

## Male's Gazes in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

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**ABSTRACT:** Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, as an illustration of the "Jazz Age," has established an outstanding position in the American historical literary circle with its profound social significance and forward-looking warning function. This masterpiece has become an important basis for future generations to explore various of modern issues, including gender ones, which are concerned with the gaze theories. Based on the relevant gaze theories and the text analysis, this paper analyzes the gazes of the three male characters on various aspects of female characters, including physiological, economic, moral and ideological gazes. Through examining the impure gazes affected by social culture, economy and politics in the textual, to some extent this paper provides a refreshing perspective for the study on gaze and gender issues.

**KEYWORDS:** *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald, gaze, gender issues.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Known as the chronicler and poet laureate of the "Jazz Age," Francis Scott Fitzgerald and his works are of great significance and have a far-reaching influence in the American literary world. In his 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby*, he vividly portrays the American society at that time. The profundity of ideological significance, the universality of warning significance and the foresight of social development that carried out by the novel, win him the greatness. Through the description of the process in which the protagonist Gatsby pursues and achieves his American dream and finally becomes the sacrifice of it, Fitzgerald truly reflects the nothingness, corruption and erosion behind the flashiness and brilliance of the American society after the world war I, and makes a strong criticism on it. This work has also become an important basis for future generations to explore various of modern issues, including gender ones, which are concerned with the gaze theories.

Gaze is a kind of concentrated thorough long-term viewing. The subject of gaze is called the gazer, and the object is called the gazed. Much more than simple viewing, gaze makes the gazer and the gazed establish a complicated power relationship. Gaze, as a visual theory, has received extensive attention in the fields of medicine and literature in recent years, and has also become an important theoretic tool in the study of postmodern culture. Modern academia has gradually taken gaze as one of the starting points for research, and the constantly developing and improving gaze theory has gradually provided a systematic and feasible direction for research. In the field of literature, gaze theory provides theoretical support, and exploring literature from such a perspective often brings new achievements.

Previous researches on *The Great Gatsby* have mostly been done from some traditional perspectives concerning the American Dream (Callahan, 1996; Yan, 2019), symbolism (Yu, 1988; Gao & Qin, 1991; Wang, 2000) and so on. Based on the relevant gaze theories and the text analysis, this paper will analyze the gazes of the three male characters on various aspects of female characters, including physiological, economic, moral and ideological gazes. Through examining the impure gazes affected by social culture, economy and politics in the textual, to some extent this paper hopes to provide a refreshing perspective for the study on gaze and gender issues.

### II. OVERVIEW OF GAZE THEORY

#### Gaze and Gaze Theory

Since the second half of the 20th century, gaze has gradually become a key word in Western literary theory and cultural criticism, which usually refers to a non-pure way of viewing that carries complex relationships, including multiple and complex factors such as power operation, desire entanglement, identity awareness and etc. Various gazes involving multiple, repetitive, and complex relationships always occur between the gazer and the gazed. Through the active and passive nature of action "gaze," the gazers and the gazed are distinguished as subjects and objects. The gazer is the initiator of action, the subject of "gazing," the subject of power, and the subject of desire. The gazed is the recipient of the action result, the object of "being seen," and also the object of power desire. Active and passive behaviors construct the subject and the object, the self and the other, with the transformation of situations and the passage of time, the positions of subjects and objects will also face transformation and exchange. It can be said

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that due to the differences and particularities of the historical background of the times, the viewing method, "gaze", has been brought with complex social and political relationships unique to their respective times, leading to the increasingly dominant research direction of the "gaze theory" in the field of Western art and cultural research, which provides a highly valuable critical paradigm and research for later scholars to conduct academic research.

The systematic gaze theory is mainly based on the long-standing concept of visual centrism. In that gazing, as an ancient concept, has a simple original meaning of "seeing", a way of viewing. The philosophical thinking of humans about the eyes and ways of viewing can be traced back to the ancient Greek era. For people at that time, obtaining external information through visual observation with the eyes carries a certain degree of authoritative truth, and viewing is always linked to truth and reason. Plato closely linked vision to the eyes, believing that the vision of the eyes was the endorsement of the soul. He divided the eyes into two types: the psychological eye and the spiritual eye. The physical eye is responsible for seeing the appearance of things, while the psychological eye recognizes reason and truth. Aristotle inherited and developed his ideas, who pointed out in his *Metaphysics*:

All men desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our sense... above all other senses the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer to seeing to anything else. The reason is that, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many different things between things. (Aristotle, 2012, p. 21)

Both Plato and Aristotle agree that vision plays an extremely important role in exploring the outside world, understanding the truth, and obtaining the reason. Vision, as a visual sense, helps to understand abstract rational concepts, has supreme power and infinite freedom consciousness, and ultimately, together with reason, becomes the standard for Western ideological evaluation at that time. In this era when visual mastered the rationality, the word "gaze" has not been officially proposed. Such visual-centered era was in the pre-gaze theory stage.

After entering the 20th century, the rational centered visual power mechanism and visual centrism have been questioned and even denied. Scholars from phenomenology, existentialism, psychoanalysis and post structuralism have subverted the visual power center. These scholars include Martin Heidegger (1886-1976), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), Michel Foucault (1926-1984) and etc. In their eyes, the way of gaze in the visual centrism, with the subject initiating the action "gaze", has absolute power, while the object receiving the action "gaze" is treated as a materialized object. They believed vision is rational, visual perception is an individual way of every living individual of perceiving external things, full of spiritual wisdom,. However, in terms of its sensory specificity, it can lead to an increase in spiritual distance and emotional alienation between the subject and the object. Thus, the vision is also indifferent. Anyhow, the prerequisite for gaze is the visibility of the object, and once the conditions for gaze are met, the power mechanism inherent in it immediately becomes apparent, though gazing naturally has different effects in different contexts.

In the academic context of feminism, gaze is often combined with desire, as the pursuit of missing objects and bodies by desire is a lack and longing for the subject. At the same time, desire is often accompanied by the pleasure of fantasy. The gender consciousness in visual activities always presents the projection of male desires towards women, while the pleasure of women themselves is often silenced. However, as the object of observation, the visual pleasure caused by women has been widely presented in modern visual art. Concerning this, two more figures' theories should be discussed. The first is John Berger (1926-2017), who was active in the 1970s and 1980s, when the second wave of feminist movement swept the western cultural circle. This movement undoubtedly stimulated Berger's observation and reflection on social culture. He made a judgment similar to that of Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), "the impression of others on her replaced her original sense of self" (Berger, 2007, p. 46). In other words, Berger believed that women's gender identity was acquired, and women's oppressed state was caused by society and culture. In *The Way of Seeing*, Berger points out that "the mirror connives at women as its accomplices, and deliberately shows itself as a landscape" (Berger, 2007, p. 71). There are similarities between Berger's theory and Lacan's mirror stage, which states that after the self enters language, the infant's self-identity is built on the foundation of imagination, a "imaginative gaze." Concerning women, they identify with themselves in the male gaze, while women also need to self gaze. The woman transformed herself into the other in front of the mirror and looked at herself with the eyes of a man.

In addition, some of Berger's views are similar to Foucault's panoramic prison. Berger proposed that due to being born as a woman, physiological characteristics and allocation only provide limited space for women, making them involuntarily subject to male care. When evaluating women's demeanor, he believes that because women survive under the "guardianship" of men and are in a dominant position, the evaluation criteria for women often come from the evaluations of male dominated society. Therefore, women divide themselves into two and constantly monitor their behavior to ensure recognition from men. In this sense, the male gaze carries a color of imprisonment, and women live within such gazes. In Foucault's theory, the prisoners are isolated in a transparent environment, and they cannot gaze or be gazers. They can only look outward but cannot look around. Alternatively, the relationship between gaze, gender, and power constitutes the core of Berger's gaze theory. From the perspective of viewing behavior itself, gaze is endowed with power, and when viewing women with a power eye, women are actually constrained by the dominant male ideology in society.

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Another figure is Laura Mulvey (1941- ). In the article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Film" (1975), Mulvey mainly analyzes and exposed the operation mechanism of patriarchal ideology in narrative films from the perspective of psychoanalysis and the position of the female characters as the "other" in the film, which opens up the research situation under the feminist context of American film theory in the 1970s, turning the focus to the subject and object, the audience and the film media noumenon. It has become a new height in the development of western feminist film theory.

The connotation of the term "gaze" in contemporary visual cultural criticism far exceeds its literal meaning, and it has been inextricably linked to factors such as subject construction and power in different contexts. From Plato and Aristotle in ancient Greece to Freud, Sartre, Lacan, and Foucault in modern times, the discussion of gaze has never been interrupted, and Mulvey's further interpretation of its connotation based on psychoanalysis makes the study of "gazing" become an appropriate entry point for feminist film criticism to expose the patriarchal order and criticize Phallogocentrism.

Firstly, Mulvey explored the sources of visual pleasure, one of which is the pleasure brought by the desire to peep. In this part of her research, she applied Freud's viewpoint on voyeurism in *Three Treatises on Sexology* to analyze the imbalanced system of male and female gaze in images and the operation of gaze desire in viewing experience activities. Another pleasure is pleasure brought by narcissistic voyeurism. Mulvey's research in this part involves the perspective of Lacan's "mirror stage" theory. Mulvey believes that the perfect and ideal image seen by a baby in a mirror is an illusion that is opposite to its true physical condition, which is a "misconception." The baby sees the reflection of itself in the mirror as an external projection of an ideal self, but this ideal self is an alienated subject. During the viewing process of films, the audience, like a baby, developed an identification with the images on the screen and triggered a joyful emotion. The powerful ability of movies to create illusions in character shaping temporarily deprives the audience of their own selves, but at the same time, their selves are strengthened and recognized within it.

After analyzing the two sources of visual pleasure, Mulvey summarized a binary opposition structure that exists in both visual pleasure and narrative structure, namely the split pattern between active/male and passive/female. She pointed out that women have become the objects to be watched and displayed in film images, thus possessing the connotation of "to be looked at". The role of female characters in the film is often used to hinder the development of narrative, and female characters solidify the narrative movement when they become visual objects in the film. The female image displayed is not only the gaze object of the characters in the film, but also the visual object of the audience in the cinema. However, on the contrary, in the film image, the male image controls the process of narrative development. Outside the film image, the male audience follows the story plot of the male protagonist in the film and projects their own viewing onto it. The male protagonist's control over the plot is perfectly combined with the male audience's visual viewing initiative, From this, they gained a sense of omnipotent satisfaction.

As the beginning of Mulvey's theoretical research on image culture, the study of gaze occupies a special position in her academic graduate studies. In early research, Mulvey devoted herself to exploring the relationship between female images, patriarchal ideology, and the audience in movies from the perspective of gaze. However, the gaze study of feminism is a starting point and prominent aspect of Mulvey's theory of image culture, but it is not the only part. In subsequent researches, Mulvey has developed several key issues that she has been trying to explore and solve, such as changing the being-gazed state of female images, exploring the status of female subjects, resisting patriarchal ideology, deconstructing visual pleasure, breaking the immersive illusions created by mainstream narrative films, and anticipating and calling for the emergence of a "intellectual" audience type. This also prompted her to re-examine the gaze theory in subsequent research, attempting to reflect, adjust, and re-examine her viewpoint in a broader perspective and context. To this day, Mulvey's feminist film gaze theory research still holds an important position and reference value in the academic community.

Both Berger's and Mulvey's gaze theories are all feasible to introduce visual-gaze perspectives into gender issues through feminist thinking. In historical reality, female characters have always been gazed and desired by male characters as the image of the others in literary works, being suppressed and reduced, and can only become affiliated secondary beings. Meanwhile, patriarchy has become the standard for measuring everything and the measure of all values, and its dominance, rationality, and legitimacy are widely recognized in the society. In such a social system, women are visually objectified by men from different aspects such as physiological, economic, ideological and moral perspectives, and the intensification of gender issues is unavoidable, which is concerned with the reactions and reflections of female characters under the gaze of the other and the self gaze brought by the gaze of the other as well. The next section will mainly explore male dimensions of gazes in *The Great Gatsby*.

### III. MALE'S GAZES IN THE GREAT GATSBY

The social background and social communication presented in *The Great Gatsby* reflect and align with Fitzgerald's true living era and his personal life experiences. His wife Zelda and his marriage have had an indelible impact on his creative psychology, which make him express his true inner feelings and complex emotional attitudes to them in the novel. His creation of female characters in his works is also influenced by the emotional value and spiritual experience brought by Zelda. Thus, by composing words and

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building up characters, he finished an abstract gaze at the characters and stories in textual world as a creator, reaping the pleasure of creative subjectivity.

### Physiological Gaze

The author believes that the emotion of female characters is passive and dominated by men. Nick's prejudice against women is deeply related to the consciousness of male power. In his narration, women are placed in a negative and inferior state. After European society entered the patriarchal era, the types of female literature in the works all reflect men's expectations, evaluation and control over women in real life, and reflect the female value scale in men's mind. Under the patriarchal culture, men are the rulers of society and the authority of the family. They have advantages in all aspects of society. They have their own values. Under such values, they believe that women are attached to them and have a "secondary" status that is played, appreciated and used.

I looked back at my cousin who began to ask me questions in her low, thrilling voice. It was the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again. Her face was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth—but there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget: a singing compulsion, a whispered 'Listen' a promise that she had done gay, exciting things just a while since and that there were gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour. (Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 12)

When Daisy first appeared in the novel, she conquered all readers just as she conquered young Nick. She was like a fairy, floating in white, with a very gentle voice and full of passion. This is not only Nick's impression of her, but in the subsequent conversation, she always is charming, simple and lovely, good at affectation and flirting. There is no denying Daisy's unique charm, but setting the characters in the background of the times at the time of the American "Jazz Age", women's beautiful appearance and unique charm are protective colors and value-added things for themselves. Fundamentally, they are used to serve men.

Through Nick's narrative tone in the novel, readers can follow the text to see the image of Daisy in his eyes, even the image of anyone. To some extent, Nick's subjective narration is a kind of one-sided gaze, and readers convert abstract words into concrete and direct images in their own minds through text reading, which is a re gaze based on Nick's one-sided gaze and has unique characteristics that vary from reader to reader. This point is only mentioned here and will not be specifically researched in this paper.

Unlike Daisy's femininity, golfer Jordan Baker has a different image. When Nick first met Jordan Baker, she "was extended full length at her end of the divan, completely motionless and with her chin raised a little as if she were balancing something on it which was quite likely to fall" (Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 11), making Nick uncomfortable.

When Daisy introduced Nick to Jordan Baker, Baker's "lips fluttered" (Fitzgerald, 2013, p.11), she nodded at Nick "almost imperceptibly, and then quickly tipped her head back again" (Fitzgerald, 2013, p.11), Nick's evaluation of Miss Baker's behavior of greeting him in this way was that "almost any exhibition of complete self-sufficiency" (Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 12). Miss Baker's etiquette was full of irregularities, she is completely self centered in socializing and what she behaved was a strange way for women in the upper echelons of society at that time, which conflicted with social morality and etiquette. Nick was greatly shocked and felt new and original by this.

From Nick's gaze, Fitzgerald described her like this: "I enjoyed looking at her. She was a slender, small-breasted girl, with an erect carriage which she accentuated by throwing her body backward at the shoulders like a young cadet" (Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 14).

As a passive subject, Jordan Baker was gazed at by male Nick from the perspective of object. Just as in society, female, as an appendage of the patriarchal society, are gazed at by male. Jordan's dress and standing posture have masculine characteristics. Her strong and independent character offends the dominant men in the society. Nick, who stands in the position of male power, believes that Jordan's appearance is arrogant and reveals a sense of indifference.

Another important woman in the book is Mrs. Wilson. This is the first time Nick saw Tom's mistress:

Then I heard footsteps on a stairs and in a moment the thickish figure of a woman blocked out the light from the office door. She was in the middle thirties, and faintly stout, but she carried her surplus lesh sensuously as some women can. Her face, above a spotted dress of dark blue crepe-de-chine, contained no facet or gleam of beauty, but there was an immediately perceptible vitality about her as if the nerves of her body were continually smouldering. (Fitzgerald, 2013, pp. 31-32)

When they headed to New York by train, "she had changed her dress to a brown figured muslin which stretched tight over her rather wide hips" (Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 33). From the description, we can see that Tom's mistress, Mrs. Wilson, has wild and rough beauty, which is completely opposite to Daisy's gentle and elegant charm. Tom, as a man of the upper class, also as the leading role of patriarchal society, lingers between female's different glammers, enjoying them unscrupulously or destroying them casually—"making a short deft movement, Tom Buchanan broke her nose with his hand" (Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 46). It is said that only when we treat the other person as an object will we casually dispose of their body. Judging from Tom's behavior as a burly man slapping a powerless woman, he is a rough, face saving, and social class oriented male chauvinist.

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.still damp with perspiration, they saw that her left breast was swinging loose like a flap, and there was no need to listen for the heart beneath. The mouth was wide open and ripped at corners, as though she had choked a little in giving up the tremendous vitality she had stored so long. (Fitzgerald, 2013, p.187)

Mrs. Wilson's physiological value was vulgar and worthless, and until her death, her physiology continued to show signs of poverty, pity, and lowliness. It seems that her life and the lives of all lower class women like her are of no value.

From Nick's narrative perspective, readers can see that his attitude towards the image of women in his stories is basically negative. Whether it's cousin Daisy, girlfriend Jordan, or Mrs. Wilson and Mrs. Wilson's sister Catherine, Nick's gaze and description of them are full of irony.

Nick, as well as author Fitzgerald himself from the standpoint of male chauvinism, described these women seem to be vain, superficial and unworthy of sympathy. Society is not only a collection of individuals, but also a complete whole of a group of people's lives. The physical and mental state of a population is closely related to the social system, laws, and customs of an era. In this novel, the three main female characters are miniature images of different female groups at that time. From a physiological perspective, the text presents three social class divisions based on three different characteristics of female physiology. Physiological superiority and aesthetics are the criteria for social class classification, reflecting the category of social class. while at the same time, the level of social class can also contribute to women's physiological superiority and aesthetics.

### Economic Gaze

Daisy, is a high-class woman with gorgeous appearance and noble birth. She often goes to various dances and has many pursuers around her that "suddenly she was again keeping half a dozen dates a day with half a dozen men" (Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 209). From what she owe at the economic level, not additional, the wealth and social status were supposed enough for her to gain the respect. However, she still needs to seek additional wealth from men in society to live. "She wanted her life shaped now, immediately—and the decision must be made by some force—of love, of money, of unquestionable practicality—that was close at hand" (Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 209). This is the pressure from the patriarchal society. Whether winning a certain social status or gaining respect, women need to attach themselves to men and obtain their additional attributes from men. Their economic status and even their own value are controlled and judged by men. Daisy was first attracted by Tom, who from the upper class and gave her a \$350000 necklace. Under the influence of the values of the patriarchal society, Daisy believes that this marriage gives her money, status and a sense of security. Later, Gatsby became rich and Daisy then was attracted to him. While maintaining a close relationship with Gatsby, she is unwilling to give up her marriage with Tom, because Gatsby does not belong to the upper class society, but Tom belongs to, and Tom can keep her wealth and social status.

Unlike Daisy, who was born in the upper class, Mrs. Wilson came from the lower class. She is vulgar, uneducated, hypocritical and money-first, her personality is determined by her poor economic level and low social status. As a representative of the poor working people from humble origins, she is eager to squeeze into the upper class society. When she first met Tom, it was only because of "He had on a dress suit and patent leather shoes" (Fitzgerald, 2013, pp. 44-45) that she was then willing to be his mistress. Myrtle thought that Tom loved her so she planned to abandon her poor husband and be with rich Tom and compete for fame, wealth and money with Daisy, but she didn't know that Tom regarded her as a plaything to get rid of emptiness and loneliness. She's pathetic, and she is only an accessory to Tom both financially and socially. Although Daisy and Mrs. Wilson are different in many aspects, such as class status and economic level, their attributes and values are actually the same for men who dominate the society. They are nothing more than male appendages.

The three female characters in the novel belong to two types: one is a male accessory like Daisy and Mrs. Wilson, and the other is a new independent woman like Baker. Different from Daisy and Mrs. Wilson, Jordan is not a housewife but has her own career: a golfer. Golf is an aristocratic sport, as a golfer, Jordan originally has a certain economic foundation. What's more, a stable career brings her a stable income, so she doesn't need to rely on the financial support given by men like Daisy and Mrs. Wilson. She is completely independent financially and has enough financial ability to do everything she wants to do. However, her relative economic independence offended the men who dominated the social economy at that time, so then she was being described as "cool, insolent" by Nick (Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 75).

### Moral and Ideological Gaze

When the "Jazz History of the World" was over, "girls were putting their heads on men's shoulders in a puppyish, convivial way, girls were swooning backward playfully into men's arms, even into groups knowing that some one would arrest their falls" (Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 64). The description of female images in the novel here is not only a portrayal of the parasitic nature of women under the patriarchal system, but also a mockery and satire of women's attachment to men at that time. Daisy attracts men through various means to obtain fame, wealth, status and sex. It is her own ideology which is completely influenced and changed by the values formed by the patriarchal society that made her do so.

At that time, women's self-consciousness is the product and expectation of men's. Poisoned by the male chauvinism in the patriarchal society at that time, Daisy was powerless to fight against the powerful patriarchal forces even though she had awakened her mind. She used to fall out with her family because of Gatsby, yearned for the love with Gatsby and planned to

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return the \$350000 necklace to Tom, but she finally gave in to reality. When her child was born, she said "I'm glad it's a girl. And I hope she'll be a fool--that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool" (Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 22). This is her helpless sigh for life. She clearly realizes that as a woman under patriarchy, only living like a fool can she gain a foothold in society and respect.

However, Jordan Baker is the representative of feminism and the rise of modern new women. Jordan Baker embodies the characteristics of maturity and independence. She and Daisy have completely different attitudes towards men. Instead of blindly approaching and catering to men, Jordan Baker "instinctively avoided clever shrewd men" (Fitzgerald, 1996, p. 63), and she dares to confront them. She is a modern female image with real economic independence, emotional independence and complete separation from the shackles of traditional moral norms. Using this role, Fitzgerald reveals the impact of Feminism on patriarchal culture with keen vision and insight, which is of practical significance to the development of women. However, American society at that time was still a continuation of patriarchal society, patriarchal culture and patriarchal consciousness were still dominant, many women were not economically independent, women's strength was still weak, and their struggle and resistance were not enough. To be on an equal footing with men and have equal power and status, there is a long way to go.

## IV. CONCLUSIONS

Starting from the critical thinking of gaze, after combing the theoretical knowledge related to gaze, this paper explains how Fitzgerald conveys his own attitude towards women in the novel world by describing the gaze behavior and evaluation of male characters on female characters. Based on this, the first step in the research process is to identify the phenomenon of gaze in the novel—male gazes towards women at the physiological, economic, and moral levels. After identifying the existing gaze phenomenon as concrete evidence to clarify the argument, it is necessary to think about the essence behind the phenomenon—men's gazes at women is a manifestation of objectifying women, and women's self gaze caused by external factors is a social alienation of themselves. The fundamental cause of all gender inequality problems is the unequal social rights structure. The exploration of gender issues in *The Great Gatsby* in this study will serve as a refreshing point for research and provide a new gender interpretation for the novel.

There is still room for further exploration in *Orlando*. The paper only focuses on the male characters, only examines the various male gazes, while the female's self-gazes influenced by the gaze of others are still under discussion. However, this study has arrived at its goal, if it might help readers achieve a better understanding of the gaze theory and Fitzgerald's masterpiece, and grasp of the gender issues.

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