

# ‘Gaze’ and ‘Visuality’ in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*

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## ABSTRACT

For many readers, there is no connection between Jane Austen’s novels and the sexualized body. Sexuality in Austen’s novels is never explicit; nonetheless, it permeates every look, gesture, and letter that passes between her lovers. This article aims to reveal the concept of ‘gaze’, especially female gaze, in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. According to feminist critics it is psychologically inevitable that women are the sexual objects of men; therefore, they have effectively refused to acknowledge the possibility that a female gaze could exist. Arguably, as it is indicated throughout this article, women are not necessarily rendered mute and inert by the male gaze; in fact, they actively shape and respond to male desire and their gaze encompasses as much authority and power as the male gaze.

Key words: Gender, gaze, visibility.

## INTRODUCTION

‘Gaze’ has had a remarkable and distinctive position among human’s senses from the old times. Its excellence and superiority is based on two aspects, one is the practical function of seeing by the use of the two eyes, and the other is the inner view and thinking. Visual expressions and words such as gaze, look, observe, view, glance, watch, etc., have all significant symbolic and metaphorical references in the world of literature. Moreover, vision is not limited to what we see or look at, but it refers to both inner and outer results of looking (Yazdanju, 1999, p. 323).

The symbolic notions of ‘eye’ and its applications are also considerable. It is believed that the right eye is the symbol of the Sun which is based on the activities and future, while the left eye stands for the Moon and looks back at the past. Some others hold that the two eyes are the symbols of ‘love’ and ‘mind’. The ancient Egyptians used to make up their eyes which were for them a symbol of sacredness. This is viewed in most of Egyptian artistic works. The eye of the heart or the eye of the soul is present in the philosophies of Plotinus, Augustine, Paul the Apostle, and also in Islamic mysticism, especially in the words of Mansur Hallaj (Fazayeli, 1999, p. 513).

The relationship between the eye and the fire which is related to ‘intuition’ should not be ignored. In the Persian and Arab mystical poetry, eye has different metaphorical allusions, from witchcraft and danger to intoxication and drunkenness. The half-drunk eye is the eye which hunts the lions, it is a murderer and cruel eye. Cup, narcissus, deer, and pearl oyster are all the symbolic representations of the eye (pp. 516-517). Eye also has some negative conno-

tations. The evil eye is an accepted belief among the Arabs. It shows the power of eye and its exercise together with its harm and misery upon others. They believe that half of the human beings’ death is the result of this evil eye (p. 518). Another ‘gaze’ which shows the power of the evil eye is ‘Medusa’s Head’, so that her “direct sight . . . evokes the terror of castration in the male spectator, a terror that turns him to stone” (Newman, 1990, pp. 1030-1031). Some believe that Medusa’s gaze is a defiance of being relegated to an object by men’s superior position of subject in Western culture so that “[S]uch defiance is surely unsettling, disturbing the pleasure the male subject takes in gazing and the hierarchical relations by which he asserts his dominance” (p. 1031).

To be under the omniscient eyes of God on the one hand, and the evil eyes of the Devil on the other hand, had been frightening for human beings so far. It shows how much human beings escape the role of objectivity, and also his interest in subjectivity, in other words, his interest to look at things rather than to be observed or seen. This complicated dialectics of ‘will-to-look’ and ‘hating-to-be-looked’ had obsessed the mind of humans for a long time. In the philosophy of Michel Foucault, a pessimism toward ‘vision’ and ‘gaze’ is also present (1977, p. 55). This cynical view can be traced in Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* where Panopticon machine is operated by the use of ‘eye’.

‘Gaze’ is a psychoanalytical term brought into popular usage by Jacques Lacan (2001) to describe the anxious state that comes with the awareness that one can be viewed. The psychological effect, Lacan argues, is that the subject loses some sense of autonomy upon realizing that he or she is a visible object (p. 133). This concept is bound with his

theory of the mirror stage, in which a child encountering a mirror realizes that he or she has an external appearance. Lacan suggests that this gaze effect can similarly be produced by any conceivable object such as a chair or a television screen. This is not to say that the object behaves optically as a mirror; instead it means that the awareness of any object can induce an awareness of also being an object. Before Lacan, Freud in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (2000) argues that the gaze is a “function of desire,” one that subsequently creates desire in the gazer (p. 45). Both theorists indirectly connect the gaze to a human’s desire for pleasure and sexual gratification, and each argues that the connection between subject and object is a complicated one. According to Freud, the subject places him or herself at a distance from the object, while Lacan suggests that the object is able to wield a certain level of influence through his or her own objectification. However, the gaze is not explicitly gendered in Freud’s or Lacan’s discussions. Rather, it signifies human desire.

On the other hand, feminist critics have largely unacknowledged this interpretation of the gaze as gender neutral. Critics Laura Mulvey, E. Ann Kaplan, and John Berger analyze gaze as a tool of women’s subjugation, assuming that it is inherently male, and that women are forced into a passive role as its object.

One of the most controversial refutation of the existence of a female gaze is perhaps Laura Mulvey’s *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975). In her argument, which examines on-screen depictions of women, Mulvey argues that a woman in patriarchal society stands as a “signifier for the male other”, she is the “bearer, not maker of meaning,” and men can project their sexual fantasies onto her (p. 35). It is the man, through his gaze, that “imposes” meaning onto a woman (p. 35). Mulvey emphasizes the traditional feminist approach to the gaze, stating that “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female”, women fulfill an “exhibitionist role” in their relationships with men whereby they are “simultaneously looked at and displayed” (pp. 39-40).

In *Is the Gaze Male?*, Kaplan (2000) examines the feminist discourse on the idea of the fetishism of the female form. She finds that while Hollywood would contend that females are able to exist on their own as women, female characters are often approached as enigmas that need to be figured out and thus placed and understood within the context of a patriarchal system (p.164). Kaplan cites Laura Mulvey who argues that the fetishism of female film characters exists through three different types of looks. The first look occurs when the woman is filmed, many times by a male director. The look, according to Mulvey, is inherently voyeuristic regardless of the gender of the director but nonetheless serves to express and describe sexual feelings and desire of the female form. The second look, which usually occurs within the narrative of the film, depicts women as objects subject to men’s gazes. The third look occurs when the audience takes on the position of both the voyeur of the first look and the character within the narrative of the second look who gazes upon the female (p. 176). Kaplan goes onto

explain that the fetishism of females relates the psycho-analytical issue of fear of castration present in men. By objectifying the female, both the men within the film and the men watching the film are able to neutralize the threatening nature of the female that Freud argues plagues the subconscious of all men (p. 180).

In *Ways of Seeing*, a highly influential book based on a BBC television series, John Berger (2009) observed that “according to usage and conventions which are at last being questioned but have by no means been overcome - men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” (pp. 45-47). Berger argues that in European art from the Renaissance onwards women were depicted as being “aware of being seen by a [male] spectator” (p. 49).

Rosalind Coward (1984) extends Berger’s analysis, exposing the power that the male gaze holds over women: “men can and do stare at women; men assess, judge and make advances on the basis of these visual impressions. The ability to scrutinize is premised on power. Indeed the look confers power” (p. 75). However, Judith Mitchell (1994) has explored the power that the erotic gaze confers on men over women in literature, investigating its implications for the construction of female sexual desire and the relationship of the viewer or reader to the text (p. 133).

According to these critics, it is psychologically inevitable that women be the sexual objects of men. Therefore, feminist critics have effectively refused to acknowledge the possibility that a female gaze could exist; for Kaplan (2000), the male gaze “carries with it the power of action and of possession that is lacking in the female gaze. Women receive and return a gaze, but cannot act on it” (p. 121). Laura Mulvey (1975) argues that the woman “holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire” (p. 40), however, makes room for some level of power or influence on the part of the woman. Arguably, a woman can desire a man as an object while also actively motivating his desire. Mulvey, Kaplan, and Berger all fail to account for this dynamic.

Eva-Maria Jacobsson (1999) describes ‘female gaze’ as “a mere cross-identification with masculinity” (p. 122), yet evidence of women’s objectification of men — the discrete existence of a Female Gaze — is in the ‘boy toy’ adverts published in teen magazines, despite Mulvey’s contention that the gaze is property of one gender. Moreover, in power relationships, the gazer can direct his or her gaze to members of his or her gender, for asexual reasons, such as comparing the gazer’s body image and clothing to those of the gazed at man or woman.

In *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Jane Austen mentions Elizabeth’s eyes with almost predictable frequency, every ten pages or so. Indicating Elizabeth’s gaze is one of the problems facing Austen as a novelist attempting to write both a female erotic subject and a male object of her heroine’s desire. George Haggerty (1988) has noted that female desire for male characters “is rarely articulated as uncomplicated (and more often appears as transgressive) female-male desire” (p. 2).

Alice Chandler (1975) has suggested that as a woman writer in the early nineteenth century, Austen's ability to represent sexuality and female sexual desire "was bound by pre-Victorian limitations of subject matter which had already turned physical sex into a topic for covert implication rather than overt description (p. 89). However, Sarah Kent (1985) specifically identifies the absence of an artistic language through which women can represent the male body in art as one of the central barriers to their representation of masculinities (p. 64). As Karen Harvey (2004) has noted, "Looking at male bodies was problematic in the eighteenth century ... men voiced concerns over the freedom of women to gaze upon male bodies" (pp. 127-128).

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The first meeting between Darcy and Elizabeth introduces the sexual power of the gaze and signals the important role it will play both in their relationship and in revealing their sexual desire to the reader. When Bingley advises Darcy to dance with Elizabeth, he turns to look at her: "turning round, he looked for a moment at Elizabeth, till catching her eye, he withdrew his own and coldly said, "She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me" (Austen, p. 13). Darcy's decision to wait until he has caught Elizabeth's eye—until she is conscious of being look at—before looking away shows the gaze power. Perhaps Darcy wants Elizabeth to know that she has been assessed and rejected by him: he fully understands the power of his gaze over women and is willing to use it. But this assumption oversimplifies the point. Can the fact that Elizabeth meets his gaze not be a signal of sexual equality? Though Elizabeth is sometimes embarrassed by Mr. Darcy's gaze, she is never intimidated and rarely objectified by it, instead assuming that "she drew his notice because there was a something about her more wrong and reprehensible, according to his ideas of right, than in any other person present" (p. 38).

This subtly sexualized context is in fact the only physical description of Elizabeth in the entire novel which is filtered through Darcy's perceptions:

Occupied in observing Mr. Bingley's attentions to her sister, Elizabeth was far from suspecting that she was herself becoming an object of some interest in the eyes of his friend. Mr. Darcy had at first scarcely allowed her to be pretty; he had looked at her without admiration at the ball; and when they next met, he looked at her only to criticize. But no sooner had he made it clear to himself and his friends that she had hardly a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes. To this discovery succeeded some others equally mortifying. Though he had detected with a critical eye more than one failure of perfect symmetry in her form, he was forced to acknowledge her figure to be light and pleasing; and in spite of his asserting that her manners were not those of the fashionable world, he was caught by their easy playfulness. He began to wish to know more of her, and as a step towards conversing with her himself, attended to her conversation with others (p. 16).

Austen shows that Darcy's attraction to Elizabeth is highly sexual—he clearly takes pleasure in looking at Elizabeth's body. His uninteresting comment on Elizabeth's physicality immediately establishes a relationship between the two that is, if not erotic, then inherently physical. Significantly, this wholly underwhelming description of Elizabeth lacks any passion. Darcy's "gaze," if it can be called such in these opening scenes, is indifferent and objective. He looks on Elizabeth not with the amorous intentions of a lover, but with the analytical scrutiny of a critic. Darcy does not sexualize Elizabeth until he begins to appreciate the beauty and power of her "fine eyes" (p. 19). Her eyes draw him in and sexually charm him. For Darcy, Elizabeth's eyes are her most attractive feature. Her eyes are not simply pretty, but expressive, and Darcy hopes for knowing more of her.

Caroline Bingley immediately recognizes the sexual competition Elizabeth poses to her once she sees Darcy's appreciation of Elizabeth's eyes. Darcy also quickly becomes aware, however, of her eyes' power, and of the threat that their gaze poses to him. Therefore; Darcy begins to "feel the danger of paying [her] too much attention" (p. 40).

Charlotte cautions Elizabeth about Jane Bennet's shyness, warning that "if a woman conceals her affection with the same skill from *the object* of it, she may lose the opportunity of fixing him" (p. 15). The man is the object in this game, and he must be carefully monitored and manipulated, lest another woman seize his attentions.

Austen's women are never passive observers. They not only objectify the men, but also consciously construct and adapt to the male gaze. Caroline Bingley is particularly adept at this skill, not only sexualizing Darcy through her gaze, but also sexualizing herself for him. After supper at Netherfield one evening, she insists on taking "a turn about the room" (p. 41) with Elizabeth, Darcy replies that:

You either choose this method of passing the evening because you are in each other's confidence and have secret affairs to discuss, or because you are conscious that your figures appear to the greatest advantage in walking;—if the first, I should be completely in your way;—and if the second, I can admire you much better as I sit by the fire (p. 49).

This is exactly the response Miss Bingley had aimed to elicit. She knows that Darcy will sexualize her through his gaze, but she is hardly rendered a passive object by it; rather, she orchestrates the entire scenario. Her insistence on continuing to tease Darcy about his admission only serves to ensure that his eyes remain fixed on her. As Laura Mulvey (1975) might put it, Caroline Bingley *holds* Darcy's gaze, and actively "plays to" his desire (p. 40). She wields a sexual power that directly matches Darcy's. Mulvey's imagined divide between "active/male" and "passive/female" (p. 39) is entirely absent. Austen's women are "looked at" (Berger, 2009, p. 38), to be sure, but only because they have actively sought men's attention; though they are the object of the male gaze, they are not always, or necessarily, objectified by it.

Darcy's intention to extinguish his desires for Elizabeth by looking into her eyes continues when they meet by chance in Meryton: "Mr. Darcy corroborated it with a bow, and was beginning to determine not to fix his eyes on Elizabeth" (Austen, 1813, p. 50), when his attention is distracted by the appearance of Mr. Wickham.

During Darcy's visit to Rosings, he: "looked just as he had been used to look in Hertfordshire, paid his compliments, with his usual reserve, to Mrs. Collins; and whatever might be his feelings towards her friend, met her with every appearance of composure" (p. 116). Darcy may appear calm, but the reader's greater knowledge of his feelings for Elizabeth together with his earlier intention to suppress them suggests that the reality is otherwise. Darcy closely observes Elizabeth during her visit to Rosings, particularly during her conversations with Colonel Fitzwilliam: "*His* eyes had been soon and repeatedly turned towards them with a look of curiosity" (p. 117). Later when Elizabeth is playing the piano, Darcy "stationed himself so as to command a full view of the fair performer's countenance" (p. 118).

Elizabeth's rejection of Darcy's proposal marks a turning point in the novel's narrative focus in terms of its representation of the sexual desire of the two protagonists. To this point, Darcy was the novel's desiring subject and Elizabeth as the object of his desire. After the first proposal, Austen shifts her focus to Elizabeth as the desiring subject and instead positions Darcy as the desired object. Yet despite the difficulties inherent in her position as a female novelist writing female sexual desire for a male object, Austen does manage to achieve this. She develops alternative narrative techniques which represent her physical attraction to Darcy. Whereas Elizabeth's gaze upon Darcy himself tends to be problematic, she may look uninhabited upon his letter, his house, his grounds, and his portrait.

Darcy's personal worth is realized in Elizabeth's eyes when she reads his letter after the failure of his first proposal. The letter serves as a kind of surrogate for Darcy himself. For the first time, Elizabeth sees Darcy as something more than proud and deceitful; she realizes that "she had been blind," and understands that her view of him has been entirely incomplete: "partial, prejudiced, absurd" (p. 141). She realizes she had not been seeing him correctly or truthfully. Darcy cannot objectify her through his gaze, for he is not even present, leaving Elizabeth in the subject role. This letter allows Elizabeth to assume a subject position from which she can scrutinize and ultimately accept her feelings for him.

Throughout Elizabeth's visit to Pemberley, it is she who is doing the looking, the gazing, and the observing. Elizabeth's pleasure in looking at the Pemberley estate is like Darcy's pleasure in looking at her; that is why Austen states that "Elizabeth was delighted" (p. 163). Elizabeth goes inside the house, moves through the rooms, pausing at different windows to observe the changing scene:

Elizabeth, after slightly surveying it, went to a window to enjoy its prospect. The hill, crowned with

wood, from which they had descended, receiving increased abruptness from the distance, was a beautiful object. Every disposition of the ground was good; and she looked on the whole scene, the river, the trees scattered on its banks, and the winding of the valley, as far as she could trace it, with delight. As they passed into other rooms, these objects were taking different positions; but from every window there were beauties to be seen (p. 164).

Elizabeth very clearly now possesses the power of the gaze, and Darcy's landscape is her object. There is, moreover, a strong scene that in gazing on Pemberley, she is looking on a representation of Darcy's body. Pemberley house is "a large, handsome, stone building" (p. 163), the dining parlor is "a large, well proportioned room, handsomely fitted up" (p. 164), and the rooms are "lofty and handsome" (p. 164). The use of the word "handsome" to describe the house and interior is shortly after used no less than five times to describe Mr. Darcy in Elizabeth's conversation with the housekeeper: "I have heard much of your master's fine person," said Mrs. Gardiner, looking at the picture; "it is a handsome face." (p. 165); "And do not you think him a very handsome gentleman, Ma'am?" "Yes, very handsome." "I am sure I know none so handsome." (p. 165); "And is Miss Darcy as handsome as her brother?" said Mr. Gardiner. "Oh! Yes—the handsomest young lady that ever was seen and so accomplished!" (p. 165).

The connection between Pemberley as a representation of Darcy's body and Elizabeth's obvious pleasure at looking at it allows Austen to present Darcy as an object of female sexual desire. Austen specifically connects Darcy's body with the Pemberley estate during Elizabeth's visit to the gallery, where she seeks out a portrait of Darcy:

Elizabeth walked on in quest of the only face whose features would be known to her. At last it arrested her—and she beheld a striking resemblance of Mr. Darcy, with such a smile over the face, as she remembered to have sometimes seen, when he looked at her. She stood several minutes before the picture in earnest contemplation, and returned to it again before they quitted the gallery (p. 167).

Elizabeth gazes upon the representation of Darcy's body in his portrait. Her pleasure in gazing upon Darcy's portrait is clear: she recalls his manner of looking at herself, and returns for another look before she leaves the room. When Elizabeth sees the portrait, she experiences what Garofalo labels as her first genuine "moment of erotic intimacy" with Darcy, and the painting "is as susceptible to Elizabeth's attractions as the original it represents" (p. 125). Therefore, Like his letter, Pemberley acts as a stand-in for Darcy himself in Elizabeth's eyes; the estate is highly sexualized, and may even be read as a symbol for Darcy's body.

Elizabeth is empowered by this objectifying and objectification. "She stood before the canvas...and fixed his eyes upon herself" (p. 189); notably, as did Caroline Bingley, Elizabeth structures Darcy's gaze so that she is the object of it. In this moment, Elizabeth is simultaneously subject and object, and though Darcy figuratively stares at her, she

returns his gaze. Out of this instance of likeness, Elizabeth fully accepts her attraction to Darcy. Pemberley thus comprises "a world of objects" that represents a completely different man than Elizabeth had come to know (Garofalo, 2008, p. 126). Through her gaze, she objectifies him; through her objectification, she sexualizes him; and through her sexualisation, she comes to love him.

Elizabeth gazes at Darcy, and he at her; each simultaneously desires and is desired. The gaze is not only a medium of communication for forbidden wants, it also allows the lovers to see, literally and figuratively, eye-to-eye. Elizabeth and Darcy's is a relationship of sexual reciprocity, and nowhere in *Pride and Prejudice* is Darcy feminized because he is an object of female desire; he remains virile and unquestionably masculine until the last.

## CONCLUSION

The arguments of critics who blame that gaze is property of one gender are complicated and challenged when applied to Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Despite the difficulties inherent in her positions as a female novelist, Austen does manage to indicate female gaze and sexual desire in her novel. Whereas Elizabeth's gaze upon Darcy himself tends to be problematic, she may look upon his house, his grounds, and his portrait. Moreover, her female characters, such as Caroline Bingley, prove that women are not necessarily rendered mute and inert by the male gaze. They actively shape and respond to male desire, wielding as much sexual power as men. Therefore, Elizabeth does not stand as the undisputed erotic subject to Darcy.

Furthermore, Darcy is as subjected to Elizabeth's gaze as she is to his. Because *Pride and Prejudice* focuses more on Elizabeth's desire than on Darcy's. Lesley Willis (1976) argues that the eye in *Pride and Prejudice* serves as both "a male and female symbol," but is more significant in Elizabeth than Darcy, because, for her, it is both "object and agent" (p. 158). The fact that Elizabeth can both desire and be desired challenges the traditional gender roles of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because it grants her a level of equality with Darcy.

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