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## What is the Female Gaze in Literature?

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**The Female Gaze in Literature: What is it?**

Cadence Dangerfield

The University of Akron Honors Project

Sponsor: Professor Elizabeth Rhoades

Fall 2021

## Critical Essay

*The female gaze*, a theoretical term that pertains to analyzing art, is an important and developing topic in feminist theory. The female gaze is a term used most often to parallel *the male gaze*, coined by Laura Mulvey. In 1975, her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” examined the film industry and the voyeuristic nature of films created by men, with men, for men. A main point that has surfaced since then is that women often serve as mere props; remove them, and the plot remains the same or observe how women are only in place to boost male protagonists. Although Mulvey’s focus was film, the male gaze can be used with all art forms. Ultimately, it is the means by which the viewer is looking at a piece through the eyes of a male. Thus, the female gaze is antithetical. It is the idea that there is a specific lens through which a woman views, influenced by the women creators whose eyes the audience is looking through. For the sake of this paper and following project, the female gaze will be the focal point as it is applied to literature, another art form that can benefit from feminist analysis.

The idea of the male gaze is relatively new to mainstream feminist theory — not even 50 years old — and the female gaze itself is a blossoming concept today. Since this theoretical term is currently developing, there is no definition. Therefore, it is being explored as more women create and have their art recognized. This paper looks at three different women writers and their relationship with the female gaze. These women represent a heterosexual version of the female gaze. There is an emergence of the queer gaze which can intermingle with gendered gazes, but this paper will only focus on the differentiation of the male and female gazes in a mainly heterosexual environment. Additionally, this examination will obviously involve only the binary of gender because of the clear oppositions of the gendered gazes. Each writer, including Siri Hustvedt, Stephenie Meyer, and Sarah J. Maas, has contributed something to the idea of the female gaze in her writing. Each writer and her work can be analyzed because of the routes she

took to explore female desire, one of the main focal points of the female gaze. The overall question this project works to answer is whether the female gaze is simply the male gaze in reverse, or if it is focused on romantic desire (rather than sexual arousal). Each writer takes a different stance and each serves as a starting point for uncovering an answer to the question posed.

Siri Hustvedt is an American feminist novelist who focuses much of her energy on examining sex and sexuality within the spectrum of art. Her book, *A Woman looking at Men Looking at Women*, contains a series of essays meant to analyze “Art, Sex, and the Mind.” The first essay is the titular piece, and she very clearly states, “A work of art has no sex” (Hustvedt 6). She continues to argue that the sex of the artist does not play a role in gendering the art itself, but rather influences how she, as an observer, is to perceive women in pieces of art (Hustvedt 6). The way in which Hustvedt understands the female gaze is hidden in plain sight. It is a correct statement that art does not have a sex, or a gender, but it does hold influence and bias from the creator. If the art is made by a man, it can be deduced that the audience is seeing through his eyes, thus using a male gaze. The opposite of this is also true. Later, Hustvedt notes the connection between the “spectator and art object” (Hustvedt 25), confirming through this and her past comments that as an observer, she is aware of the significance between gender in the artist and audience. Hustvedt is an important contributor to feminist theory because of her intent on discovering the intricacies of how gender takes shape within art. Her ideas can be translated to understanding how the different lenses work when reading literature and she works to make this explanation available for all art forms. After looking at Siri Hustvedt as a starting point to understanding what the female gaze means in terms of art analysis, it is easier to look more closely at real examples of author's choices regarding the female gaze in their own work.

The two fiction writers being examined in this paper have been chosen because of their relevance to young adult literature. This is important for several reasons. First, it is a genre aimed at developing youth and has the capabilities to shape opinions and self-identification. It is also an incredibly popular genre that captures the attention not only of girls and young women, but people of all ages. Stephenie Meyer and Sarah J. Maas have not written modern classics, yet their work contains value because of the relevance their stories have in popular culture. With this exposure, it is important to understand YA literature and the impact the genre has on people of all ages. Unfortunately, YA is a grey area for literature. This is due to several reasons, including the difficulty in specifying an age range, the entertainment value, and a general “negative perception” (Crowe 148) of the genre. Because of these reasons, the range in quality of YA literature is astounding, especially when it comes to an age range of 13- to 25-year-olds reading the same content. Meyer and Maas are both considered YA authors, reaching an audience of young teens as well as readers into their 20s. This means that during developing and influential teen years, readers may be impacted by the fiction they digest, especially if mature content is included (which often works to satisfy the older ages on this spectrum).

This has several implications. For one, it could be a great opportunity for writers to engage with young readers. The creation of meaningful and positive plots and characters has the potential to influence young people in their lives, starting conversations and providing them with positive influences, even fictional ones. However, there is also the possibility of corruption (Crowe 146) for young readers. Unfortunately, some women, and in this case authors, experience an internalized male gaze and tend to show self-objectification through their female characters, which ultimately perpetuates the male gaze through readers who may or may not be aware of the consequences of self-objectification. This can have negative impacts on girls of younger ages who ingest this sort of gaze. Lying in the middle of these two points, there is a possibility of

influencing a certain gender role formation of the reader. This could go either direction, depending on the work. It could provide excellent freedom in showing emerging attitudes on lack of gender roles, or it could repeat the narrative of stereotypical gender roles. Therefore, a few things are important to note. First, it is crucial that YA and New Adult (meant for the older range of readers who like what YA has to offer) continue to be defined. Second, that writers begin to analyze their own gaze and see how it may affect readers. Both Meyer and Maas show a reflection of their own gazes which have developed over time and both have something to offer to the development of the female gaze. Their works, worthy of examination because they are hugely popular and have enormous fan bases, are major markers on the spectrum of the female gaze showing completely opposite viewpoints.

Stephenie Meyer, author of the *Twilight* saga and its accompanying novels, is a writer in the young adult fantasy genre. Some see Meyer as one of the first women writers to have mainstream media focused on literature that is written with the female gaze. For the sake of this analysis, there is the unique ability to see the same events through two characters' eyes, which can sometimes be done through multiple points of view, but which Meyer takes a step further. The first novel in the series, *Twilight* (2005), is completely from the perspective of the main character, Bella. However, 15 years later, Meyer's novel *Midnight Sun* was published, a complete retelling of the first novel from the perspective of Edward, Bella's primary love interest. These two novels from two separate perspectives can be analyzed due to the sameness of the plot but the difference in lenses: in this case, the female gaze and the male gaze. As a woman, she is writing in the female gaze through a female character with *Twilight*. Yet with *Midnight Sun*, she is a woman writing through both her own female gaze and a separate attempt at the male gaze, which is consequentially influenced by her own gaze. This is significant because readers will be able to look closely at her version of the male gaze, something she has no

doubt been influenced by her entire life, and compare it to her female gaze. Furthermore, women can be argued to have more of an understanding of the male gaze than men have of the female gaze because women have lived and created in a patriarchal world consumed by male gaze dominance.

Overall, a major focus of these novels when it comes to showing Meyer's understanding of the female gaze is the importance of non-sexual intimacy between Bella and Edward. In the beginning of their relationship up until they are married in the last novel, the two remain abstinent. Although there is love between the two characters, *Twilight* shows a lack of direct sexual content that can be found in other young adult fantasy (and will be exemplified later). Instead, a focal point in the beginning of their relationship and continuing through the story is the process of becoming acquainted and having open communication. This seems like a given since the two are newly met, but it is heightened because Edward, a vampire who is able to read the minds of everyone, is unable to hear Bella's thoughts. This is what initially sparks his interest in Bella; not her level of attractiveness, which he sees as of no huge importance — "I look away, bored" (Meyer *Midnight Sun* 5) he notes when he sees her the first time — but the connection (or lack thereof) between their minds. Bella, on the other hand, does note the inexplicable beauty of Edward the first time she sees him and many times following (Meyer *Twilight* 20). However, this is not the main focus of Bella's thoughts but almost an afterthought or an additional element to her love for him. Instead, protection and connection hold more gravity for the teen protagonist.

Looking at these two opposing perspectives on the same relationship, it is evident that Meyer chose not to include sexual desire as a main component to drive the love story. However, it is interesting to note how the two feel in relation to gender roles and gendered gazes. Kevin Goddard believes that "both sexes feel the pressure of living up to what the other is assumed to expect from them" (25). He argues that male and female gazes should not be inherently different

and only differ due to societies established gender roles or constructions (Goddard 26). In *Twilight*, which contains the female gaze through both Meyer as an author and Bella as a character, the need for protection points to one form of men's gender roles in a normalized, patriarchal society. *Midnight Sun*, however, exhibits a yearning for mental and emotional connection from Edward's standpoint. If this is the male gaze, it is not a traditional one. This stems back to Laura Mulvey's essay on the male gaze; men who write men tend to write what they think women will appreciate. This can also be done with women writers. As mentioned previously, Meyer is writing in the male gaze through the female gaze because of her own gender identity. Therefore, as a woman, she is still inputting gender bias onto the male character and establishing that his intimate desire — connection — is one that women *want* men to have, but may not.

To answer the question posed earlier, Meyer showcases the female gaze through a romantic and intimate connection instead of sexual desire. Her decision to do so is not for anyone to necessarily agree with or dispute. It is up to her as an individual to define the female gaze for herself and situate her writing in that definition. This is encouraged at this point in time because the female gaze is currently developing. Yet Meyer's version is not the only possibility for answering the question of what the female gaze is. The point of this paper is to discover how the female gaze is fitting into current trends in literature and to see what it means to the female gaze as it tries to establish itself. Thus, a second author's differing use of the female gaze is necessary to contrast Meyer's.

Sarah J. Maas writes through both male and female characters, just as Meyer does, within the young adult fantasy genre. Her use of the female gaze is quite the opposite of Meyer's interpretation. Throughout two of her main series, *Throne of Glass* and *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, Maas focuses on female sexual desire in almost all of the main characters' relationships.



For example, Aelin, the main protagonist in the *Throne of Glass* series, meets her “mate” Rowan and their relationship quickly becomes about sex. (“Mate” refers to a soulmate of Fae.) The time that they have together away from the waging war and battle training is spent with explicit, adult content. In the fifth novel, *Empire of Storms*, several sex scenes take place that capture a type of male possessiveness amid female pleasure. To Maas, it seems that young women in control of their sexuality and sexual desire are the subjects of the female gaze. Yet the language being used in *Empire of Storms* is male-centric, following closely to gender roles set by patriarchal societies. “Growling nips to her throat” (Maas *Empire* 359-350), and “velvet-wrapped steel” (Maas *Empire* 354) are two phrases included in the nearly ten-page sex scene from Aelin’s point of view. It seems that to Maas, her character’s female gaze includes hearing and feeling the strength and stereotypical masculinity of the man she is with. Two phrases that follow this sex scene are in Rowan’s point of view; “He’d marked her” (Maas *Empire* 359), and “to eliminate any other threat” (Maas *Empire* 359). This further shows the male dominance and possessiveness present in their relationship and in this first-time sexual encounter.

Maas’s sexual discourse does not stop with her first series. In fact, her second series (which is much shorter) contains just as much explicit content between the main characters in quite a similar fashion, if not more descriptive than before. Feyre and Rhys, the main characters in *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, are also “mates” in her second series about Fae. Chapter 55 of *A Court of Mist and Fury* contains a sex scene between the protagonists that is popular among fans and readers. It is the first time they recognize each other as “mates” and the language in this series is very similar to the possessive, male centric language from *Throne of Glass*. ““You’re mine”” (Maas *Mist and Fury* 530) and “my mate” (Maas *Mist and Fury* 531) are both inner dialogue from Feyre’s point of view. However, Rhys’ words, “my own personal feast” (Maas *Mist and Fury* 531) are also shared in this scene. Feyre thinks that he “growled his approval”

(Maas *Mist and Fury* 531) and she notes his “considerable length” (Maas *Mist and Fury* 532) when the two undress. This is all through the female gaze from both Maas as the author and Feyre as the female character, but it is also where the idea of an internalized male gaze becomes a possibility. Going back to Goddard and the idea of the differentiation of gender roles on the gazes, the possessive qualities of the language (such as the claiming and growling) are the ideas of what a woman thinks a man wants to be/have. Through writing it into a female character's love scene, Maas confirms that not only is her focus on female desire rather than romantic interest, but her ideas generate a maleness that seems to be the woman trying to take back power in a patriarchal society. “To gaze back is to attack the edifice of male power at its pillar” (Goddard 30). Feyre is utilizing male tonal language in an effort to take control in her relationship. The power struggle between men and women in Maas’s books is revealed through this language she uses; all these ideals fall into her own definition of the female gaze.

Meyer and Maas both present two extreme sides of possible female gazes in literature, especially as representatives of YA. They both tend to lean heavily on either romance or sex, sticking strictly to that extreme. This is not always the case; many writers find themselves using a mix of the two. However, this analysis benefits from two contrasting sides to the argument because it establishes the spectrum of the female gaze. As of now, feminist theory does not strictly define a female gaze. It is a developing concept, establishing itself in relation to art every day. Currently, there is no true conclusion, but it is growing and expanding in understanding. Readers and writers are living in a time where experimentation is popular and even necessary for the development of the female gaze.

To enter into a world of gendered gazes as a young woman writer, it is important to find where I identify myself within this spectrum of the female gaze. I believe that a key part of differentiating the gazes is perception. How a girl or woman perceives herself often changes

throughout her lifetime and is influenced by external factors such as the male gaze itself. By looking at the most fundamental piece of the female gaze, perception, a wholly substantial female gaze will be offered without either of Meyer or Maas's extremes regarding male figures and sexuality. Instead, my work will focus on perception of the individual as a female gaze is explored in relation to one body without romantic interest. By doing this, it will prove easier in analyzing the basic parts of the female gaze and to see how it is changing and developing today.

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### A Woman's Perception

For a moment, I pretend the mirror is one from the circus's House of Mirrors. It is intentionally wobbly, adding circumference to my midsection and elongating my neck. I wonder how it made it into my room. *Possibly, I think, my mother bought it for me at the thrift store where she found the three-legged side table.* It is a mishap, an accidental purchase meant to be laughed at and returned.

But the moment passes.

The mirror is not from the circus. It is not distorting my image even as I admit that I would like that to be the truth of the matter. My image in the mirror, with all its chub and awkwardness, is the one I live with every day (whether I look into the mirror or not). In a moment the mirror is covered by an abandoned towel from my bedroom floor and I turn away, working tirelessly to erase the image behind my eyelids.

~

My arms cross over my chest, barely linking together over the bust of my breasts. At 20 I have the chest of a breastfeeding mother, thick and heavy and uncontainable. Uncomfortable. The glances I receive are frequent, but they are never appreciative. As I walk through the courtyard, I feel eyes glaze over my body as if it is a piece in a museum. I laugh to myself for a moment. *Me, a piece in a museum?*

Self-deprecation is a coping mechanism. At least, that is what my last therapist told me. She recognized my humor and called it for what it was: a way to insult myself before anyone else could. Truly, she was right. But no one wants their therapist to be right. I left her office and I have not been back to see her again, self-deprecation remaining.

My phone buzzes in my jeans pocket and when I pull it out, I realize it is my grandmother. “Dinner tonight?” She asks as a way of greeting. No precursor; to the point with brutal efficiency.

“Yes,” I hear myself saying, though the word *no* runs through my head more than once. “That should be fine.”

“Great, come over after class and we will make vegan tortellini soup. I’ll see you at five.” And just like that, no goodbye. A strict end to the conversation and I foolishly say my own farewell into the quiet phone.

Classes pass; the mid-September air warms and by lunch my sweater is too heavy to bear outside, but my body is too heavy to bear ever, so it stays on and my underarms pool with sweat. But it is the best option, I know that. Because otherwise my body is on display for a world that cannot accept it, for peers who do not understand it. My body remains hidden beneath my clothing. Some call it baggy, but I respond “comfortable” and they stop, knowing that comfortable means my mind is not picking apart my body like a bird with its prey. So my look is called “old school” and no one comments on my jeans anymore, or the sweatshirts I never remove.

Yet I cannot help but wonder if this world, these people with their noses glued to their phones, would ever look up to see me anyway. As I head to my last class across campus, I pass through a sea of beauty. Greek goddesses with their skin showing like it is meant to be worshipped. Their midriffs, flat and muscled unlike anything I have ever had, are revealed without contemplation because it is standard, it is normal, it is beautiful. The sun dapples the ground where I walk and for a moment I wish my arms were bare, my whole body naked in the sunlight and out of the shadows. A breath releases itself and my eyes nearly close in ecstasy of

the thought. And then I pass a building of windows and someone with my clothes and my hair and my backpack walks in the same path as me, but I cannot recognize the body beneath. Its thickness, the odd lumps that are usually honed into muscle on other bodies sit like a rock on mine. I look away. No more mirrors, no more reflections. If I could live life blind would I be happy? Give up the colors, the motion pictures, and the art for a reprieve of my own reflection, one I can never escape anyway except in this case. In this way. But it is a hypothetical.

~

My grandma is wearing her cooking apron when I come in the front door. She is a small woman, barely above five feet, but commanding nonetheless. In her presence my back is straighter, my hands still at my side instead of fidgeting with my sweater sleeves. Immediately, she comes to wrap her small, muscled arms around me, and I must bend at the waist to fit into her embrace.

“I started without you,” she says, already removing herself and returning to the stove, “you know how antsy I get for dinner.”

Internally, I smile. It is 4:55pm and the soup is well on its way. As a college student, dinner at my grandma’s is as close as I get to real meals throughout the week. Otherwise, I would be snacking at 10pm after a long day of classes and homework, then later regret the calories through the ache in my stomach. But meals here are different. They do not make me feel as guilty, even as I cringe when taking bites of the food. I know my grandma recognizes this, but she doesn’t say anything anymore. She knows I have been working on it.

“Chop, chop,” grandma waves the ladle at me. “The table won’t set itself.”

So in comfortable silence we work together to make our dinner. It is steamy in the kitchen, the air filled with spices that I couldn’t name but appreciate all the same. When it is time

to eat, I tell my grandma to sit down while I get her bowl, and then mine. She smiles, thanking me wordlessly, and we sit down to enjoy our creation.

“So,” she says, not quite attempting to fill the silence but almost thinking about how to start a conversation.

“So,” I repeat. The spoon shakes slightly on its way to my mouth. For a moment my eyes close and it’s just enough time to bring the spoon to my mouth without thinking about it. But I swallow, open my eyes, and cringe.

“How are you doing?” My grandma asks, sipping on her white wine.

“I’m fine. My classes aren’t that hard and I’ve made a few friends.” The truth is stretched and I hope it won’t snap.

“Good, honey. I’m so proud of you.”

“Really, I like the courses. Everything is new and interesting and I enjoy the freedom of study.”

“I’m glad.” A silence follows and we both take bites of the tortellini. My heart is thumping awkwardly because I sense a conversation turn that I may not be ready for. “I wanted to talk to you about Dr. Jane.”

And there it is. The therapist that I left a few months back. My grandma has always been aware of my appointments because I am on her health insurance. This has made it a lot harder to leave.

“Grandma, please—”

“I really think you need to see her again. Explain why you left, explain what you need.”

“I don’t know what I need.”



“You need help,” her tone is stern. “I see you flinch every time the spoon hits your tongue. I see the way you fold in on yourself. I remember the sounds from the bathroom every time you would eat over here.”

“That hasn’t happened in a long time. It’s not that bad anymore.” My throat starts to close. The memories hurt as much as the mirror.

“But you are going that direction, honey. I am seeing the warning signs every week we are together.” For a moment, her voice wavers. “I hate to see you like this, my beautiful girl.”

I stand up. I cannot take anymore from her. Today is a bad day, and I feel it getting worse. I leave my plate at the table and walk to my backpack in the kitchen. My movement feels panicky and I hope that I can make it to the car before tears start falling.

“Virginia, please,” my grandma says, abandoning her own dinner behind and following me. But I have gathered everything and am already walking to the door.

“I love you grandma; I have to go now.” I walk out the door and leave the thoughts behind.

~

I feel a tickle on my hip. It is persistent and turns into a tingle. My hand reaches down and I expect a bump, a bug bite. My fingers graze textured skin and for a moment they linger. I blink a moment when I recognize the feeling. No need to look, I know it is a stretch mark filling in the limited skin of my body with ugly red that will later turn purple, then eventually a ghostly white. I have many, spanning my lower abdomen and making me happy for the return of high waist pants. I stand and pull up my pants, finishing in the bathroom only to return to my bed.

Every night is the same. I usually start by doing chores while watching a show or movie. My head usually follows the stories from an analytical perspective now that schooling has

pushed me into gender theory and taught me what truly great writing is. While folding laundry, I catch myself saying, “Well, that doesn’t pass the Bechdel test.” And then I laugh because of course I said that and of course no one is here to debate the benefits or disadvantages of passing the test. After this I usually pick a book and read. I delve into another's world, pretend not to be me for hours at a time.

Strangely enough, my phone buzzes from under my pillow. Scrambling to see the notification, my heart drops thinking it may be about my grandmother. But then I blink in disbelief at the text. It’s from Jenny, a girl in my Composition class that exchanged numbers with me for a group project. We haven’t really started it yet, so this is the first text in our conversation.

*“Hey Virginia! This is Jenny from comp. I know this might be weird, but I was wondering if you were busy tonight? Some of us are heading to a party on High St at a friend's place, I thought I'd ask if you wanted to join.”*

Sweat breaks out on my palms and I nearly drop my phone before the next text comes through.

*“Obviously this is so last minute and I won’t feel bad if you already have plans! Wanted to ask just in case.”*

I have no response ready, no idea what to say to this. Friends have never been a thing in my life, especially beautiful girls that want me to go to a college party with them. It is a wild feeling to be wanted, to be desired for company. I say the only thing I can think of: *Yes, I would love to join. Text me the address.*

I should not have shown up on my own. When I get to the address Jenny sent me, I have no idea where to go. High St is full of restaurants and bars and tattoo shops where bad ideas are waiting to happen. I'm not sure how to get to the apartment, which she said is above one of the women owned tattoo shops next to a small club. I text her but with her being here already I'm sure she will not respond promptly. So that means I must make my way over to Obsidian Tattoo and see if I can get in to ask. As soon as my hand is on the knob, it is yanked open by a severe looking young woman.

"Shit, hey," she says, stepping back yet still holding the door open. "We are just about to close up for the night."

"Yeah, hi, I'm Virginia," I stammer, now unsure of how to ask. "I don't want a tattoo."

"Oh, cool." She stands there, waiting for me to speak or move.

"Actually, I'm a friend of Jenny's and she is at a party in the apartment upstairs but I have no idea where to go and she hasn't responded yet so I thought I would stop in and ask someone here—" I stop talking, and not just because I am rambling on the doorstep of a tattoo parlor, but because this woman is surveying my outfit in a way that makes blood rush to my face. Instinctively, my arms cross against my chest and I feel small.

"Right," she says, meeting my eyes again. "I can let you up the back staircase. Jenny is at Derek's, that's my roommate upstairs."

For a moment, I'm still stuck on the doorstep. Of course this goddess of a woman with ink on her arms and metal dangling from her ears would live at the apartment I am trying to get to. I am not attracted to her but I think if I ever was attracted to someone, it would be someone like her. But as I think this, she motions to follow her and leads me through the back room to a staircase.

“Go on up here. Tell Derek I’ll be up in a bit.” At my confused face, she laughs. “Right. Have Jenny tell Derek.” With a wink, she shuts the door behind me and I wait for a moment, making sure I’m still breathing.

At the top of the stairs I stop and catch my breath and think. I have never done anything like this. I look down at myself and my palms start to sweat again. My boyfriend jeans seem huge, as if my body is lost in denim. My top, one of the softest sweaters I have, does not accentuate my breasts but instead shows the sweep of my neck into my shoulder. I like this spot, and I touch my fingers to it for a moment. I nearly jump out of my skin when the door in front of me is pulled open. For a second, I feel *deja vu* and expect the tattoo woman to be in front of me.

“Virginia!” Jenny yells. “I just got your text, I was going to run down to find you. I see Leila let you in.” Jenny pulls me inside and I breathe in the sweet smell of vape pens and booze. “Oh my god, your sweater is so soft.”

I smile to myself, knowing that it is but still feeling as if every pair of eyes is on me, judging. When I look around, no one has even noticed I have come in. I can’t tell if I like that or not.

“Come on, let’s get you a drink and I’ll introduce you to some people!” She grabs for my hand and I feel the skinny bones of her fingers wrap around my pudgy hands. She does not let go and I feel almost elated at the physical touch. Not until this moment had I known I suffered from touch deprivation. With a drink in one hand, and Jenny’s in another, I find myself in the first introduction of the night.

“Hey, I’m Lucas.” Lucas is in my comp class, but he does not seem to realize that. Jenny, however, is also in that class.

“Are you serious?” She asks, letting go of my hand. In its absence I feel a little bit lost, as if Jenny served as an anchor. *Am I really that far gone?*

“What?”

“Lucas is an idiot, Virginia,” she says, and at the sound of my name Lucas seems to remember the Virginia with copper hair that sits behind him in the lecture hall.

“Virginia, I’m so sorry, you’re in my comp class, aren’t you?” He asks, but really it is more of a statement since Jenny seems to be shooting him looks in the affirmative.

“Yeah,” I respond, not really having anything else to contribute. I take a sip of my (way too strong) drink. I cringe as it goes down but as I do so I notice Lucas’s eyes. They linger a little on my face but not in the way I would have expected. They take in my freckles, the blueness of my eyes, and the slight dimple on the left side of my face. The features that I like seem to be the ones he notices. Until his gaze drops to my chest. But still, the combination of it all makes my skin flame. All of this in a split second, but when my attention turns back to Jenny she is talking and I only catch the end of it.

“—so anyway, be nice to her because I don’t really like anyone here and I actually like Virginia and not just because her name is my home state.” Jenny laughs, I smile, and Lucas’ eyes find my dimple again. He smiles.

Before he can respond with words, someone taps on Jenny’s back and she turns around. *Leila*. Jenny shrieks and throws herself at the tattoo artist and co-habitant of the apartment.

“Okay, I take that back. I like Virginia better than *most* people here.” I laugh at her statement, finding myself leaning toward her like a flower to the sun and when I take my eyes from her I see Lucas looking at me again. I look away out of embarrassment and it paints my cheeks pink. When I glance back, he does not seem ashamed for being caught. He smiles again.

Is this what it is like to be looked at? To be noticed? Never before have I felt the warmth flooding through my body at the look in his eyes. The warmth is not desire; I do not desire him. But it is an acknowledgment that my body is aware of the attention. I think I like it.

It is at that moment that I decided I did not want to remain a wallflower. I wanted to be visible.

“Leila, hi,” I said smiling, tipping my drink towards her in a “cheers” manner.

“Hi Virginia, friend of Jenny’s,” she says, tipping her cup in the same way. After that, the four of us are inseparable. The rest of the night we are dancing, jumping, eating, and laughing. Poetry is recited at some point to the background music of the Fleet Foxes. A plate hits the floor and breaks and everyone yells “Opa!” and suddenly there are no bad feelings, just broken shards being swept into the bin.

Sometimes throughout the night, I feel a shift take place in myself. Almost as if there are two of me, two conscious beings that are separated by some kind of wall. I feel as if I’m watching myself and I notice that this is the first real fun I have had in years. The first time that I have felt a laugh take away my ability to breathe. The first time that I have put the image of myself in a box at the back of my mind. Part of me, the part that remains inside and hiding, knows that I will confront it again soon. But the other part of me feels too free to care. It is with joy that I dance and ignore the jiggling. It is with freedom that I allow Lucas to dip me while dancing. And it is with pink cheeks and staggering breath that I recover from an hour of near cardio, the music finally turning slow and altering the direction of the night.

“Virginia, wow,” Jenny says, catching her breath and throwing herself down on one of the floor pillows. Lucas is next to her and I sit down across from them, Leila disappearing.

“What?”

“You are more fun than I even imagined!”

“Jenny, I have to be honest with you,” I say. She leans in. “I am more fun than *I* imagined.” She bursts out laughing and Lucas does as well, leaning his head back onto the window. I allow myself to look at him a moment, to take in the hill of his Adam’s apple and the stubble on his chin. For a moment I am transported to our dance, to his hands leaning me backwards and holding me steady while my head and hair hung towards the floor.

“Leila, is everything cleaned up downstairs?” Jenny asks as Leila settles herself down next to me, arm brushing mine.

“Mostly. I left some stuff out because I knew you would ask.”

“Can we? Please?” Jenny’s lower lip juts out.

“How intoxicated are you?”

“Not very. I haven’t had anything this past hour of our Just Dance competition. I think the more important question is how intoxicated are *you*?”

“Same answer. I have definitely tattooed in worse conditions.”

Jenny jumps to the floor, shouting intelligible sounds of joy and pulling me to my feet.

“Virginia, you have to!”

“I have to what?”

“Get a tattoo with me!”

“You know what?” I say smiling. “I think I will.”

We find ourselves downstairs a half hour later. Lucas, totally uninterested in ink, does not follow us down but instead goes out on the patio for a smoke. I don’t ask what he is smoking, but

I do tell him that it was bad for his lungs. He just laughs. Lucas doesn't seem to say much, but he does watch. I do too.

"Okay, Jenny. What do you want?"

"A smiley face."

"Yeah?" Leila smiles to herself, a twinkle in her eye. "Are you sure?"

"You ask me this every time as if I don't have a Pinterest board of all my possible tattoos. This is on there, it's what I want."

"Okay," Leila says as she starts grabbing supplies. "Where?"

"My finger," Jenny says. Then she holds up her middle finger right in Leila's face. "*This* finger." I can't help but laugh and Leila turns to me.

"What a cute laugh."

The doodle goes on the side of Jenny's middle finger, a small smiley face in a circle. I think I understand her, and not for the first time tonight. It makes me happy just to see that image and I imagine Jenny feels the same way. I love it *for* her and I love it *because* of her.

About 15 minutes later, Leila turns to me.

"Okay, V. Are you ready?"

I like V. No one has ever given me a nickname except for my grandma when she used to call me "virgie" because she went through a Fergie phase, as one does. It didn't stick.

"Yes, actually. I am."

"What do you want?"

"The symbol of Venus. Here, this is it. Very tiny, right here." I point to the back of my neck.



“Perfect. I like it. Not that you need my approval,” *yes, but I like your approval*, “just put your hair up for me.”

And the symbol of Venus, a sign of my womanhood, sunk into my skin with a smile.

~

I know that I feel different after the night on High Street. Sometimes, very sporadically, I am reminded of the look in Lucas’ eyes that night as he surveyed me in a way I had never experienced, at least consciously. I understood his desire for me and I longed to experience that again. With my confusion regarding sexuality, I knew that I did not yearn for him specifically, or even the male body, but I wanted someone else to see me the way Lucas had. I wanted to feel like I did when I noticed his attention.

It made me feel empowered. I began to experiment with my clothing instead of hiding away. It is not that I am happy with my body all of a sudden, because I definitely am not. I still see the flatness of other stomachs, the smallness of other waists, and feel the sinking feeling of disappointment in my gut. But this does not hang over me like it used to. Instead, I have time to dress myself in new clothes that show more skin, more curves, and put a certain swing in my hips.

I also note that this does not go unnoticed. I am encouraged by men to continue this experiment, to scandalize my body in a variety of ways. My shirts go lower, my jeans get tighter, and with each new outfit I feel like I am finally emerging from my cocoon. Jenny notices as well, but I am not sure she understands my change.

“Wow, V, this is a whole new woman!” She exclaims with a hint of forced enthusiasm. She is sitting next to Leila, who only glances up at me, then back to her novel.

“Yeah, I thought it was time to refresh my wardrobe.” I don’t know why, but my eyes flicker to Leila whose head remains in her book, unphased by my drooping v-neck and curves on display.

“You look wonderful,” Jenny says with a smile, but somehow I feel disappointed.

“Where is Derek?” I find myself asking. Leila’s roommate is the reason Lucas was at the party, having been friends throughout college.

“Working,” she says, still not looking up. “Lucas isn’t here.”

“I wasn’t asking for Lucas.” My cheeks blaze with embarrassment.

“You were,” Leila says, finally looking up at me. “You want him to see your new look.”

I don’t understand why I am hurt, even as Jenny shoots Leila a glare and then turns to me sympathetically. I cannot listen to them anymore and I still don’t know why. Of course I wanted Lucas to be here, to see me new and improved, but the tone Leila used hurt me. So I grab my purse and turn, leaving the apartment with my throat burning.

~

“Hi, honey, come on in.” My grandma is standing in the kitchen turning a spoon through the thick stew on the counter. November has brought with it the chilly winds, so comfort food has returned to the house. She turns to me and her smile falters.

“Hi, grandma.” I put my things down and go to retrieve the second apron meant for me. She turns back to the stove but I do not miss the second look she throws me over her shoulder.

“Did you go shopping?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s been years since I have bought clothing that fits me.”

“I could have gone with you.”

“I didn’t want you to.”

After a moment, as I busy myself with setting the table and cutting the fresh bread, she speaks.

“Well, honey, whatever you want to wear, I support.”

“Grandma, it’s not some political ideology. It’s an outfit.”

“I know that but it is very different from your usual.”

“I know.”

“My beautiful girl.”

~

Now that it has been a whole year since meeting Leila and befriending Jenny, I have no problem showing myself up to the apartment above the tattoo parlor. I find Derek in the kitchen, nursing a beer and holding his phone in his hand. When I come in, he looks up and smiles.

“Virginia, hey,” he says. He does what I want then, what I have been searching for this past year. He looks me up and down and smiles again. “Got a hot date?”

“Yeah,” I chuckle, filling up my water at the sink, “with Leila and the couch.”

“Should have worn pajamas,” he says. “Should have had a sleepover worthy of a chick-flick.”

“Right, because Leila is the type to have a satin matching set and jump on the bed while feathers rain down.”

He laughs and then I laugh as we take in the impossible image.

“Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask you,” he says, setting down his drink. “Would you want to go out sometime?”

My heart flutters in my chest and I don't think it is a good sign; if it was, I would not feel my stomach reaching my throat. I think of myself during this past year of new clothes and new friends. But I do not see romance in that picture, and I am okay with that. I see attention and a few encounters, but nothing that I didn't want. *This* I don't want.

"Derek, I really don't see us going in that direction," I say. Part of me shrinks, hiding from his gaze now and crossing my arms over my chest.

"Right, right," he says, sounding distant. Now I am confused; were his smiles, the friendliness that oozed from him every time I walk through the door, all for this? For the moment of truth? I am hot and cold at the same time and I suddenly wish I had on a big, comfy sweater. I feel exposed and vulnerable in more ways than one.

"I'm going to find Leila."

"Sure."

When I find Leila on the couch, she gives no indication that she heard what happened in the kitchen. The corners of her mouth turn up and she pats next to her, allowing me to sink into the soft cushion and curl in on myself.

"You okay?" She asks. Just when she says this, the front door slams shut leaving us alone in the apartment, Derek having left us here.

"It's Derek. He asked me out." She does not say anything to fill the silence that follows. "I said no. I don't think I could ever be like that with him. I don't know if I could be like that with anyone."

"You don't have to feel pressured to be with someone," Leila says. Something in her tone makes me feel as if there is more she wants to say.

"There's something else though."

“Yes,” she says, scooting to the edge of the couch and looking at me, “there is something else.”

I wait for a moment and the anxiety coiling in my stomach makes me feel nauseous. I want to cry, already knowing that this is a conversation I would normally avoid. But I am tired of running and I am tired of feeling that Leila and Jenny talk about me when I am not in the room.

“I’m afraid that you just don’t know yourself,” Leila says. I choke on a laugh.

“I’m not sure anyone does at this point, Leila, that is far from abnormal.”

“No, I know. But you don’t even seem to be happy in your own skin. That is a dangerous place to live. I want you to be happy and more importantly I want you to be healthy.”

“I know that.” I am a bit confused on where she is going. I don’t know where the turn is.

“You do not have to live for men, Virginia.”

*Ah, there it is.* The room itself seems to be holding its breath, dust hanging midair as the words sink into my head.

“Live for yourself, V.”

~

A few years later, I find myself in New York City. Jenny, after becoming my best friend, applied to jobs in the city with me. She is working at a law firm, a woman in control of her career breaking the glass ceiling with many men under her. I am at a publishing house. Granted, it is not one of the big five, but it is somewhere I can gain experience and later use to climb my way up the ladder. One of the first things people will tell you when you move to the city is that you will constantly be judged. However, the second thing they will tell you is that it does not matter. At all. This is why people are the way they are in the city. This is why outfits are the

most extravagant they can get. It is a fashion show of the melting pot which the city has been founded on.

To say that I took both of these pieces of advice to heart the first time is simply untrue. When I arrived, I felt wonderful in my clothes. My breasts were on display in deep v-necks or accentuated by wired bras. My pants were usually fit to be tight, hanging to my curves and leaving nothing to the imagination. Needless to say, the first time on the subway a man asked how much I charge an hour. I got off at the next exit and cried until I got home to Jenny, who helped me laugh and move forward. But I did not forget the gaze of that man on the subway.

Today I am walking down the street to work. My boots click on the pavement with a satisfying sound. The soft brown of my dress makes my hair shine like a beacon, reddening the tones to copper. My cardigan feels like a hug around me and I smile in assurance, even in a city as mad as this one. At the intersection, I stop to wait. That is when I find myself across the street in a mirrored window. I am in awe that I recognize my body, the body that I have been at war with for far too long. I cross the street and stop in front of the building. A grin breaks across my face like sunshine.

~

When I get home, I look at my reflection. No longer do I feel as if I am in a House of Mirrors. This is a true reflection of me and one that I linger on not because of my faults but because of the utter beauty I find. That sweep of my neck into my shoulder is divine. The swell of my breasts is feminine in the best way, showing the capabilities of the female body. My stomach is full of the food I ingest and the organs I need, possibly a safe home one day for another human. The lines that cross my stomach, white, red, and purple, are like paint on the canvas of my body and I vow to learn to love every inch.

This is the shift into awareness. I see myself as I am in my purest form, as if God herself is shining her light on me. I am whole, I am beautiful, and I am a woman in love with herself.

Have mercy on the rest of the world.

## Self-Analysis

Thus far, this Honors Project has spanned over six months and has encompassed much of my time. I became interested in Feminist Theory my freshman year of undergrad and soon after decided to minor in Women's Studies. Throughout my English major studies I focused on gender and sexuality within many time periods; Shakespeare's commentary on gender equality in Early Modern Literature, Margaret Fuller and the transcendentalists in American Literature, and the Brontë sisters and the Cult of Domesticity in the Victorian Period all contain studies specific to gender and sexuality. I have discovered now that my interest in the gendered gazes does not lie strictly in one area, but rather is exemplified in how they change and develop over time. Therefore, my project soon became one focused on contemporary works in order to see how *the female gaze* specifically developed and where it stands now.

From the moment of conception, my project has included many thoughts and opinions from faculty and students alike. I have found this open conversation helpful because of the many things I have learned from countless perspectives. Put together, the team of people I have on my committee come from different backgrounds and fields of study. Therefore, the feedback I receive includes an array of comments which hit many different points, reaching all aspects of my project. As for the actual writing of the content, I have been working on the Honors Project for more than four months. Editing and perfecting each piece has been a lengthy process, but one that has prepared me for the future in graduate school and publications. At this point, as I sit back and look at everything that has been completed for this project, I am proud of the journey I have taken, both academically and personally.

As a feminist, my interest in gender and sexuality started on a personal level. My matriarchal family has influenced my ideals and the importance of feminism blossomed during



high school. Thus, the transition to feminism being an academic interest was not surprising and it proved to be more rewarding with each course. This project, as a culmination of everything I have learned, is one that I do not think I am finished with. As a young woman, a writer, and an avid reader, *the female gaze* is more than a lens to look through. It is a way in which writers express gender and readers understand women. It can help or hurt a narrative, depending on the writer and the way in which women are perceived. Throughout history *the female gaze* has been present, but only recently has it gained attention and intense study.

The first part of this project, the critical essay, involved plenty of research in scholarship to understand where academia stands with gendered gazes and how *the female gaze* is being defined. In fact, it does not have a definition like Laura Mulvey's *male gaze* does. This in itself is proof of the development it is undergoing within the field. Not only did the project take research, but it also took plenty of analysis of Stephenie Meyer and Sarah J. Maas's works, *Twilight* and the *Throne of Glass* series. These works were presented in the critical piece because they represent opposite ends of the spectrum of gendered gazes. Therefore, this piece presents a system of measurement for the female gaze. It shows these extremes and offers evidence of each portion represented. By doing so, it also shows the possibilities that lie within the female gaze. The middle ground, something that seems to have less intense analysis because of the hidden use of the gaze, is where many writers fall within the spectrum of the female gaze and this is not to be criticized or ignored. Overall, by the end of the critical piece, my understanding of the female gaze has grown and my interest is ever present. Interestingly enough, a shift occurred during this essay. My first idea for the fiction piece turned out to be exactly the wrong message I wanted to portray. By the end, after months of research and discussion regarding the critical essay, I had my idea for the fiction piece.

The next part of this project is the fiction piece, and in my opinion, the thing we have been waiting for. Writing has always been a way of expression for me, evidenced by the countless journals I have from the past decade, and I felt that the only way to do this project the right way was to embrace the idea of writing with the female gaze and finding where I locate myself on the spectrum. Despite the plethora of research done on the female gaze, this piece was not easy to write. First, I had to decide how I wanted to frame this gaze. After a few ideas, I thought that it would be best to find the fundamentals of gendered gazes: perception. This word changed how I was thinking about writing in the gaze and it took much of the pressure off my shoulders. I created a character, Virginia, who in some ways mirrors myself. I began to express in the piece her perception of herself. She goes on a journey, one in which only she can make the decisions. Thus, I gave her autonomy. However, she was limited by her own perception of herself.

The next step in her journey was to meet a young man who looked at her with everything she thought she wanted. This scene is symbolic of the male gaze and the transformation we see in Virginia takes place because a new gaze is introduced to her, and she changes how she is perceived. This is where some play comes in between the two gazes. It shows how the male gaze affects young women, but it also shows how the female gaze remains inside of her without a way of release. Interaction between the two is crucial in order to show the reader the two gazes, especially if one is not consciously aware.

Yet Virginia herself knows the change in her character, which strictly appeals to the male gaze, is not a healthy one. Men and their attention serve as a distraction even as her own mind remains in opposition to her body. Eventually Virginia has her moment, her epiphany, where perception changes for the final time. After seeing a reflection of herself where her outfit is

finally reflecting interests of the female gaze instead of interests of a male one, she realizes her body is hers alone and one that will never be replaced. She makes a conscious decision to love the body she has been battling and rejects the idea that she needs male attention to feel confident, sexy, beautiful, and ultimately, herself.

Writing this piece was a journey for me as well. It was therapeutic to impose many of the anxieties and insecurities that I have on a character and to see it play out in someone else's life. My personal experience contributed many emotions and moments in this original piece and because of that I believe this is some of the most honest work I have done. It is a look into my head of course, but also into the heads of girls and women all over the world who suffer from sexualization and objectification of the male gaze. Of course, this is strictly an extreme, but it is one in which remains the most evident form of the male gaze. Writing this piece as I started a personal training and nutrition program proved to be incredibly healthy. As I have advanced through my program, I have mentally changed the perception I have of myself much like Virginia does in the final scene.

With the Honors Project and my time at UA coming to an end, it is important to note the positives this project has presented me with for the future. This semester, as I have been developing this project, I have also been working on applications for graduate school. My goal is to get a PhD in English and to specialize in Feminist Theory by working with mentors in Gender and Sexuality Studies. This project has offered me many wonderful things. It has given me an understanding of research and analysis that has solidified everything I have worked towards in English and Women's Studies. It has given me mentors within the department who have broadened my understanding of womanhood and education. It has given me a specific point of

study as well as a research question that I would like to continue with into graduate school. But most importantly, it has given me a voice in a place where I was struggling to use it.

In conclusion, this Honors Project has proved to be rewarding beyond measure. I have been intensely dedicated to the topic and to the execution, partially because of the importance and educational purposes but also because of my personal connection to the themes and topics. I have learned more than just how to complete a long-term project and how to perform the more technical parts of the project. I have learned about myself along the way, and I have made personal connections with the wonderful people helping me with this project. That is a true reward and one that I hope to always be granted with projects such as these.

Later in my academic career, I hope to return to this topic, possibly even for a thesis. Being able to talk about this project in my statements for graduate school applications and in future interviews is a step ahead of many undergraduate students and I am thankful for the opportunity to have such a project set me ahead thanks to the Williams Honors College. It feels strange to be completing a project that has taken so much of my time and focus these past months, but the feeling of accomplishment is a reward as well.