

# An eye for an eye: gazing and courtship in gaskell's north and south



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Although Margaret Hale and John Thornton do not fall in love ‘at first sight,’ sight, or gazing, plays an important role in the asymmetrical power relations implicit in the courtship of the protagonists in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*. Laura Mulvey’s 1975 essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” introduced the now-familiar concept of the gaze. Taking the work of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan as the basis for her theory, Mulvey argues that “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (39). The voyeuristic gaze, traditionally wielded by a male, has the ability to reduce a woman – that is, fetishize or objectify her – in a way that renders her passive. Mulvey explicates Freud’s concept of scopophilia, or pleasure in looking, and asserts that in “their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact” (40). While Mulvey’s theory is based in film studies, Nalini Paul suggests that “the phenomenon of gazing in literature strikes relevant parallels with gazing in film theory” (1). Thus, the application of this theory to *North and South* sheds light on the exchange of power within the courtship of Margaret and John. To be sure, while John finds erotic pleasure in seeing Margaret, his gaze upon her does not reduce her or render her passive; in fact, Margaret’s attractive physical appearance and ability to appropriate the gaze endows her with authority over John, and leads to a constant and reciprocal exchange of power that culminates in their marriage. The power dynamics of the relationship between Margaret and John are immediately established in their first meeting in Milton. Gaskell writes: “Mr. Thornton was a good deal more surprised and discomfited than [Margaret]” at meeting “a young lady of a different type to most of those he was in the <https://assignbuster.com/an-eye-for-an-eye-gazing-and-courtship-in-gaskells-north-and-south/>

habit of seeing" (58). His bewilderment is compounded when she returns his gaze with a " simple, straight, unabashed look" (58). Upon seeing Margaret, John realizes she is different from most of the women he has encountered before, and more specifically, those he commonly " sees" or looks upon. John's expectations are further troubled when she blatantly stares back at him. Her stare is " simple," supposedly because she does not realize the socially awkward or perhaps inappropriate nature of the look she returns. Of course, at this point in the narrative Margaret has had little social interaction with possible suitors (with the exception of Mr. Lennox, whom she never considers as such) and is unaware of the implications of her stare. The initial looks exchanged between the two characters are figured overtly in relation to authority and power. Gaskell notes: " Mr. Thornton was in habits of authority himself, but she seemed to assume some kind of rule over him at once" (58). Margaret is unpredictable for she returns John's gaze, and in so doing figures herself as an equal - not inferior - individual. From the outset Margaret exerts personal sway over John, albeit unconsciously, through her gaze. Contrary to Mulvey's expectations, Margaret is not rendered passive but rather wields power through her own gaze. In the same initial scene, John's gaze upon Margaret becomes scopophilic; her continuing return of the gaze, however, further undercuts the power - in the possessive sense - typically associated with the voyeuristic male gaze. Gaskell writes of Margaret and John: She sat facing him and facing the light; her full beauty met his eye; her round flexible throat rising out of the full, yet lithe figure; her lips, moving so lightly as she spoke...her eyes, with their soft gloom, meeting his with quiet maiden freedom. He almost said to himself he did not like her...to compensate for that mortified feeling, that while he looked upon

<https://assignbuster.com/an-eye-for-an-eye-gazing-and-courtship-in-gaskells-north-and-south/>

her with an admiration he could not repress, she looked at him with proud indifference... (59) Margaret's physical description is decidedly erotic and highly sexualized. The narrative sketch focuses on her bare throat, her limber physique, and her lips. John looks curiously at Margaret's body, which Mulvey emphasizes is a "function of sexual instinct" (39). This objectifying process, for John, is a positive one; his "admiration" of her suggests pleasure, approval or agreeable surprise in beholding her attractive appearance. The pleasing feeling of looking upon Margaret is disturbed, however, by the gaze she once again returns. Her eyes have "maiden freedom"; she is naïve and fails to recognize the sexually charged nature of their glances. Interestingly, while Margaret is unaware of the power dynamics aligned with the gaze, John is uncomfortably aware – he is embarrassed to feel so much pleasure in looking at her and resents her effortless ability to make him question his own feelings. Consequently, while John's scopophilic gaze figures Margaret as a sexual and erotic spectacle, her unfettered return of the gaze prevents her from simply becoming a passive object. As the romance plot continues to develop throughout *North and South*, John's erotic gaze upon Margaret begins to determine his actions and thoughts. Even after she rejects his marriage offer, John, more than ever, feels the need to gaze upon Margaret. To justify visiting the Hales, John brings the ailing Mrs. Hale a second basket of fruit. He tells himself that "he would not – say rather, he could not – deny himself the pleasure of seeing Margaret. He had no end in it but the present gratification" (217). His gaze is overtly scopophilic – he yearns only for the pleasure he gets in gazing upon Margaret. To John, Margaret continues to be a sexual and pleasing object to behold. Yet while he finds pleasure in seeing her, this urge actually

<https://assignbuster.com/an-eye-for-an-eye-gazing-and-courtship-in-gaskell-north-and-south/>

controls his actions more than it controls Margaret's. He is, in a sense, possessed by the need to see her. The need is so great that he questions if he is "bewitched by those beautiful eyes" (192), further strengthening the connection between sight and sexual attraction. John's desire to gaze upon Margaret reaches self-abusive heights. Upon hearing of Mrs. Hales death, John thinks of Margaret: "For all his pain, he wished to see the author of it. Although he hated Margaret at times, when of thought of that gentle familiar attitude and all the attendant circumstances, he had a resting desire to renew her picture in his mind" (247). Margaret causes John extreme emotional distress, and yet he continually feels the urge to see her again. To counter his growing preoccupation with his unrequited love, John vows to "see as little of her as possible – since the very sight of that face and form... had such power to move him from balance" (306). Indeed, the sight of Margaret does less to control her than it does to control John. His obsessive need to gaze upon her actually dominates his consciousness, and has an irresistible "power" over him. Critics E. Ann Kaplan and Mary Ann Doane argue that men are not the exclusive bearer of the look, but even when a female appropriates the gaze she fails to inherit its agency (121, 1). This is not true of Margaret. Margaret is a notably active heroine in *North and South*, and this characteristic unquestionably plays into her courtship with John. Margaret is the object of John's gaze, and yet Margaret reverses this formation by studying John and therefore becoming the subject of the gaze. She tells her father that John is "the first specimen of a manufacturer – of a person engaged in trade – that I ever had the opportunity of studying, papa. I know he is good of his kind, and by and by I shall like the kind" (152).

Margaret figures herself as the observer, the studier, and the scientist, while <https://assignbuster.com/an-eye-for-an-eye-gazing-and-courtship-in-gaskells-north-and-south/>

John becomes the object of study, the “specimen.” Her dehumanizing and condescending rhetoric places her in a superior position to her object of study - John. Later in the novel, after the two have been separated for over a year, she still plays the role of the scientist inspecting her specimen. Gaskell writes: “Margaret was watching Mr. Thornton’s face. He never looked at her; so she might study him unobserved, and note the changes which even this short time had wrought in him...” (389) This passage also focuses on sight and observation, and places Margaret in the dominant position as the studier and subject of the gaze. The agency aligned with Margaret’s gaze is more overtly demonstrated in the scene in which John comes to propose after Margaret shields him from his violent and disgruntled workers. Margaret is thoroughly offended that John would think her actions were based in love and not womanly duty. “‘You had nothing to be grateful for,’ said she, raising her eyes and looking full and straight at him...her very eyes...fell not nevertheless from their grave and steady look” (176). She denies having romantic feelings for John, and bluntly rejects his marriage offer. Her glaring eyes reflect her outright defiance of John’s intentions. No longer is her gaze “maiden” and “simple,” but it is rather deliberately severe and threatening. Margaret’s rejection of a well-off suitor is a bold move considering the particular social and historical milieu, and her fiery gaze is reflective of this audacious decision. In essence, Margaret’s appropriation of the gaze, and the authority therein, allows her an active role in the narrative and a strong degree of power over the male protagonist. In the end, both Margaret and John willingly submit themselves to the other’s gaze; in so doing, they allow their relationship to culminate in a mutually satisfying marriage. After a year apart, the two meet once again. Gaskell writes that Margaret looked “up <https://assignbuster.com/an-eye-for-an-eye-gazing-and-courtship-in-gaskells-north-and-south/>

straight into his face with her speaking eyes” and then dropped “ them under his eloquent glance. He gazed back at her for a minute” (392).

Margaret returns the gaze at first, but eventually submits to John’s. Taking into account the idea of the gaze and power as closely aligned, it is clear that Margaret’s downward glance forfeits the agency and power she has wielded with her gaze throughout the previous sections of the novel. Furthermore, while she looks away John continues to gaze upon her. In this way he becomes the dominant actor in the interaction. The exchange of power between the protagonists becomes most significant in the final passages of *North and South*. Gaskell writes: For an instant she looked up; and then sought to veil her luminous eyes by dropping her forehead onto her hands... still lower the head; more closely hidden was the face...after a minute or two, he gently disengaged her hands from her face, and laid her arms as they had once before been placed to protect him from the rioters...she slowly faced him, glowing with beautiful shame. (394-5) Margaret, once again, begins by returning John’s gaze, but physically conceals her gaze with her own hands. John, in disengaging her hands, invites her to return the gaze. As she faces him, we can assume that he, too, is looking at her. The exchange of the gaze in this scene attests to the changed power dynamic between the two characters. Both Margaret and John are now the subject and object of their lover’s gaze, submitting themselves to each other through the reciprocal exchange of power. It is only through this exchange of power that the two lovers can come together in marriage. Gaskell writes that “ so much was understood through the eyes that cannot be put into words”

(235), and indeed, their exchange of looks signals their commitment to one another in matrimony. Contrary to Mulvey’s central argument, John is not the  
<https://assignbuster.com/an-eye-for-an-eye-gazing-and-courtship-in-gaskells-north-and-south/>

exclusive bearer of the gaze in *North and South*. The gaze he directs towards Margaret is scopophilic, to be sure, and yet the gaze she returns - a gaze aligned power and agency - allows her to reject the objectifying gaze that would render her passive. In taking Laura Mulvey's gaze theory as an apparatus with which to understand the dynamics of the courtship plot, one is better able to investigate the complex and unique approach to romance that Gaskell takes in *North and South*.