

# The Journey from a Common Man to a Criminal: A Psychoanalytic Study Through John Fowles's *The Collector*

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**Abstract:** A common man is usually characterized as someone who lives a simple life with authenticity and prefers minimalist goals without wealth, big dreams or achievements. A common man's life is filled with monotonous cycle of events such as birth, growing up, sacrificing passions for family, running in a rat race and then dying but when a common man confronts with his own psychological traits and allow himself to be a little different by choosing violence over accepting reality he becomes a threat to the society. The paper is an analysis of the psychological traits which can trigger a common man and lead him to wrongdoings. A human behaviour and attitude is a reflection of the structure of their psyche. A criminal is someone who is completely detached from society rules and does not force himself to confront the casting structure of the society. He attacks anyone with or without any motif, causing them harm. A criminal's behaviour can be traced back to anyone's psychological characteristics and most importantly to the effect of the various events such as childhood trauma, problematic home atmosphere, toxic parenting, societal pressures etc. Even a criminal can inherit a criminal psyche or mentality from his own upbringing or family roots but it is the study of how a common man can become a criminal without having any previous criminal records or any roots of the crime from the entire family. John Fowles was an English novelist, renowned for his intellectual rich narratives and Complex characteristics. John Fowles's works are infused with thrill, suspense and psychological elements. One of his most famous works is *The Collector*. It delves into the theme of psychology of the protagonist, a common man who has an addiction to collecting butterflies which gradually turns the habit from collecting butterflies to the collection of girls. The protagonist Frederick Clegg is a common man who comes from a working class family and is addicted to a simple girl Miranda Grey. He kidnaps and tortures her and leads her to death. The psychological traits of him are associated with criminology and psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud with which readers can trace the structure of his psyche and him becoming a criminal.

**Keywords:** Common Man, Psychology, Criminology, Behaviour, Childhood Memories, Trauma, Psyche.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The word 'CRIME' has no official definition but the crime can be defined as an act of someone who breaks the legal rules, laws and decorum of the society and causes harm, damage and trouble. The characteristic of the criminal is to harm people directly or indirectly without any responsibilities and sometimes having no exact motive of the crime varies and the reasons of these crimes can lead to the studies of criminology and psychology. Criminology is the study of crimes, criminals, crime patterns, crime victims, theories and explain its illegal or deviant behaviors the social reaction to crime and the effectiveness of crime control policies and the psychology though only studies the mind of people and how works but can also use to predict the behaviour or attitude of the criminals. Psychology is the scientific study of behaviour and mental process, encompassing a wide range of approaches and theories. The interrelation between criminology and psychology is important to rectify the criminals and their actions and behaviors. It is like they both are the two sides of the one coin. In the 1870s an Italian professor named Cesare Lombroso deduced a potential connection through scientific determination between criminals and an under-developed psych. According to him, criminals are motivated by greed, anger, jealousy, pride and other emotions and there is a need for psychology. In simple words criminology department discuss the crime, criminal and its effect and most importantly about the punishments but psychology helps criminology in studies to rectify the 'WHY'—why a criminal is influenced or motivated by which factors

criminal often seeks revenge material gain or control over anyone or anything which can satisfy their soul. A crime is actually a reflection of the structure of their psyche – it's a study of criminology, but can also be interpreted with the theory of Sigmund Freud of unconscious mind and trauma theory along with Sandra Bloom's criticism. Anyone can turn into a criminal if their psychological shape or the psyche is not constructed evenly. Though the study of criminology, psychology and psychoanalysis are different in nature and seek different fields, purpose and characteristics but to study a crime or the entire criminal mind, the necessity of those theories is insane as they are interconnected. Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis is both theory and therapy to discover the unconscious minds of human beings. His preferable theories are centered round the structure of the psyche- Id, Ego; Superego can use it to study the cause of finding the roots of the mental disability. According to Freud's theory the human mind decides the attitude, behaviour and also activities for daily life. So the Id, Ego and Superego are the main factors to shape everything for a human life. The Id here actually represents the evil side of the human mind as it always forces to create thought for humans which is either illegal or out of the league. It interprets hidden rather than unconscious desires such as hunger, sexual desire, intentions of frauds and so on but here is the rescuer- The superego who reminds the mind of all those pros and cons of listening to the Id. The ego acts as the mediator between the both, and it decides the ultimate solution by remembering the moral values and humanity, it allows the mind to control the emotions and activities of the human. No-one born as a criminal, they are always made of through their mental illness, societal pressure, lack of parental love etc. A mind is a powerhouse of thoughts and the role of Id ego and superego is vast. A man (a common or elite) can have psychological trauma caused by various factors which shape his personality. A common man especially from a working background merely has the courage to commit crime as the pattern or the mainly same lifestyle is associated with common working-class man. And the main motto of their life is to live simple life and definitely not engage with any complex activity which can destroy their life the monotonous lifestyle is also created through societal acceptance, patriotic patterns and also the failure of dreams. The journey of a common man is

nothing exciting but the desire of being famous or rich or getting anything they want without any interference of society can also shape the psyche and lead him to the path of crime anyhow.

Here is an analysis of John Fowles's famous work *The Collector* which paints the image of a man's journey from as a common clerk to a criminal. It was a novel which was written in 1963 and published in 1965. The novel is centered around the character Frederick Clegg, a clerk who wins a lottery and buys a house far from the city life and boundaries, he becomes addicted and obsessed with an art student Miranda Grey whom he kidnapped and tortured her which lead her to the death. The novel is divided into two parts the first part is the description of his childhood, upbringing, adulthood, working life, obsession and the process of kidnapping while the second half is the perspective of Miranda and her diary entries about the kidnapping and the feelings of mental trauma Miranda is going through because of Clegg. The novel deals with the theme of obsession, addiction and guilt. The character Clegg is trapped in his own psychological patterns and impulsive thoughts. To define his criminological actions, there is a need to acknowledge his life events which cause his thoughts and perspectives. At the very young age he lost his father in a drink and drive case to whom he was attached the most and later he got to know through one of his cousins that it was probably a murder by his own mother and his mother and away with a foreigner, though in the text he admits that these incidents did not affect him much but deep down he seeks parental love and affection. For a child it is necessary to have parents and a healthy life, education and respect to become a good human being but Clegg is lacking both of his parents' love. The word obsession is a state of mind in which a person thinks about someone or something constantly. It shows the characteristics of personality. Collecting and killing those butterflies depicts the intention of control and obsession. Here the butterfly acts as a symbol of Death. Those dead butterflies conduct the image of Miranda's Fate. The obsession is not only limited for butterflies but gradually it grows for the art student Miranda. "The strength of the fear will influence the strength of the habit" (Bloom 20). The more a patient fears something the more his or her habit grows and turns into obsession. Clegg has an emotional and shaped background which somehow grows a feeling inside him - the fear of losing those loved ones. So the

collection of butterflies shows that the way of preserving the loved ones and its claims on Idea or style by not letting those butterflies out of the jar. It also shows the consequences of having trauma often attached with someone after having trauma lead them to gain authority to torture, abuse, hostages and do anything related to give trauma to the loved once or those whom they are attached. According to Bloom it is the “trauma bonding” so here the incident of killing butterflies is actually a sign of “trauma bonding”, due to this Clegg not only kills those butterflies but also he kills Miranda by torturing her. Trauma is actually a response to some incidents which deeply affect someone’s mind and it can lead to both physical and mental damage. A person who developed trauma can have paralyzed effects on the body, heart attack, anxiety, heartbreaks and even death.

John Fowles stands as one of the most innovative voices in twentieth-century British fiction, celebrated for his exploration of human psychology, morality, and the complexities of modern identity. His debut novel, *The Collector* (1963), remains one of his most striking and unsettling works—an exploration of obsession, power, and the frightening transformation of an “ordinary” individual into a calculating criminal. Through its unique dual narrative and psychological depth, the novel continues to hold a significant place in post-war British literature, marking a shift from traditional realism to a more introspective and psychologically charged form of storytelling. At the centre of the novel is Frederick Clegg, a socially awkward and emotionally stunted clerk who appears harmless, even forgettable, in his everyday life. Fowles deliberately presents him as a common man—quiet, unremarkable, and seemingly incapable of violence. Yet beneath this façade lies a turbulent inner world shaped by repression, loneliness, and a yearning for control. As the narrative unfolds, Clegg’s latent psychological disturbances gradually surface, revealing a man who evolves from a passive observer into an abductor driven by obsession and an alarming desire for possession. This transformation from ordinariness to criminality forms the core of the novel’s psychological tension. *The Collector* emerges during a period in post-war British literature when writers increasingly turned inward, examining the fragmented psyche of individuals caught between social expectations and inner turmoil. The

psychological novel—deeply influenced by Freud, existentialism, and modern anxieties—began to interrogate the hidden impulses behind human behaviour. Fowles’s work fits firmly within this tradition, blending psychological realism with symbolic structure to expose the darkness that can lie beneath the surface of the everyday individual.

The novel is situated in the mid 20th century England which was undergoing significant social changes in the aftermath of World War ii. Those changes lead to a reconfiguration of traditional class structures and the emergence of new class dynamics. John Fowles in his text compiles this class structure to portray a perspective of Clegg towards the elite. He always tries to escape from the elite. He can’t adjust himself among those elite people due to his lack of courage and his background of working class. He always thinks that people will take advantage of himself if they can and have a chance so he has social awkwardness and lacks self confidence. But this text shows not only the effect of class categories but the study of social trauma which leads to destroying the assumptive world. People who suffer trauma a special characteristics is noticeable among them they feel themselves as not worthy and it might takes them to a realization that there is no reason to leave wheat happiness and prosperity even they are so power to commit suicide they let them serves to go with the flow having no tension for future or work or family. Bloom here refers them as “zombies The Walking Dead wondering in the wildness” (Bloom 21) also humans are social creature and individual existences are also relies in groups as a social members such as family ,friends , a group of cousins but those people who are suffering from trauma can have anxiety to social lives traumatized people often escapes from any social events or award such groups where they feel of being humiliated or insulted without having any traces of these things in realities in these characteristics are leading to them of become a patient of ‘XENOPHOBIA’. People like these often comfort and they become obsessed with one thing or someone whom they can control or rather feels superior anyways. Due to this he somewhere gain interest to a very simple girl who comes from a and upper middle class background and clean these his another cells in the factor of Miranda whose life is imbalanced the self clean is lacking a good reputation of healthy family a popularity and faith kidnapping is actually issues the

inner play who think he can control a girl who is superior from him in education, economy and beauty. He thinks that he kidnapped her with the accuracy of love but when he tortures her by not giving food and freedom it describes the intention of his control and possession over her. By controlling her this way Clegg actually represents a vital thing which is often overlooked. A criminal or a traumatized person often transfers their own trauma by their actions or in shorts they bring are the people in a same position they want belongs for example a criminal tries to attack his enemies daughter or son (who are innocent in most of the cases) to make them understand what it feels like having no closed ones. In this case though Clegg does not harm anyone except Miranda to prove anything to anyone but at the end Clegg gives Miranda that trauma which may not include snatching the loved ones but freedom and life – the purpose to live.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The psychological depth of *The Collector* invites a multilayered analytic approach grounded in classical and modern psychoanalytic theory. To understand Frederick Clegg's transformation from an ordinary, socially awkward clerk into a calculated abductor, it is necessary to explore the unconscious motivations, emotional deficits, and symbolic structures that shape his behaviour. This study employs four major psychological perspectives—Freudian psychoanalysis, Object Relations theory, Adlerian psychology, and Lacanian psychoanalysis—to uncover the underlying mechanisms of Clegg's actions and obsessions.

## III. FREUDIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS

Sigmund Freud's model of the psyche—comprising the id, ego, and superego—offers a foundational framework for interpreting Clegg's psychological fragmentation. Clegg's personality reflects a profound imbalance in this triadic structure. His id-driven desires for possession and control remain unchecked due to a weak or underdeveloped ego. His attempts to rationalize the kidnapping as an act of "love" reveal how the ego struggles to mediate between primitive desires and moral boundaries. Similarly, his superego, instead of functioning as a moral compass, becomes a distorted voice influenced by social insecurity and

emotional repression. At the centre of Clegg's pathology lies repression, a key Freudian concept. His inability to express desire in socially acceptable ways leads him to suppress his emotions, particularly sexual and romantic feelings. This repression does not eliminate the desires but pushes them into the unconscious, where they re-emerge as fixation and obsessive behaviour. His collection of butterflies serves as an early symbolic outlet for these repressed urges, foreshadowing the pathological obsession that later manifests in the capturing of Miranda. The kidnapping thus becomes a distorted expression of unconscious desires long denied an authentic release.

## IV. OBJECT RELATIONS THEORY

Object Relations theorists, particularly Melanie Klein and D.W. Winnicott, emphasise the formative role of early relationships in shaping an individual's emotional life. From this perspective, Clegg's psychological instability reflects his inability to form healthy and reciprocal human connections. His childhood isolation and lack of nurturing relationships prevent him from developing the emotional tools necessary for intimacy, empathy, or mutual understanding. In Clegg's mind, Miranda becomes a substitute object—a symbolic entity upon which he projects his unmet emotional needs. Rather than engaging with her as an autonomous human being, he reduces her to an object meant to satisfy his desire for affection, validation, and control. His fantasy of a harmonious life with Miranda reveals his failure to differentiate between real relationships and imagined ones. The static, lifeless quality of his emotional world mirrors the lifeless objects he collects, showing how he transforms human interaction into possession and display.

## V. ALFRED ADLER'S INFERIORITY COMPLEX

Alfred Adler's theory of the inferiority complex is crucial for understanding the social and emotional conditions that shape Clegg's behaviour. Throughout the novel, Clegg exhibits a lifelong sense of inadequacy and insecurity, particularly linked to his lower-middle-class background. His exposure to the cultured, intellectual world represented by Miranda intensifies his feelings of inferiority, deepening the

psychological gap between who he is and who he wishes to be. According to Adler, individuals with chronic inferiority often seek compensation through dominance or superiority in other areas. Clegg's crime reveals this compensatory mechanism: by abducting Miranda, he attempts to assert control over a world from which he feels excluded. The act of possession becomes a symbolic victory over the social and cultural inferiority that has haunted him. His longing to dominate Miranda is thus not merely personal but deeply tied to class insecurity, social aspiration, and a fragile sense of self.

#### VI. LACANIAN DESIRE AND THE 'OTHER'

Jacques Lacan's theory of desire provides another compelling lens for interpreting Clegg's psychological world. Lacan argues that human desire is shaped not by need but by lack, and that individuals pursue an imagined Other who seems to embody what they themselves lack. In the novel, Miranda functions as Clegg's Lacanian Other—the idealized figure who appears to contain the qualities he desires but cannot attain: beauty, confidence, culture, and emotional depth. From a Lacanian perspective, Clegg's desire for Miranda is inherently unattainable because it is rooted in his own fundamental incompleteness. His obsession arises from this gap between self and other, between desire and fulfillment. Rather than recognizing that Miranda cannot complete him, he attempts to possess her physically, mistakenly believing that control over the Other can resolve his internal lack. The tragic outcome reveals Lacan's central insight: desire created by difference cannot be fulfilled by domination, and any attempt to do so leads to violence and destruction.

#### VII. ANALYSIS OF PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY

Sigmund Freud when explaining his theory of Id, Ego, Superego, Conscious and Unconscious mind he also discusses two terms named 'Mourning' and 'Melancholia'. The first one refers to the conscious mind or activity which is often regarded as healthy; it's a response to the loss of loved objects or people. "One feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this kind has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what is that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either" (Freud 245). In the case the libido (the

emotional energy) focuses on lost object which becomes a way of accepting the loss adjusting the reality to and to flow with the time and accept new things or people in life in contrast 'Melancholy' is more unconscious process that lasts here which is not identical which leading a person to ambivalence to the lost object and causes the ego to back fire in terms of self hatred and social anxiety and more trauma. Clegg's psyche can be studied through the theory of psychology and how he behaves. The role of memory and emotions are vital. Clegg's childhood memories are centered round his trauma and the emotion which could be normal or healthy but it becomes negative and cantered around him to commit such things called crime but according to him it's just the way of escapism from his own trauma and its circumstances. His childhood memories and trauma is leading him to the path of crime which he thinks is the only way to get whatever he wants. In the case of Frederick Clegg, the Id wins and the criminology here to describe the intention and the situation of Clegg. The Superego makes him resist and think for once before committing the crime but it was a failure. The character Clegg being a failure of his own libido he becomes narcissist in the text he kidnapped Miranda but also tried to make her smile anyways by giving her art supplies and making her to post to capture her with smile and the most surprising thing is that Miranda also feeling happy by his moves or actions it shows the success of a narcissist. Narcissist is someone who loves to play with people's emotions and feels happy for getting complements and treat their loved ones according to their own mood for example if they are angry for some reasons they will torture or slap or insult their loved ones, and when they become come they tried to conference and compensate for their wrong deeds. A Narcissist is behaviour can be found in any human being leading to their psychological traits and structure of their Id, Ego and Superego and the thing is here to noticed that Clegg is no one to allow her in any of her activities still it is happening, it shows that he has succeeded in proving Freud's statement "After all the person who has occasioned the patient's emotional disorder and on whom his illness is centered is usually to be found in his immediate environment" (Freud 251), that means Clegg is replacing his imagery of a spouse or girlfriend which had lived rent free in his mind because of the relationship between his parents, by keeping Miranda as a secret.

## VIII. CHARACTER ANALYSIS

The character of Miranda is centered round arts and her perspective for the world is impressive. She thinks that the world is beautiful and has sympathy for working class people. Even her perspective towards Clegg is different in different times. She chooses to confront him and tries to fix him so that he will free her but it was a failure then without having any plans she tries to seduce him in the hope of freedom. That time she is also going through a lot for Clegg. He gives him continuous psychological trauma makes her more weak from inner and outer self. She also unconsciously started liking Clegg by knowing his past and gains a soft corner of him as she stated “I told him he was looking for the mother he'd never had, but of course he wouldn't listen” (Fowles 56) and her character shows that Clegg's narcissist behaviour is slowly capturing her unconscious mind making her a victim of his untreated trauma emotions and nature. “It's odd (and I feel a little guilty) but I have been feeling happier today than at any time since I came here, a feeling all will turn out for the best” (Fowles 67). Here not only Clegg but also gives complex feelings and provides her aspects that can leave the readers in confusion and hard to understand the truth of the protagonist's psyche. Clegg sometimes pleased her with her favorite foods, books and in another chapter he tries to capture her naked and not allowing her to go out even near the windows and spy on her when she was changing. But, he never touches her or tries to rape her. This incident made Miranda give a thought about Frederick Clegg. Here, Miranda is also confused and the narcissist's behaviour is showing its true colors as she quoted “Of course he was sexually attracted, but there was this other thing. It wasn't really shyness; it was a determination to try to be a priest and to live in the world” (Fowles 92). And by his constant forcing of her to sit naked and doing whatever he wants to Miranda, leaves her a feeling of worthlessness as she always failed to escape and make her feel something which a girl at her age should not feel- “The curse is with me. I'm a bitch to C. No mercy. It's the lack of privacy on top of everything else.” (Fowles 72). After sometime, she was suffering from fever and allergy and for this a hope gains in the mind of Miranda that if he let her to admit to the hospital, she might escape but it was a fail as she fake her illness before in front of Clegg to make a door to

escape and of which Clegg has no headache. This time Clegg can see the actual illness of her but he also has the same feeling like Miranda that it can be a chance for Miranda and this time he can't let his loved ones escape from his life. “I'm getting desperate to escape. I can't get any relief from drawing or playing records or reading” (Fowles 105). He let her die in his home anyways which proves that she was his obsession and not love, he was mistaken as for.

Sigmund Freud analyses the unconscious mind and in his “Mourning and Melancholia “ he tries to focus on the Melancholia more as the Mourn is very common and a normal propaganda for a normal people who are not much affected by those events but he gave more stress to the Melancholia that it is a state of mind in which a person can't rectify what the losses are as Freud presents Melancholia as more problematic area to be treated- “ The analogy with mourning led us to conclude that he had suffered a loss in regard to an object ; what he tells us points to a loss in regard to his ego”( Fowles 247). In this text, Clegg is an example of Melancholia who has no actual sense of what he has lost and what he can lose regarding his own actions. According to Freud, the trauma has a great effect on the unconscious mind and builds the structure of Id, as a traumatized person does things according to his will power which generates from the Id and here the ego or the reality is blended with imaginations and illusions. The struggle of being not able to rectify analyze and accept the reality helps to recognize a traumatized person. Those activities are regarded as a post traumatic stress disorder., and leading to attempt such activities which can harm people directly or indirectly. Even those unsatisfied desires or rather the untreated traumas make people unable to take any decision which can make their life filled with simplicity and happiness.

## IX. CONCLUSION

John Fowles's *The Collector* offers a chilling exploration of how an apparently ordinary individual can evolve into a dangerous criminal through a combination of psychological vulnerabilities and social pressures. Frederick Clegg's journey is not marked by sudden violence but by a slow, insidious transformation shaped by repression, emotional emptiness, and a profound inability to form authentic human connections. Fowles meticulously traces this evolution, revealing how a fragmented psyche—left

unchecked—can give rise to obsessive desire and destructive behaviour. The novel underscores that crime does not always emerge from overt brutality; often, it arises from a psychological vacuum, where unresolved trauma, deep-seated insecurities, and compulsive fantasies slowly erode moral boundaries. Clegg's obsession with Miranda illustrates how repressed desires, when denied healthy expression, mutate into pathological fixation. His emotional detachment and class anxiety further exacerbate this inner void, ultimately driving him toward captivity, domination, and moral corruption. As a character, Clegg represents the hidden darkness within the "ordinary man." His outward normality masks a dangerous psychological landscape, reminding readers that deviance can grow in the shadows of social invisibility and emotional neglect. Through Clegg, Fowles suggests that the line between normality and criminality is more fragile than society admits—easily breached when individuals are denied empathy, identity, and meaningful connection. Ultimately, *The Collector* stands as a powerful warning against the consequences of unchecked repression, isolation, and power imbalance. It urges readers to recognize the psychological and social conditions that cultivate deviance and to confront the dangers of ignoring emotional dysfunction. Fowles's narrative, therefore, is not merely a psychological study but a broader commentary on modern society's failure to acknowledge and address its invisible wounds—wounds that, if left to fester can erupt into profound and irreversible harm. The common man, who only wants to be happy, becomes a problem for society. Even the death of Miranda makes him repent and guilty sometimes, but later he buries her in the backyard of his house and he becomes a robot who has no shame or guilt or any feelings left for the girl whom he was once obsessed like hell. But now, he goes on to collect another butterfly or another girl. Frederick Clegg, having a traumatic past and childhood, he becomes a criminal for which he has no shame or guilt. His obsession leads him to kidnap torture and murder an innocent girl who could be a great painter and most importantly a great human being. He constantly gives trauma to Miranda, showing that he actually doesn't care of what his closest ones feel but it's the matter of his own psychological satisfaction. This shows the characteristics of his psychological depth of Clegg by not having enough morality and emotional intelligence

to sense what he did and how much it will cost him and he has no headache for Miranda's life and dreams which she has to leave for his obsession. John Fowles perfectly blends the trauma and psychological elements to provide a brief picture of Clegg's life, actions and its consequences. Fowles chooses to portray Clegg's unconscious mind that way which most of the time gets overlooked as a matter of a common man. Clegg's psyche becomes a threat to the society that shows how a common man's untreated traumas tend to get control all over human beings and society. Thus, John Fowles is successful with his work *The Collector* to show the story of obsession, trauma and events which imbalance the life of a common young man.

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