

The Subversion of Male Gaze in Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady*

Cheng Sun¹

¹ English Education Department, Kyungnam University, Gyeongsangnam-do, South Korea

Correspondence: Cheng Sun, English Education Department, Kyungnam University, No.7, Kyungnam University Road, Masanhappo-gu, Changwon-si, Gyeongsangnam-do, South Korea.

Received: May 25, 2022

Accepted: June 16, 2022

Online Published: June 30, 2022

doi:10.20849/ajsss.v7i6.1211

URL: <https://doi.org/10.20849/ajsss.v7i6.1211>

Abstract

The male gaze is one of the main critical focuses in feminist critical theory. The heroine of "A Lost Woman", Mrs. Forrester, is a degenerate woman in the eyes of the narrator Niel Herbert. But in fact, the author, Willa Cather, always attempts to reduce the influence of the male gaze on her during the writing process. This article analyzes the limitations of Niel's views on Mrs Forrester's femininity, emotional world, and rebellion against tradition by highlighting the complexity of Mrs Forrester's image. Through employing more different eyes, men's stereotyped perceptions on women are subverted, which further reflects feminist consciousness against traditional male discourse.

Keywords: male gaze, Willa Cather, subversion

1. Introduction

Willa Cather is one of the most famous American writers of the 20th century, gaining reputation for depicting social life in the American Midwest. *A Lost Woman*, one of her novella published in 1923, presented the decline of the pioneering spirit in American West in the age of commercialization. The protagonist of the novel, Marian Forrester, is a beautiful, elegant wife of a respectable Captain Daniel Forrester. Under the influence of the economic crisis, she, however, was reluctant to bear the dull life in the small town especially when suffering from the grievance of the death of her husband. Too spiritually vulnerable to stand the poverty after a national-wide financial panic in a materialism-oriented society, she herself chose to make commitment to others. Niel Herbert, the narrator of *A Lost Lady*, is rather scornful and contemptuous of Mrs. Forrester's moral corruption due to the fact that not only did she betrayed her husband Captain Forrester who was regarded as a hero of the western frontier, but more significantly, what she had done obliterated his aesthetic ideals.

Gaze, as a terminology belongs to visual culture, is also widely applied in literary criticism. Feminist critics show unprecedented interests in this term because the male gaze becomes a way of looking at women and representing their images at the same time. Hawthron Jeremy once sharply pointed out that "In the standard formulation: men look, women are looked at. Not just this, but if the owner to the gaze is both the product of patriarchy and also a way of reinforcing male dominance" (Jeremy, H., 2006). From this perspective, male characters constantly and continuously keep a watchful eye on Marian Forrester, among which her image is usually illustrated through the first-person narrative view - Niel Herbert. What is more, according to Bloom James D, "who thoroughly objectify women, who gaze intently enough, may begin actually to aspire beyond objectification, to a rigorous objectivity, when they've come to recognize the disparities and grotesqueries." (James, B. D., 2017). Marian in the past has satisfied Niel's illusion of the ideal woman in almost every aspect. However, his perspective is so limited that Marian, to a certain extent, is imagined to become an impeccable figure whose own personality is obfuscated and diluted. Thus, an omniscient third-person narrative perspective is created by Willa Cather with the aim of supplementing or even diminishing Niel's viewpoints. It is through the interaction between different perspectives that a fire-new perception of the complexity of Marian Forrester is conceived. As Dickstein put it, "Niel is not actually the narrator, since Cather needed to put things in the story that he could not have witnessed." (Dickstein, M., 1999)

2. Over-Idealized Feminine Quality

Marian Forrester is viewed as an object of desire by Niel *Herbert*. In his 1972 book *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger explained "Men survey women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated. To acquire some control over this process, women must contain it and

interiorize it" (Berger, J., 1972). As the object to be stared at, Marian plays dual roles as both Niel's aesthetic object and his desire for maternal care, so he praised her as a Goddess with unparalleled elegance, charm and vitality" belonging to a different world from any they had even known" (Cather, W., 1997, p. 31). On the one hand, Oedipus complex is the main ingredient in his worship towards Marian. In the light of Niel's gaze on Marian, satisfaction has been kindled by her feminine quality which he has been hungering for in his life since his mother's death. When our narrator injured his arm, it was nobody but Mrs Forrester who rescued him and acted as the role of a mother. Therefore, Neil projects the zest for maternal care on her and places a strong emphasis on her femininity. For Niel, on the other hand, Mrs Forrester was an exit for escaping from boredom and frustration that he encountered in life with "an atmosphere of failure and defeat" (Cather, W., 1997, p. 14). Compared with our heroine's luxurious house, specifically, his was "usually full of washing in various stages of incompleteness" (Cather, W., 1997, p. 13) - anything but a pleasant or cozy one. As a symbol of elegance and modesty, Mrs Forrester is gradually regarded as a nonpareil in his mind.

In fact, Mrs Forrester's image is highly romanticized. Susan J. Rosowski, an American expert on Willa Cather, proposed "The young Neil first saw her (Mrs. Forrester) as being from a magical realm, always lovely, never change. So Neil always judges her according to her fantasies" (Rosowski, J. S., 1999). Unrealistic, biased and somehow illusory, Niel's description and evaluation towards the heroine is too vulnerable to withstand detailed scrutiny. To be more specific, Cather employs two techniques to attract her readers to the suspicion about Niel Herbert's gaze. Firstly, exaggeration and ambiguity can be apparently traced in Niel's narrative. For example, his compliments to Marian is flooded with his cult-like tone. "In his eyes, and in the eyes of the admiring middle-aged man who visited there, whatever Mrs. Forrester chose to do was lay-like because she did it." (Cather, W., 1997, p. 3) At the same time, adjectives with strong subjectivity including "exciting", "charming" and "lively" continuously appear in descriptions about his Goddess. Secondly, the author deliberately introduces Adolf. It is through this minor character who witnesses the licentious relationship between Marian and Frank Ellinger that Cather smashes Marian's flawless image for her readers who, for the first time, unexpectedly but precisely realize the finitude of Niel's viewpoints. Therefore, the subtle shift in the male gaze not only exposes the defects in Niel's perspective, but also drives the plot to a great extent, which enjoys supreme significance.

3. Complicated Female Mentality

An omniscient perspective unmasks genuine human nature encoded in Marian Forrester, with the help of which her emotional world has been further explored and Niel's lack of the perception of her unvarnished character and intrinsic desires disclosed. Haunted by the boredom as Niel himself is, he regards Mrs. Forrester as his spiritual beacon emitting countless vitality and passion which, in fact, has been extinguished by rural life in the west so much that she undisguisably expresses her animus and abomination "Suppose we should have to stay here all next winter, too, ... and the next what will become of me, Niel?" (Cather, W., 1997, p. 45) As a female who craves resplendent banquets and sumptuous vacations, Marian obsessed with myriads of social events is therefore reluctant to enjoy the halcyon time in the countryside. As for Niel, the imagination of an immaculate Mrs. Forrester is deeply rooted from her loyalty towards Mr. Forrester the Captain. "Curiously enough, it was as Captain Forrester's wife that she most interested Niel, and it was in her relation to her husband that he most admired her. Given her other charming attributes, her comprehension of a man like the railroad-builder, her loyalty to him, stamped her more than anything else." (Cather, W., 1997, p. 46) Such a description apparently objectifies women. As Margaret Olin claims, "We treat women's body as an object is also to say something about the way we treat objects in the twentieth century: as commodities, as objects of possession" (Margaret, O., 1988). Therefore, such a misinterpretation is crushed mercilessly by the author through labeling Marian with licentiousness and infidelity. Our narrator experiences thorough and complete disillusionment in his aesthetic ideal and marvelous fantasy after being informed of Mrs. Forrester's adulterous relationship with notoriously wild Frank Ellinger. As the truth emerging from the vertiginous swirl, the vibrant image of Marian as a paragon fades off. No other people are more disappointed and furious than Niel Herbert. He roared that "Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds" (Cather, W., 1997, p. 50), "It was not a moral scruple she had outraged, but an aesthetic ideal". (Cather, W., 1997, p. 51) Tyson Lois firmly believed that "it is the one who looks who is in control, who holds the power to name things, the power to explain the world and so to rule the world." (Lois, T., 2006)". Willa Cather's full command of writing allows her to conduct a veiled and delicate comparison between distinct attitudes towards the heroine's affair among Niel and Mr. Forrester. "The longer Niel was with Captain Forrester in those peaceful closing days of his life, the more he felt that the captain knew his wife better even than she knew herself; and that, knowing her, he, - to use one of his own expressions, - valued her" (Cather, W., 1997, p. 86) Conversely, Neil, who saw Marian as the ideal woman, could never comprehend the emotional

complexity and physical needs encoded in this woman merely because he is restricted and limited in his own imagination.

Mrs. Forrester's hysterical and vexatious personality is further unveiled as the plot proceeds. When she accidentally finds out Frank Ellinger's decision to marry another woman, irrational and maniac emotions burst out so intensely that she could never manage her own calmness and amenity anymore. Marian as an image of being "attractive in deshabille" abruptly turns into a frantic miserable woman abandoned by her lover. What Niel has built in his own mind and what Niel has saw through his own eyes are now evaporating and withering. It is such an omniscient perspective employed by Willa Cather that breaks the stereotype that Niel constructs for the readers about a decent and dignified but inauthentic thus unilateral Marian Forrester.

4. The Rebel of Traditional Values

Laura Mulvey links Foucault's theory that "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The deterring male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly." (Laura, M., 1989) Niel's adoring gaze towards Marian Forrester is the natural fruit of regulatory mechanism of power, but his disparaging and even contemptuous gaze towards her is the stem or even root of the traditional values. As he learns that Marian still maintains the adulterous relationship with Ivy Peters after the death of Mr. Forrester, his promising and perfect fantasy is suffering unprecedented disillusionment. What Niel firmly believes then is his Goddess is nobody but a mediocrity who is deprived of basic judgement. He further accuses Mrs. Forrester's deviation from the conventional western values which represent stability and nobility. What Niel can not stand is that this depraved Marian becomes a betrayal of the Forrester family which acts as a powerful magnetism to Niel due to the fact that it satisfies his fantasy and symbolizes the ideal household, the one Niel could not obtain thus has pursued from an early age. At the same time, the Forrester Family also symbolizes the heyday of the Frontier West. Marian's escape, from this perspective, is somehow a metaphor for the termination of a glorious era and as an over-idealized character as Niel is obviously reluctant to accept such a cruel reality. "It was what he most held against Mrs. Forrester; that she was not willing to immolate herself, like the widow of all these great men, and die with the pioneer period to which she belonged; that she preferred life on any terms...he went away with weary contempt for her in his heart" (P103) Neil's over-idealization also respects his coercive and even unrealistic belief in Marian's adherence to the traditional values of western society. Once she disobeys or refuses to cling to the past, she is regarded as "a lost woman". However, Cather once again reminds her readers of being cautious about Niel's gaze by outlining an extraordinary picture in the end. From the perspective of another minor character, Ed Elliott, the canvas depicting Marian's leaving Sweet Water and starting a new life is exhibited in front of the readers. It is in this way that Cather provides a perspective free from onefold moral judgment, and successfully subverts Neil Herbert's point of view and negates his narrative style. The final scene further strengthens such an effect - Marian remarries, is well cared for by her new husband, and, in her words, "is doing very well." Cather by arranging a happy ending for Mrs. Forrester redefines a woman formerly condemned by traditional morals.

The design of the denouement embodies the author's subversion of the male gaze to the climax. Superficially, Marison tarnishes the dignified and graceful image which conforms Niel's aesthetic romantic fantasy. However, Cather through portraying the authentic Mrs. Forrester as a human being incisively elicits her own rebellion against the authority of male gaze as well as the traditional values and morals rampantly imposed to females. The plot in which Marison frees herself from the stable but solidified social order in Sweet Water makes Niel's perspective more unreliable and ex parte. On the other hand, Cather has the instinct for emotional complexity of the characters. Therefore, in order to bridge the gulf between the limited perspective of Niel and the complicated human nature, his knowledge about Marian Forrester, at the end of the story, is supplemented through the gaze of Ed Elliott who told Niel about Marian's yearning for Mr. Forrester. "Wherever she was, she always sent a Chequers to the Grand Army Post to have flowers put on Captain Forrester's grave for Decoration Day" (p106). At this time, Neil, overwhelmed by feelings of guilt and sympathy, finally casted aside his contempt and realized his "ignorance" because he never really understood this woman, which exactly indicates his prejudiced opinion about his Goddess.

5. Conclusion

The narrator's perspective in "A Lost Woman" is always challenged by other characters in the text and author who seemingly stands outside. It is these conflicting and contradictory perspectives that furnish us with a new approach to interpret Marian the character. Neither is she the perfect woman whom Neil gazes at, nor a completely depraved one. Marian Forrester is not an object designed to flatter male desires, but a flesh-and-blood figure with complicated minds. Different from the traditional writing style of male writers, Willa

Cather subtly juxtaposes Neil's narrative perspective with others in the attempt to show us the complexity of the heroine's image and character. Therefore, the stereotyped image of females through male gaze is subverted, with the help of which the authority of male discourse is greatly challenged in the text.

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