

Original Paper

The Study of Social Gaze in *Salome* and its Enlightenment for Contemporary College English Majors

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Abstract

This paper takes Oscar Wilde's tragic masterpiece "Salome" as the primary analytical object, delving deeply into the enlightening insights that the social gaze depicted in the play offer to contemporary undergraduate students majoring in English literature. By employing the framework of Gaze Theory, it meticulously analyzes the intricate relationships among gender, power dynamics, and identity construction within the narrative. Through this analysis, the paper uncovers the profound challenges and resolute resistance displayed by female characters to the oppressive gaze of male authority, shedding light on the enduring relevance of Wilde's work in the context of contemporary gender studies and cultural critique.

Keywords

Salome, social gaze, power, feminism

1. Introduction

Social gaze, as a cultural phenomenon, not only reflects the social attitudes and perceptions towards a certain group or individual, but also shapes and constrains their behavioral patterns and identity to a certain extent (Dong, 2021). In *Salome*, female characters, notably Salome herself, are persistently subjected to the scrutinizing gaze of men, which invariably influences their destinies, decisions, and actions. This gaze transcends mere observation; it embodies a manifestation of power and poses a significant challenge to women's self-perception and subjectivity.

This study endeavors to delve into the insights offered by the phenomenon of social gaze for contemporary English majors through an exhaustive examination of its manifestations in *Salome*. In particular, the research will be carried out in the following aspects: firstly, the analysis of the specific manifestations of the social gaze phenomenon in *Salome*, including male gaze on women, female

resistance to the gaze, and the power and cultural factors behind the gaze etc.; secondly, the exploration of the impact of social gaze on women's self-perception and subjectivity, and how to seek self-expression and identity in the gaze; and lastly, combining with the actual situation of contemporary society, analyzing the implications of this phenomenon on contemporary English majors' self-perception and subjectivity. Finally, the analysis of how English majors can maintain independent thinking and critical thinking in the face of social gaze in light of the actual situation of contemporary society.

2. Gaze Theory and Contemporary Cultural Criticism

Gaze is a visual mechanism through which the subject directs attention towards the object. Gaze theory originates from an emphasis on visual perception. The subsequent classifications and explanations of gaze theory are delineated by various scholars and theoretical perspectives:

2.1 Psychoanalytic School

Within this framework, Freud introduced the concept of "scopophilia", considering gaze as an integral part of sexual instinct, positing that voyeurs derive satisfaction from peering into others' secrets. Conversely, Lacan explored the role of gaze in the process of subject formation from psychological and psychoanalytical viewpoints, asserting that gaze plays a significant role in shaping one's identity.

2.2 The School of Power and Surveillance

Among them, Foucault emphasized the importance of gaze as a mechanism for exerting power and conducting surveillance. His concept of Panopticism elucidates how the gaze can extend and consolidate power through visual means (Foucault, 2007). According to Foucault, gaze is not a merely an act of observation, but also functions as a social control mechanism, which compels individuals to self-regulate under potential observation, thereby manifesting the omnipresence of power.

2.3 Feminist School

Feminist scholars have applied gaze theory to gender studies, particularly in relation to the phenomenon of gendered gazes in film and media. Mulvey introduced the concept of Male Gaze Theory, highlighting that female images are often depicted as visual objects for male audiences in films and media, thereby reinforcing gender inequality (Wang, 2021). Furthermore, feminist scholars have critiqued the gendered power inherent in these gazes, arguing that they serve not only as visual acts, but also as tools for social control and cultural construction. These gazes perpetuate gender inequality by objectifying women and reducing them to mere objects.

2.4 Postcolonial and Racist School

Postcolonial and racist scholars have employed gaze theory to examine race and ethnic relations, unveiling the role of gaze in racial discrimination and ethnic oppression. They argue that the gaze marginalizes specific groups or individuals as "the other" through visual means, thereby reinforcing the

dominance and power dynamics within mainstream society. This phenomenon of gaze not only manifests between individuals, but also pervades social institutions and cultural practices.

The diverse perspectives and interpretations collectively encompass the intricacy and diversity of gaze theory, which is extensively employed for deciphering the covert dynamics of power and mechanisms of subject construction in visual culture, feminism, and postcolonialism.

3. The Interplay of Power and Desire

This section commences with a comprehensive discourse on desire: In *Salome*, the intertwining of desire and power is evident, propelling the narrative's progression. Power provides the potential for fulfilling desires, while desires compel individuals to strive for power and exploit it. Salome uses her beauty and charisma as manipulative tools against King Herod and others, effectively harnessing her desires as instruments of authority. King Herod, on the other hand, flagrantly abused his power and transgressing moral boundaries and disregarding beliefs to satiate his own cravings.

3.1 Herod's Authority and Salome's Desires

As a ruler, Herod possessed ultimate authority, wielding it absolutely and determining the fate of others. Throughout the play, he exploits his power to fulfill his own desires, yet this very power corrupts him, cultivating an increasingly authoritarian and brutal demeanor. His dominion not only underpins his reign but also embodies male desire. Consequently, under the male gaze, Salome becomes both a victim and an object of scrutiny, ultimately resulting in the subjugation of women.

Salome harbors a twisted infatuation for John, driven by an intrigue in the enigmatic and forbidden aspects of him, yet is also tinged with a craving for dominance and authority. "Your body is white, like the lilies of the prairie where no one has ever been"; "Your hair is like grapes, like bunches of black grapes hanging down from the vines of Idoma like the giant fir trees of Lebanon". She aspired to satisfy her inner desires and vanity through acquiring John's head. Salome attains power by ingratiating herself with Herod, encompassing this desire is an aspiration for supremacy.

The intertwining of Herod's authority and Salome's desires is intricately connected. Herod's power affords Salome the opportunity to fulfill her desires, which in turn exert influence on Herod's actions and decisions. Salome strategically employs her beauty and charisma to gain access to Herod. Herod then subsequently utilizes his power to satisfy her own aspirations. Driven by his authority, Herod, fulfills Salome's demands; however, this very act ultimately leads to his downfall.

3.2 Herodias' Desire for Revenge and Strategies for Utilizing Power

Herodias' desire for revenge against John stems from John's public denunciation of her relationship with Herod. John's words and actions threatened Herodias' position and reputation in the court and made her a target. As a result, Herodias harbors a deep hatred for John, and she longs to borrow the power of the king to achieve revenge against him.

To secure her revenge, Herodias skillfully leveraged her power, position at the court, and King Herod's favor. During the climax of the dance, she orchestrated a display of Salome's beauty and charm in front of King Herod, aiming to manipulate his emotions and decisions. Subtly, she arranged for Salome to make a seemingly harmless request to Herod: the granting of John's head as a reward. However, Herodias' plan for revenge did not bring her true fulfillment or peace. Instead, her actions lead to more tragedy. Salome's descent into madness as a result of receiving John's head ultimately led to her destruction. And King Herod lost his dominion because of his abuse of power and fulfillment of Salome's demands.

3.3 Salome's Love Desire and Abuse of Power

Salome's desire for love is mainly reflected in her infatuation with John. This infatuation is fueled by a profound curiosity about the unknown and the forbidden, coupled with a relentless pursuit of purity and holiness. In her perception, John stands apart as a unique individual, "I believe he is as pure and noble as the moon". His purity and holiness captivate her heart, leading her to fall deeply for him. She eagerly desires to be near him, to comprehend him, and even to possess him. However, John sees her as "the daughter of Babylon" and "the daughter of Sodom", and his coldness and rejection of her makes her desire for love even more twisted and intense.

In her pursuit of love, Salome inevitably involves the abuse of power. She uses her influence and Herod's favor for her to achieve her own ends. This is not only a deprivation of John's life, but also an abuse of Herod's power. Salome ultimately fulfills her desire - getting John's head.

4. Construction and Deconstruction of Gender Roles

A complex and subtle social dynamic can be observed in the interweaving of power and desire. Power and desire, which are often interdependent and mutually influential, jointly shape the rules and order of society (Zhong, 2010). In the game of power, desire often serves as the driving force that pushes people to fight for and control, and in the process of desire fulfillment, power often becomes the tool to achieve this goal and means.

However, when turning our attention to the construction and deconstruction of gender roles, we will find that the intertwining of power and desire plays a crucial role in it. The construction of gender roles is not only a process of socialization, but also a result of the interaction between power and desire. In this intricate dance, men and women are assigned distinct social expectations and role definitions, often rooted in the underlying structure of power arrangements and the manifestation of societal desires.

4.1 Subversion of the Female Role

The construction of the role of Salome completely breaks the stereotypical image of women. The dominant discourse in the past was patriarchal, and women have long been in a state of subordination and disembodiment (Liu, 2006). In the stereotype, women are usually depicted as weak, dependent and

submissive, but Salome is a woman with strong personal will and independent spirit. She dares to challenge male authority and strives for her independent personality. Not only does she use her beauty and charm to influence King Herod's decision-making, but she also dares to make a direct request to him, "Give me John's head", even to the point of going to extreme lengths to achieve her goal. This challenge and rebellion against male power makes Salome a characterization with a strong feminist spirit.

4.2 Complexity of Male Characters

The male characters in *Salome* consist mainly of King Herod and John. The construction of their roles is mainly reflected in their inner turmoil and contradictions as well as their relationships with the surrounding characters and environment. The complexity of gender roles, on the other hand, is reflected in the construction of the character of John. His image as a pure and noble prophet forms a stark contrast with Salome and King Herod. He is firm in his principles and beliefs, rejecting Salome's temptation when she says "Allow me to kiss it lightly" with "Go away! Daughter of Babylon", "Do not speak to me", and "I hear only the voice of the Lord". He might sympathize with her situation or feel helpless and saddened at her madness. The complexity of John's attitude toward Salome makes his character even deeper. The complexity of the male characters not only advances the plot but also deepens the themes and meanings, showing the complexity and diversity of human nature.

5. Embodiment of Gaze in *Salome*

From the in-depth study of the gaze theory and contemporary cultural criticism, it can be learned that gaze, as a cultural phenomenon and a theoretical tool, holds unique value in revealing and critiquing societal gender roles and power structures. It uncovers the intricate power dynamics and desire projections underlying the act of observing, providing a new perspective for understanding contemporary cultural phenomena.

When applying the theory of gaze to the analysis of *Salome*, gaze emerges as a multifaceted tool. It serves not only as a vital means of shaping character relationships and propelling plot development but also as a profound means of uncovering gender roles, power dynamics, and entangled desires. Through the intricate dance between the gazer and the gazed, it highlights women's vulnerable position within societal power structures and their struggles, resistances, and awakenings under the male gaze.

Therefore, from the perspective of the gaze theory and contemporary cultural criticism, it is possible to understand the specific embodiment and deeper significance of gaze in *Salome* more deeply. This not only enables a better reading of the work, but also provides new ideas and methods for exploring contemporary cultural issues such as gender, power, and desire.

5.1 The Gaze and the Shaping and Challenging of Gender Roles

The gaze, serving as a mirror of gender power relations, deeply exposes the self-awakening and rebellion of female characters under the scrutiny of males, along with the shaping and challenges posed to gender roles throughout this process. As pointed out by Foucault in “Discipline and Punish”, power is constantly in a state of flux, and where there is oppression, there is bound to be resistance. When women issue a gaze, they place themselves in a position of agency and subjectivity, therefore, this becomes a confrontational strategy for women to turn the tables, and also poses a challenge and subversion to this power mechanism. Despite the objections of the crowd, Salome insisted on seeing John, who was imprisoned in the underwater dungeon, and her gaze upon John is a result of her subjective choice. Despite John’s ignorance and curses towards Salome, Salome still scrutinizes his body carefully and employs lengthy lyrical descriptions, “His body again was like lilies, snow, roses, sunshine and the bright moon; his hair was like bunches of grapes, cedars and the long night; his mouth was like a red hoop, a pomegranate, a red horn, a dove’s claw, a hunter’s foot, coral and vermilion; and his voice was fine wine”. Salome’s gaze is always colored by the “male gaze”, and John’s body takes on strong feminine overtones. The feminized portrayal indicates that Salome has perceived John as a passive object, meant to be admired and to fulfill others’ desires. At this juncture, John’s spiritual status, which represents the patriarchal society, has been completely discarded, and he has been relegated to a status as lowly as that of a woman, which carries a strong irony. Despite being a male, John is portrayed in a feminized manner, and Salome, as a female, engages in a masculine gaze. To a certain extent, this inversion of gender relations also signifies Salome’s defiance.

5.2 The Connection between Gaze and Consumer Culture

Salome, as the central character of the story, becomes the focus of attraction and control with her beauty, talent, and mystery. Her presence is akin to a precious and scarce resource, avidly pursued and longed for by all who encounter her. King Herod’s obsession with her and her mother Herodias’ exploitation of her as a pawn for vengeance further underscore her status as a highly valued commodity. Her fate and choices are manipulated by power and desire, just as commodities are circulated and exchanged in the market.

Other characters in the story also exemplify the equivalence of roles and commodities. For instance, the head of Prophet John, a holy and pure figure, becomes an object of Salome’s desire in the story. His death and the exchange of his head highlight the human pursuit of power and desire, and also demonstrate the extreme pursuit of material goods and the fulfillment of desires in a commodity society.

5.2.1 The Desire-driven Factor

From Salome’s point of view, her obsession with John exemplifies the profound impact of desire on individual emotions. This obsession transcends mere admiration or worship, embodying an extreme

pursuit of beauty, purity, and mystery. In her eyes, John the Prophet is not merely a man; he is a symbol of perfection, an irresistible 'work of art' that she must possess. To a certain extent, her behavior can be seen as a form of extreme consumerism, where she sacrifices everything she possesses in pursuit of this beauty.

Second is King Herod's desire for Salome. As a symbol of power and status, Herod's desire primarily lies in possessing power and beauty. His admiration for Salome's beauty and talent gradually transformed into a profound longing to possess her, dreaming of integrating her into his harem and making her his own. This desire propelled him to make a sequence of irrational decisions, even defying his own moral principles and beliefs. Herod's behavior reflects the general pursuit of beauty, power, and status in the society of that time, as well as the excessive pursuit of materialism and pleasure in the consumer culture.

5.2.2 The Pursuit and Consumption of Beauty

In *Salome*, beauty is given a very high value, and at the same time becomes an object of pursuit and consumption. Salome's beauty becomes the key to attracting others and even changing her fate. The pursuit and appreciation of beauty by other characters also reflects the general recognition and consumption tendency towards beauty in the society at that time. Whether it is King Herod, the young Syrian officer John, or the audiences captivated by her beauty, their pursuit of beauty is not only a recognition of Salome's personal charms, but also a microcosm of the general recognition and consumption tendency towards beauty in the society at that time. At that time, beauty was given a high social value; it is not only a symbol of personal charm, but also a hallmark of social status and power. People saw beauty as a form of capital that could be possessed and flaunted, which inadvertently promoted the commodification and consumption of beauty.

5.2.3 The Intersection of the Gaze and Consumer Culture

The gaze in *Salome* is a form of viewing with a strong sense of purpose, often accompanied by the operation of desire and power. Salome's gaze on John the Prophet is not only an appreciation of his external beauty, but also an obsession with his pure and mysterious temperament. This gaze not only reflects her inner desire, but also mirrors the definition and pursuit of beauty prevalent in society at that time. Similarly, King Herod's gaze on Salome reflects more of a possession of power and fulfillment of desire. He hopes to control and possess Salome's beauty through his gaze, which is essentially a form of consumption behavior, fulfilling his desires through visual possession (Wang, 2009).

Consumer culture, on the other hand, is expressed in *Salome* as the pursuit and consumption of beauty. The characters in the story, whether they are Salome, Herod, or other roles, are all influenced by consumer culture in their behaviors and choices. They pursue beauty, power, and pleasure, and these pursuits are evident in their consumer behaviors. For instance, Salome sacrifices her life to attain the beauty of John the Prophet; Herod violates his morals and beliefs in pursuit of Salome's beauty. He

begs Salome to dance for him and even promises to give her everything she wants. “Whatever you want, I will give it to you”. When Salome offers to take John’s head in exchange for the dance, despite his inner struggle, King Herod ultimately chooses to fulfill Salome’s demand, saying, “Give her whatever she wants”, which undoubtedly poses a significant challenge to his personal morals and beliefs. These consumer behaviors reflect the prevailing social attitude towards the pursuit of beauty and consumption at that time.

The interplay between gaze and consumer culture in *Salome* manifests in several ways. First, the gaze itself is a consumer behavior that satisfies individual desires through the appropriation of beauty. At the same time, the gaze also promotes the formation and development of consumer culture, which makes people pay more attention to the external manifestation of beauty, thus promoting the commodification and consumerization of beauty. Secondly, consumer culture also influences the way and purpose of gaze in turn. In the context of consumer culture, people’s pursuit of beauty is more explicit and direct, which also makes the gaze more purposeful and targeted. Consumer culture fosters the pursuit of individuality and differentiation, catering to people’s unique aesthetic and emotional needs. This trend is also reflected in “*Salome*”, where Salome’s pursuit of John is a pursuit of individuality and differentiation.

5.3 The Connection Between the Gaze and Visual Culture

The gaze is a pivotal concept within visual culture. In this context, it is regarded as a distinctive mode of perception that transcends a mere glancing at visual objects. Rather, it encompasses a viewing behavior that is laden with profound cultural, social, and psychological implications. Characterized by intense concentration, extended duration, and meticulous scrutiny, gazing serves as a lens through which the intricate relationship between the observer and the observed can be unraveled. This viewing mode also elucidates the cultural, social, and psychological mechanisms that underlie this relationship. In *Salome*, such cultural, social, and psychological connotations of the gaze are fully demonstrated. For example, Salome’s gaze on John the Prophet is not only an appreciation of his external beauty, but also an obsession with his pure and mysterious temperament. This gaze reveals Salome’s inner desires and pursuits, while also reflecting the societal definitions and pursuits of beauty at that time. Similarly, Herod’s gaze upon Salome embodies more of a possession of power and the fulfillment of desire. This gaze reveals Herod’s desire for Salome’s beauty and his wish to fulfill his power and desire by possessing her.

Secondly, in visual culture, the gaze is not only a way of viewing, but also a cultural practice and social act. Through gazing, people can establish connections, express desires, pursue power, and in the process shape their own identities and statuses. In *Salome*, the gaze between characters not only reveals their relationships and desires, but also reflects the power structures and values of society at that time. Through the gaze, people can express their identities and statuses, and at the same time be gazed and

judged by others.

Finally, there is a mutual influence between gaze and visual culture. In the process of gazing, people interpret and judge visual objects based on their own cultural, social, and psychological backgrounds, which will further influence the formation and development of visual culture. In *Salome*, the gaze between the characters not only reveals their relationship and desires, but also reflects the cultural, social, and psychological background of the society at that time, which in turn further influences the manner and outcome of the gaze.

5.4 The Gaze and the Construction of Individual Identity

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir pointed out that women are not born, but rather constructed as an inferior gender under male domination. Under the patriarchal system, women's bodies are subjected to the gaze of men and confined within the family sphere; women's minds are compelled to accept cultural indoctrination under male authority and are stripped of their right to speak. When women are gradually awakened from the nightmare of the male-dominated social power structures woven by men, their self-consciousness demands that they strongly aspire to break free from the gender cage constructed by men and break out of gender relations dominated by male authority, attempting to reposition their gender roles and reconstruct their ethical identities.

6. Reflections on the Phenomenon of the Gaze

6.1 The Subtle Relationship between the Gaze and Power

In contemporary society, the gaze has gone far beyond the simple act of watching; it is deeply embedded in the network of power relations. Michel Foucault's theory of the Panopticon uncovers the gaze as a symbol of power: even if the watcher is not present at all times, the watched individual still disciplines themselves due to the implied gaze. This invisible power control has become a universal principle guiding social operations, which not only defines gender, class, and cultural identity but also profoundly influences individual behaviors and choices.

6.2 The Gaze's Shaping and Reflection on Gender Roles

As a social evaluation mechanism, the gaze shapes stereotypes of gender roles through constant visual examination. Under the male gaze, women are often expected to embody fragility and beauty, while men are labeled as courageous and independent. This gaze mechanism not only limits the diversity of gender expression but also contributes to the solidification of gender stereotypes. In the face of the impact of consumerism and visual culture, it is especially crucial to maintain rationality and independent thinking. English majors, in particular, need to develop strong critical thinking skills to uphold their autonomy in cross-cultural communication, enabling them to deeply understand and critically analyze cultural phenomena, while resisting the influence of external gazes.

7. Enlightenment of the Gazing Phenomenon for Contemporary College Students

7.1 Enlightenment of the Gazing Phenomenon on the Cognitive Level of Contemporary College Students

In an era where the phenomenon of gazing is increasingly prevalent, contemporary college students are confronted with a flood of information and visual stimuli. To effectively address this challenge, cultivating critical thinking becomes particularly crucial. Gazing is not merely a simple visual act; rather, it encompasses complex social, cultural, and psychological dimensions. Moreover, cultural backgrounds and individual psychological differences also influence the way gazing is perceived and interpreted, leading to the same gazing behavior having different meanings in the eyes of different individuals. In the era of information explosion, college students need to learn to filter, analyze, and evaluate the information they receive.

7.2 Enlightenment of the Gazing Phenomenon on the Behavioral Level of Contemporary College Students

The widespread adoption of social media has led to a notable increase in the phenomenon of gazing. Behind social media interactions such as likes and comments, there frequently exists a scrutiny and evaluation of individuals' images by others. This scrutiny can have significant impacts on college students, with excessive attention to feedback potentially resulting in anxiety, low self-esteem, or vanity, which in turn may affect the authenticity and health of their social behavior. In the realm of academic research, it is crucial to maintain an open mindset and avoid being unduly influenced by personal biases, societal opinions, or prior research findings. Regarding the emotional challenges posed by the gazing phenomenon, college students are advised to focus on establishing healthy emotional relationships and fostering emotional independence, recognizing that personal value is not exclusively defined by external opinions. By cultivating healthy emotional connections and seeking emotional support, students can effectively mitigate the stress associated with gazing.

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