not recognize her as human, but rather an object that should conform to his will. Miranda's recognition of this fact exposes the true psychological horror being inflicted upon her and forces a sympathetic response to her situation. According to Nodelman, "It is the revelation that we must take Miranda seriously that makes the

beginning of part two such a shock - a shock Fowles clearly intended, for once there is a real person inside the role, we must feel compassion for her; no matter what character Miranda reveals, as soon as she reveals any character at all she becomes human, and the book moves beyond the fake horror of the thriller” (Nodelman 334). Fowles’s use of split perspective forces Miranda to be humanized, despite any revelations of her flaws and pitfalls, as these are, in fact, what humanize her to begin with. The exposure of Miranda as a complex and imperfect character only makes her more real and relatable as she is no longer confined to her prior role of the maiden in distress. The addition of her perspective turns her from an object that was pitied simply because she required rescue to a real human being in a horrific situation.

Similarly, *You* grants its female subject, Beck, one episode of narration in season 1. The shift from Joe’s exclusive voice to Beck’s voice in episode 4, “The Captain,” is another jarring and disorienting shift that forces Beck to appear as more human due to the presence of her own thoughts and opinions. Just like Miranda, Beck is lifted from the role of an objectified woman who is in need of saving or romance and is turned into a real person through the presence of her voice, forcing her audience to sympathize with her. Beck’s narration about her self image differs greatly from Joe’s as instead of exhibiting the violent, narcissistic thoughts that Joe has, she reveals herself to be a highly insecure person. The majority of her narration in her episode is used to speak negatively of herself, as she makes statements such as, “Literally, the most supportive she’s ever been about your writing and you’re lying to her face. You are the worst friend” (“The Captain”). In contrast to Joe who never admits fault in his narration, even after committing horrible, violent acts, Beck finds fault in almost all of her actions, humanizing her to a great degree and breaking the mystique of perfection that Joe has created for her throughout the rest of the series. Despite these narrative shifts and granting of female agency, however, both

pieces still privilege the male narrative, proving that male voices are still prioritized even when they present false narratives. In *You*, Beck is only granted narration of one episode out of ten while the rest of the show is dominated by Joe's voice. Similarly in *The Collector*, the novel opens and closes with Clegg's narrations, giving him both first and final say over the story. Both pieces go to show that even when female characterization and narrative are shown, men are still prioritized and given final say over how their story is told. This aspect adds to the critique of male centrism and narcissism, as the addition of female narration both proves the male narration to be misguided and also emphasizes how accustomed society is to hearing exclusively male voices.

Ultimately, the female characters in both pieces have to die due to her inability to meet the man's narcissistic expectations. In both cases, the male character remains static and is undeterred by the death of the woman he had previously been obsessed with. Namely, in *You* and *The Collector*, both Clegg and Joe move onto different women to become obsessed with almost immediately, showing no regard for taking the life of their previous obsession. The new obsession that both men undertake serve to prove that they are static characters who are incapable of change due to their narcissism. On the other hand, the female characters in these stories experience change and catharsis throughout their stories due to the trauma being forced upon them by their male obsessor. For example, in *The Collector*, Miranda undergoes profound change and becomes a dynamic character, much in contrast to Clegg, as she is not afflicted by the narcissistic psychosis that Clegg is (Nodelman 335). The stasis in the male characters in these pieces goes to show the allowance that society provides for men to maintain their violent and obsessive tendencies. Even though both Joe and Clegg commit murder, they are allowed to

continue to do so and are given a voice to justify their actions as they are part of a system that prioritizes male voices and beliefs.

Thus, due the long history of society's prioritization of male voices and actions, male violence against women and their fetishistic fantasies are permitted to continue. In *The Collector* and *You*, this idea of male obsession and centrism is critiqued quite heavily through use of narrative tactics and manipulation over storytelling. Although these works were created many decades apart from one another, their stories are very similar, proving that there is an innate allowance of male perversion and obsession in society that has not changed with time. Thus, both works seek to critique and parody societal acceptance of these norms, taking them to extreme lengths to show their inherent danger and potential for extreme violence. These extreme depictions of male violence serve to remind their audiences of the dangers of this behavior as they remove the positive lens of romantic comedies and expose male narcissism realistically. These stories translate into real life as they depict realistic horrors and fears that women face everyday and expose the perils of allowing these violent patterns of behavior to continue. In the end, both of these pieces prove the danger of male narcissism as both characters, Clegg and Joe, remain completely static and are allowed by their respective societies to maintain their harmful and violence habits.

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