

# Seeing and Being Seen

-- A study on Faulkner's short stories from the perspective of gaze theory

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**Abstract:** William Faulkner is a representative writer of the American modernist writer of the twentieth century, and the setting of his novels is the American southern society after the Civil War when the society was undergoing radical change. Telling stories of the vicissitude of the aristocratic families, his novels have vividly reflected the alteration of power and tortuous development in the South at that time. This thesis mainly analyzes the gaze of major characters in Faulkner's three short stories to enhance readers' comprehension of power and gaze. This thesis concludes that the gaze in Faulkner's works is the gaze under the power system of the American southern society, reflecting the social environment and power distribution at that time. By applying Foucault's gaze theory, the thesis offers a new perspective to appreciate the gaze in Faulkner's works.

**Keywords:** William Faulkner, Power Gaze, Subjectivity.

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## 1. Introduction

The thesis aims to analyze the gaze of the main female characters in Faulkner's three short stories in the perspective of gaze theory in order to explore the change of power under the gaze. Gaze, as an important norm of the literary studies, refers to a particular way of seeing in which power and desire are included. Gaze is not a simple glance of a subject. Complicated political and social relations were revealed through the shift of gazing and being gazed. The action of gazing and being gazed formed the triangle relationship between subject, object and gazer itself. The relationship between the subject and object is another manifestation of the power and desire behind the gaze. The Gaze Theory aims to reveal the social and political factors and relations in the action and process of the "seeing".

This thesis aims to use Michel Foucault's gaze theory as the theoretical foundation. The thesis chooses to analyze three short stories of Faulkner under the gaze theory. These stories are *Elly*, *Hair* and *A Rose for Emily*. These three stories are mainly about the condition of female in the South. *Elly* is about a teenage trying to break the convention and find her freedom of her body. *Hair* is a story about the life of a girl and his father and how the public view them. *A Rose for Emily* is about the tragedy of an aristocratic lady. It respectively portrayed the same dilemma of three different females. They are both being gazed in the story. But they made very different response to the gaze. That's what this thesis will analyze.

## 2. Gaze in *A Rose for Emily*

### 2.1. The Gazed: Emily

As a monument for this town, Miss Emily was always gazed in her whole life. When she died, the whole town went to her funeral. The men tried to show their respect for a past period while the women tried to see what was inside Miss Emily's house. For Miss Emily, her house was the only place that she was not gazed. When she went out of that house, her every move was under close gaze which mainly come from the women in this town.

An aristocratic lady was doomed to be noticed and judged

by the people around, "Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty and a care" [4]. For Miss Emily, born in a prestigious family, grew up with the high expectations from her father and was fettered by all these conventions. She was controlled by the invisible gaze from this town. Born in a prestigious family, reputation and glory were always with her. When she grew up, she was gazed by his father, "that quality of her father which had thwarted her woman's life so many times had been too virulent and too furious to die" [4]. Her love life was not accepted by his father. All her thoughts and action were under control. This gaze was the male gaze. As a young female in traditional South, Emily was powerless enough to only be tolerant with this gaze.

In townspeople's eyes, Miss Emily always looked down upon anyone in this town. When she was in trying times, these people made fun of her situation and spared no effort to gaze at her with their cruel sympathy, "when her father died... people were glad. At least they could pity Miss Emily. Being left alone and a pauper, she had become humanized" [4]. Townspeople took malicious pleasure in finding Miss Emily's tragic experience. This could be taken as a gaze which exist with the fall of power in Emily's family<sup>[1]</sup>. When Emily's father was alive, they still had their influence on the people in this town. The gap between the Griersons and the townspeople was still wide. The scale of power still tipped to the Griersons' side. When her father died, those who used to be timid and silent became present on the stage. They started to pay attention to the only survivor, Miss Emily, in the Griersons. This kind of gaze was different from the gaze when Emily's father was alive. It was more harsh, brutal and disdainful.

When Emily bought arsenic alone in the night, all the people in this town knew on the next day. They talked about what she would do with that poison. People judged her every move, her love life and even her suicide. They regarded this as a pleasure and something they could enjoy to spend their leisure time. Emily was gazed every second. No matter what she did, she would be criticized, "then some of the ladies began to say that it was a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people"<sup>[4]</sup>. It can be seen that Emily did not only suffer from the visible gaze but also the invisible gaze. The morality and the customs still spelled their curse on

her. Her love for a negro was doomed to be unaccepted and a failure. And all of this tragedy happened under these people's eyes. Emily was powerless and could not resist the gaze from the public which were much more powerful at that time.

## 2.2. The Gazer: Townspeople

The gaze of townspeople came from the envy and discontent of the power and fortune, "when her father died... now she too would know the old thrill and the old despair of a penny more or less"<sup>[4]</sup>. Townspeople were jealous of the Griersons' fortune and status in this town. But now things changed. Miss Emily was no difference from them and they could say "poor Emily" to satisfy their needs for gloating. When Emily's father died, the gap between Miss Emily and townspeople was narrowed. The scale of power started to be balanced. The gaze of townspeople started to fix on Emily.

In the whole story, Emily was an important figure in townspeople's topics. People conjectured her life and her state of mind. The comments about her every action never stopped, "so when she got to be thirty and was still single, we were not pleased exactly, but vindicated; even with insanity in the family she wouldn't have turned down all of her chances if they had really materialized"<sup>[4]</sup>. Emily's life became predictable to these people and it seemed that everything was in control under townspeople's gaze. When she bought poison, they predicted her suicide. When she met Homer, they predicted she would marry him. But the women were not satisfied, they asked minister to persuade Emily. They were gazing all the time, "so she had blood-kin under her roof again and we sat back to watch developments"<sup>[4]</sup>. Emily was powerless at this time. Her life started to change under the townspeople's gaze. They not only gazed but also made things go as they expected.

Emily was not the only one that was gazed. Homer was also gazed by the townspeople. His look, his favorite place and his race were under their discussion and surveillance. He was a Yankee which was inferior in the South. A Yankee in the South alone was hard to beat the power of the community. The townspeople's gaze to Homer was more of a white gaze than a collective gaze. He was the victim under the power gaze that came from the racial prejudice. As the supervisors of this town, townspeople's gaze did not let go any of the powerless.

## 2.3. The Wrestle between the Aristocratic Decadent Woman and the Public

When Emily's father died, an era ended. The fall of the Griersons started and accelerated with the change of time. After the Civil War ended, the wealth distribution changed. The gap between Emily and townspeople were small enough to make them equal. The wrestle between the aristocratic decadent woman and the public started.

As an aristocratic lady, Emily used her ways to fight against the public's gaze. When all eyes on her, she became stubborn, determined and strong to show her will power to be noble and elegant as a lady. However, this gaze actually made her unable to free herself from the fetters of past glory. She lost her subjectivity and became the object in the gaze. She became passive. The defense she made against the gaze was shutting her door to public. In Foucault's opinion, an architecture that render visible those who are inside it would operate to transform individuals. This kind of architecture could influence the people who shelter in it and make it possible to know and control them<sup>[5]</sup>. When Emily shut her door, she

actually shut the gaze of townspeople. It was her way to stay out of control and surveillance from the town. When the object of gaze was gone, the gaze would disappear<sup>[1]</sup>. When everyone talked about her relationship with Homer, she bought poison to kill Homer. When Homer was gone from the public, she did not have to worry about her reputation and she could keep Homer around her forever.

Even though Emily made her responses to the gaze of townspeople, she was too weak in front of the public. The public used their ways to break the door and made the house visible. When she refused to pay the taxes, they sent deputation to come upon her. When her father died, she refused to bury him. Townspeople buried her father when she broke down. This is the first loss of Emily in this wrestle. When she killed Homer, that's her second loss. Townspeople gazed at her and Homer and even pitied her in front of her face. It was a sign of the fall of grace and status in this town. Language can be the weapon of power or the area where people use their power<sup>[6]</sup>, "It is as though discussion, far from being a transparent, neutral element, allowing us to disarm sexuality and to pacify politics, were one of those privileged areas in which they exercised some of their more awesome powers"<sup>[8]</sup>. "Poor Emily" was clear evidence for the loss of power and status. They used to be afraid of using this while now they used it in public. The less power Emily had, the bolder their gaze would be.

The wrestle between Emily and the public was actually the wrestle between the noble and the ordinary. The unbalanced wealth distribution broke down after the Civil War. Power was held in the new generation. The loss of power made her lose the position of subject. She became the other and the gazed. The loss of this wrestle ended with the death of Emily and her being ordinary. In the power distribution, she was exiled and passive. This made her the gazed and unable to change her situation in the gaze which proves the important position of power in the gaze.

## 3. Gaze in *Hair*

### 3.1. The Gazed: Susan Reed

Susan Reed was an orphan with soft hair not blonde and not brunette who was hard to gain attention in this town. But when Hawkshaw adopted her, she became the topic of this barber shop and even of this town. She was gazed since the day Hawkshaw adopted her. The color of her hair was her unique identity which implies her identity and status that she was a crestless girl.

As an outsider, Susan was the marginalized in this town just like Hawkshaw. People in the barber shop or in the town gazed at her in order to see her fate. Because she did not fit in this town and she was a stranger and disconnected with this place. This made her an outsider, the freak and the other. The gaze of the town came from the exclusivity and curiosity which actually objectified Susan as a joke or play that was made for thrill-seeking and entertainment<sup>[9]</sup>. It is the surveillance on the marginalized. Susan Reed was powerless and impoverished. People's gaze at her life was a kind of surveillance on her. They used gaze to control her and watch her fall as they expected, "somebody -- one of the high-school boys maybe, but she never drew any lines: schoolboys, married men, anybody -- would get her a report card every month..."<sup>[4]</sup>. It can be seen that people in his town helped her cheat Hawkshaw and witnessed her fall all along. The position of the object made Susan hard to compete with the

people in this town. Her position of the object in the gaze was fixed and hard for her to be aware of.

Susan Reed was also a victim of the male gaze. This male gaze mainly came from the Hawkshaw and the narrator. The narrator claimed that “girls are born weaned and boys don’t ever get weaned ... because they are all born bad, born with the badness in them”<sup>[4]</sup>. Demonizing and belittling women is the common way that men made women the symbol of instinct and lust (Randall 9). In the whole story, Susan’s image was a degenerated girl which the men in this town impose on her. They gained pleasure through the process of watching her depravity. Men in this town and even the Hawkshaw himself gazed at Susan in this story. To men, she was topics and evidence for their prejudice against women; to Hawkshaw, she was his property and future wife. They gazed at her because they were both able to get something from Susan. Susan’s body did not belong to her in certain sense and this was the influence of male gaze.

### 3.2. The Gazer: The Barber Shop

In general, most of the gaze in this story was near the barber shop and most of the gazers were related to the barber shop. The barber shop consisted of four men: Matt, Maxey, Hawkshaw and the narrator. They were the major gazers in the story.

The narrator and Matt Fox were the gazers to Hawkshaw. They gazed at Hawkshaw and his life. Matt knew Hawkshaw’s personal life, “Hawkshaw never told him. But he knew some way; he knew more about Hawkshaw than Maxey did”<sup>[4]</sup>. Hawkshaw was regarded as the freak or stranger in this town. The kind of gaze was the surveillance of this town on an outsider. Hawkshaw never really belonged to this town and his action was consider weird, “he doesn’t know what everybody else in this town except maybe Mr. and Mrs. Burchett...” Hawkshaw’s social life was under their gaze. Even the first day that Hawkshaw came to this town, they both gazed at him who was in “a blue serge and a black bow tie”<sup>[4]</sup>. The narrator even asked Stevens about the news of Hawkshaw and went to his house to look into his secrets. This was a kind of privacy invasion and caused high visibility about Hawkshaw which was also a kind of surveillance<sup>[2]</sup>. This visibility and surveillance were actually rooted in the power of the society. The barber shop stuffs and the narrator knew this town and their resource of information was wider than Hawkshaw. This actually made Hawkshaw in the position of the object. They became the subject in this gaze.

Besides, the barber shop also gazed at Susan Reed. Matt Fox gazed at her out of the curiosity to Hawkshaw, while the narrator gazed at her out of the discrimination against women. Susan was oppositely in the position of “the other” which also means the objectification of Susan<sup>[7]</sup>. To Matt, Susan was the information related to Hawkshaw which could be his topic; to the narrator, Susan was the example of “the badness in women’s heads” which was his object to observe. Susan was described as the fallen and degenerated woman which was the result of male gaze in the barber shop and this town. It actually reached their expectations. Her body and appearance became the object for gaze which was the product of an relationship formed by disparity and imbalanced power<sup>[3]</sup>. They were the gazers all the time but their surveillance and silence about Susan’s change made Susan fall. This is the male gaze in the barber shop.

### 3.3. The Invisible Oppression on the Marginalized

As the marginalized in this town, Hawkshaw and Susan were regarded as the weird and the different which actually was the process of alienation of the two. This is the invisible oppression on the marginalized that comes from the difference in appearance, gender and class. Hawkshaw and Susan were the victims of the changing times after the Civil War. Their behaviors and identities were misfits to the South which made them suffer from misunderstanding, mockery and especially the gaze of the town. The gaze was the invisible oppression on the marginalized.

Susan’s identity of the Marginalized was implied through several signs like her hair color and her origin. Her hair was brown-yellow which was not blonde and not brunette. This kind of hair color was rare in this town which was only seen in the girl of Starnes. Her unknown origin as an orphan implied that she cannot fit in any group of this town. The invisible oppression of townspeople on her was conducted through their gaze. When Susan grew older, she started to become rebellious and bad. Townspeople knew about this but they kept silent and watched her degeneration. This town and even the barber shop were closed areas where many eyes were seeing in the dark just like a Panopticon, “this Panopticon, subtly arranged so that an observer may observe, at a glance, so many different individuals, also enables everyone to come and observe any of the observers”<sup>[5]</sup>. Susan’s tragedy was the result of power gaze. Her fall was her alienation under the gaze of this town. Her gender and identity made her powerless and suffer in the town. She was the direct victim of the oppression of gaze.

Hawkshaw was another victim of the oppression. He worked hard and married the girl of the Starnes but the unfortunate illness killed all of the Starnes. He kept the promise to pay the mortgage of the house. He was the representative of hardworking farmers and the follower of the fallen aristocracy which was from the prewar times. He was the victim of the times and the victim of the gaze of the narrator, Matt and even this town. He did not fit in this town or more accurately, this time. He was marginalized because of his identity and belief. This gaze came from the power of community and the exclusivity<sup>[10]</sup>. He was under the oppression of the changing times and the public. This gaze was a kind of privacy invasion and mockery at those who cannot keep up with times. The power of times made him marginalized and his tragedy was the result of the times.

## 4. Gaze in *Elly*

### 4.1. The Gazed: *Elly*

Elly was a girl who was trying to pursue freedom and happiness and kept herself out of the Southern conventions under the gaze of her grandmother Ailanthia. Her process of pursuing freedom was actually her resistance against the gaze of grandmother which was a sign of the oppression on Southern Women. Elly was fighting against the gaze and the prejudice in the story.

Elly was fighting against her grandmother and the gaze all along. Grandmother gazed at Elly every time Elly went to see her, “she remembered her grandmother, thinking of the old woman with her dead hearing and her inescapable cold eyes waiting at Mills City”<sup>[4]</sup>. Grandmother’s gaze was the cruelest fear in the deep side of Elly’s heart. The gaze was a kind of

authoritativeness, pressure and even surveillance. Every time Elly remembered this gaze and this old lady, she would unconsciously behave in a ladylike way and sense of guilty appeared. This was actually a form of discipline:

“It introduces, through this ‘value-giving’ measure, the constraint of a conformity that must be achieved ... The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it normalizes”<sup>[5]</sup>.

This gaze and sense of guilty is the discipline of society on women and the discipline of normalized women on the other women. Though the gaze of Grandmother is from a female, it is a sign of patriarch oppression and domination on women. Elly was actually gazed by the invisible patriarch society.

Elly was also gazed by herself or her value. When she went out with different men and tried having adultery, her sense of guilt and sin always interrupted her and made her stop. She was always confused and regretful about her sin, “She would undress and look at her face in the mirror, examining her mouth now pale of paint and heavy, flattened (so she would believe) and weary and dulled with kissing, thinking ‘My God. Why do I do it? What is the matter with me?’”<sup>[4]</sup>. Her self-examination was actually the gaze of herself which came from the moral value of the society. Elly was disciplined in her growth. The sense of morality and sin was the result of her being disciplined. This discipline mechanism caused her to examine herself constantly<sup>[12]</sup>. Her self-gaze was the direct result of the power of traditional Southern value and the indirect result of oppression under the power of male-dominated society. She became the observer and the observed in the gaze at the same time which was a kind of alienation under the power gaze.

## 4.2. The Gazer: Grandmother Ailanthia

Grandmother Ailanthia’s gaze is the driving force of Elly’s later rebellion. She gazed at Elly in her way and used her silence and solemnity to intensify the effect of gaze which caused the resistance of Elly. Her ways of gaze were unique due to her disability, “The grandmother stood just behind and above them. When she arrived, how long she had been there, they did not know. But there she stood, saying nothing, in the long anti-climax”<sup>[4]</sup>. This silent but powerful gaze appeared in the whole story which was the deepest fear to Elly.

Grandmother’s gaze was a part of male gaze even though she is a woman. As a female, she was the victim of the male gaze. But the awakening and awareness of her female identity was absent in her whole life. She was disciplined by the convention and the morality which actually were products of male domination. She does not realize her position of the oppressed while she gazed at other females in the same way that she was gazed. Behind the image of grandmother was the spiritual connotations of the patriarchy that the age and the gender were the source of power in domination and authority<sup>[11]</sup>. The gaze of grandmother was used for controlling and normalizing which also became the criteria of sin and purity and the trial of the vision and spirit. Grandmother gazed at Elly to change her and assimilate her to follow the rules that men put on women. Her gaze came from the power of her age and her authority which caused fear and obedience to the oppressed.

Grandmother’s gaze was also the white gaze which came from the prejudice against ethnic minorities. Paul was gazed by grandmother because of his African American identity,

“Look at his hair, his fingernails, if you need proof. I don’t. I know the name which his people have borne for four generations... That man must not sleep under this roof”<sup>[4]</sup>. Grandmother’s gaze at Paul was actually the Southern whites’ gaze at blacks. They used rules, surveillance and gaze to form the power of language and the fields of white supreme so as to suppress the blacks. This power made the blacks speechless and silent in the process of gaze. They are fixed in the position of the object. Blacks were objectified under the gaze.

## 4.3. The Collision between the Conventional and the Unconventional

Elly is the representative of the new generation in the South while the grandmother represents the females before the Civil War. Their clash is the collision between the different values about women’s rights and freedom which actually is the collision between two eras. The gaze and the anti-gaze are their battlefields and weapons and they use gaze to fight for the position of subject in the narrative of the new era.

They gaze at each other respectively to seize the power of control and narrative on women’s body, “Then for an instant they would look full at one another: the old woman cold, piercing; the girl weary, spent, her face, her dark dilated eyes, filled with impotent hatred”<sup>[4]</sup>. The purpose of the gaze is to get the right to control the freedom of woman’s body. Elly’s control of her body is gazed by the grandmother. Grandmother uses gaze to increase the visibility of Elly which is the surveillance on women’s body. Elly anti-gazes at grandmother to protect her control of herself, “Elly ran to the chair and stooped and laid her fingers on the old woman’s thin and bloodless lips and, one furiously importunate and the other furiously implacable, they glared eye to eye across the hand...”<sup>[4]</sup>. Elly’s anti-gaze is the rebellion against the hegemony on women’s body in the patriarch society. Anti-gaze also reconstructs the field of power of discourse for the new generation. To Elly, she is powerless compared with her grandmother. However, her anti-gaze is her revolt against the exclusivity of old generation in the power of discourse. Their clash in the gaze is the consequence of the alternation of power in the southern society.

The southern society witnessed a thorough change and collapse of the old systems after the Civil War. The collision between Elly and the grandmother was the epitome of the southern society where old system was torn down and the direction of future was still unknown. The gaze and anti-gaze are the forms of seizing power in the changing times. The collision between Elly and grandmother is part of the rivalry in the southern society. Elly followed the trend of times and her awareness of her body preceded. In the end of the story, only Elly survived which implied the final victory of Elly in the gaze and the future of the unconventional generation of South.

## 5. Conclusion

The gaze in the Faulkner’s works have been well analyzed in previous studies, and many scholars have proposed a lot of convincing arguments about the gazer and the gazed in the novel. However, after using Foucault’s theory of power gaze as the theoretical approach to analyze Faulkner’s three short stories, the essay comes to its major conclusions. Some of the findings underpin the conclusions of previous studies, while others lead to different interpretations.

First, female characters in the three short stories are victims

of the male gaze in the South. Male gaze and the power of patriarchy cause their tragedy respectively which serves as the evidence for the oppression of the power gaze on individuals, especially females. This supports the previous studies of the gazed female characters in Faulkner's works. Secondly, the gazed in the stories are fettered and marginalized which caused their alienation and suffering. The gaze has its power to alter and influence individual's life and serve as the surveillance and discipline on the vulnerable. On the other hand, difference of power formed the relationship between the gazed and the gazer. The power and gaze are integrated. Thirdly, the power that supports the subject in gaze is not fixed and static. The clash between gazer and the gazed is the wrestle between two different powers in fact. The power is dynamic and fluid. Factors like gender, race and wealth can influence power and change the relationship between the gazed and the gazer.

In conclusion, the analysis of the gazer and the gazed in Faulkner's works contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the social condition, interpersonal relationships and power distribution at his times.

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