

## The Gazed Desire of Margaret in *Affinity*

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### Abstract

*Abundant psychological and cultural connotations carried with the word “gaze” have rendered it a concentrated scholarly research topic, particularly in the visual culture field. This paper intends to reveal the gaze relations in the literary text Affinity, written by Sarah Waters<sup>[1]</sup>. In discussing the three gazes in the novel, namely the M-Other gaze, the gaze of affinity, and the self-gaze, this paper intends to uncover gaze relations between the principal character Margaret and other parties, as well as her desire as revealed by the gazes. While Margaret reveals and tries to fulfill her lesbian desire and her desire of freedom via the three gazes, she fails to do so because of Selina’s deception and her own fantasy. In this case, the fictional world that Sarah Waters presents to readers resembles Lacan’s world in which each subject is alienated and forever chases unobtainable desire.*

**Keywords:** M-Other gaze; gaze of the affinity; self-gaze; power; desire; fantasy

### Introduction

The postmodernist novel *Affinity*, by Sarah Waters, is an exploration of lesbian relationships that is particularly noteworthy for its intense attention to the manner in which the characters engage each other in the quest for closer sexual relationships. Briefly stated, the novel concerns a British woman named Margaret, who finds escape from her dreary existence in Victorian London by befriending a mysterious woman who is incarcerated in Millbank Prison. As one might guess from such a brief scenario, the novel is particularly heavy on visual imagery, and also on philosophical understanding of the nature of the imagery.

As such, *Affinity* lends itself particularly well to a textual analysis that employs “the gaze,” which has been the focus of considerable attention for the past several decades in the application of critical theory to literature. In fact, *Affinity* is an especially good exemplar of the gaze because it invokes three dimensions of the gaze phenomenon that have been discussed by theorists. These are the “M-Other” gaze, which recalls the manner in which a young child first differentiates himself or herself from the mother and arrives at a sense of self-identity, the “gaze of affinity,” which allows humans to understand how they relate to the Other, and the self-gaze, which centers on the ability of individuals to see themselves apart from the social context.

As will be apparent in the following textual analysis, *Affinity* lends itself to an analysis of the gaze in its various permutations. The result is not only a unique discussion of the nature of the gaze, however, but also a deep exploration of human sexuality, particularly as it relates to female-female relationships. However, it is first necessary to discuss the theory of the gaze at some length.

### 1.1 Introduction on Gaze Theories

The concept of sight as being the noblest of the five senses has persisted in Western history since ancient Greece due to “its supposedly closer association with the mind than with the body” (Cavallaro 131). The tradition of visual superiority in the Western world has endowed the gaze with much power. The word “gaze,” in fact, has acquired its wider philosophical, psychological and social connotations in the academic field other than merely in its literal meaning as a way of looking at people or things with fixed attention. The well-regarded existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre, in his masterpiece *Being and Nothingness*, points out the medium function of ‘the look’ in establishing interpersonal relationships in the world. Sartre understands ‘Other’ as a man who

...refers to my permanent possibility of *being-seen-by-him*; that is, to the Permanent possibility that a subject who sees me may be substituted for the object seen by me. "Being-seen-by-the-Other" is the truth of "seeing-the-Other."...*The man is defined by his relation to the world and by his relation to myself.* (my emphasis) He is that object in the world which determines an internal flow of the universe, an internal hemorrhage. He is the subject who is revealed to me in that flight of myself toward objectivization. (257)

From Sartre’s perspective, “to look and to be looked at guarantee the meaning of world and human existence” (Zhu 47), which further proves to us the importance of visual practice in establishing subjectivity. However, Sartre takes a negative attitude regarding the look of others, which he thinks it is always full of shame, fear and disgust and can be best testified in his famous remark “Hell is other people.”

Lacan’s mirror-stage theory treats the look of the image in the mirror as the beginning of self-identification, yet the mirror image is unreal and fake in the imagination. In his essay *Of the Gaze as Object Petit a*, Lacan notes the separation between the eye and the gaze. “I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides” (72). The eye exists when the looker looks the world in subject position, yet the gaze refers specifically to the look of the object. Hence, “the failure of the subject’s eye to look at object’s gaze triggers anxiety and fear of being gazed upon” (Zhu 61). The Lacanian concept of the gaze also considers the gaze relationship between the subject and object as being fluid and circular. One is gazing at and being gazed upon at the same time, which might suggest “the split of the

subject” (Zhu 61). Furthermore, the Lacanian gaze is best characterized by the relationship with desire: gaze carries and projects desire, which is always in lack and can never be fulfilled.

Apart from philosophical and psychological connotations, Foucauldian theory endows the gaze with rich cultural and social implications. In three canonical works *Madness and Civilization* (1961), *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), *Discipline and Punish* (1979), Foucault builds his “empire of gaze” (Zhu 68) where the asylum, general hospital and prison become the institutions that associate the gaze with power. In *Discipline and Punish*, he “identified the gaze as a mechanism by which power exerts its influence” (Heru 110), and power for him is not a one-time domination but an “on-going subjugation” that “reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives” (ibid.). Foucault concludes in the discussion of the panopticon that “the gaze is alert everywhere” (195), which is also manifested in the Millbank Prison in *Affinity*. Panoptic structure, as it was originally designed by Jeremy Bentham, is a “segmented, immobile, frozen space” where “inspection functions ceaselessly” and “induce the inmate a sense of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 195, 201). Through the illustrations of the panopticon, Foucault presents us the formation of a disciplinary society where every subject is being gazed upon with power and knowledge as its “functioning mechanism with convenience and efficiency” (Zhu 81). In addition, Foucault rejects the idea that the gaze is completely passive and repressive; instead, the gaze from his perspective operates in productive and positive ways to make the society and its subjects internalize the disciplines in order to strengthen social productivity and cohesion.

To sum up, the gaze has acquired wide range of meanings other than its literal meaning of simply looking. It is often connected with self-identification during interactions with others and the formation of subjectivity. In addition, it is loaded with the function of power and knowledge in social dimensions.

## 1.2 Research Significance and Objective

On the one hand, the large amount of “gaze” words used by Waters in the novel, especially in the second half of the book, shows to some extent the significance of this research. On the other hand, the ongoing illustrations clearly reveal that the gaze not only functions as the interactions of interpersonal relationships, but also may carry deeper cultural connotations concerning gender, race, class, etc. Henceforth, a detailed research on the gaze relations in the novel is of great significance for readers to grasp an in-depth understanding of the novel as well as the author's intentions of writing.

On discussing the M-Other gaze <sup>[2]</sup>, the gaze of the affinity, and Margaret's self-gaze, this paper intends to clarify the power relations hidden in the gazes; more importantly, it attempts to reveal Margaret's desire for female erotic love and freedom in the three gazes. However,

while Margaret yearns for her erotic relationship with Selina and her freedom to escape social shackles, Selina's deception leaves little space for Margaret to fulfill her desire, only further captivates her within inescapable fantasy.

### **The Gazed Desire of Margaret**

#### **2.1 The M-Other Gaze**

One interesting thing about this novel is that the author capitalizes the first letter "M" of the word "Mother" almost throughout the whole book, as if it were a proper word which symbolizes patriarchal mechanism of gender and power. It is ironically coincident that, while Margaret visits the inmates in Millbank prison, she is a miserable "inmate" in her own house, namely, as an occupant of a house that is like a panopticon. As such, she exemplifies the "panoptic role occupied by warders at Millbank is enacted most frequently by members of the same family upon each that servants her, by Ms. Prior and the servants upon her daughter" (Llewellyn 207). Waters inks many lines featuring the gaze that Ms. Prior places upon her daughter and her reprimand of Margaret's inappropriate behaviors. For instance, when visiting Millbank for the first time, Margaret senses the gaze of inmates on her and thinks that she is also the object of gaze in the prison, which results in her having "suddenly thought of Mother, scolding me when I was two-and-twenty, saying I must talk more when we went calling" (Waters 21) <sup>[3]</sup>. The thought of being an objectified gaze by warders who act as guardians of law and orders in Millbank makes Margaret think about her mother's supervision in the family. The comparison between Ms. Prior and the warders is in constant use until the end of the novel: "I said, 'Miss Haxby' ---but I stumbled over the words, for I had almost said *Mother*" (267). It seems unarguable for Mother to supervise Margaret, who scolds her for not behaving as a "decent" lady, even though "Margaret is intelligent, unmarried and childless, all 'social crimes' for women in the society of which she is both a part and apart" (Llewellyn 207). Patriarchal social norms were indeed the shackles for females during Victorian times, when females were encouraged to stay indoors and shoulder the "due" responsibilities for households, even though a number of progressive females were aware of their plight and objected. Yet, overall feminism was still in bud against powerful patriarchal domination during the Victorian Era. Llewellyn asserts that "In Margaret's case, the difficulty lies in the fact that society keeps re-reading her status" (207). Margaret was an assistant of Mr. Prior when he was alive, which secures her social status and promises her availability to knowledge under man's power and privilege. However, after Mr. Prior's death, Mrs. Prior does not like her daughter writing about all the things, saying that she is not "Mrs Browning." Furthermore, she "equates Margaret's recalcitrance not with a need for 'intellectual occupation', but with her spinsterhood" (Llewellyn 207). Patriarchal norms embodied through M-Other gaze suggests that the psychological pressure through gaze would

not be so huge, “were Margaret to conform to society's laws via a suitable union” (Llewellyn 208).

In other instances in the novel, when Waters does not capitalize the “M” in “Mother,” the descriptions portray Ms. Prior as a vulnerable and common woman with children. “I saw her aging. I saw her growing old and stooped and querulous---perhaps, a little deaf..... Now I sat and watched my mother, and felt fearful and ashamed of my own fear” (201). Only when she appears weak and vulnerable, as any human being might be, will Mrs. Prior be “mother” instead of the Mother which readily invokes a different symbolism for a competing social mechanism. To conclude, the M-Other gaze that Ms. Prior places on Margaret symbolizes patriarchal repressions on females that require them to be home-bounded and restrain them to exert their talents on social affairs. In this case, Margaret, the “social criminal” for not living up to patriarchal expectations, is ostracized and alienated. She has been “Otherized” and becomes an “outrageous” Other in patriarchal hegemonic society, which is why the “M” and “O” are deliberately separated to make it like a sign system. Yet, Margaret’s Otherness precipitates her identification with the marginalized inmates living in the darkness of Millbank, which paves the way for her to become Selina's affinity and brings closer to her own desire of lesbianism and rebellion.

## **2.2 The Gaze of the Affinity**

As a lady visitor, it is fairly reasonable for Margaret to gaze upon inmates, including Selina, since she is a lady with certain social status and a visiting mentor trying to cultivate those inmates. Margaret’s gaze, in other words, is initially invoked so that she can get to know their disgraceful past and show sympathy for them so that they will “grow meek, they will grow softened and subdued” (12). Madsen suggests that in Margaret’s case, “being a 'lady visitor' is an outlet for her lesbian desire. Although being a victim of the gaze, Margaret is also an active participant in using the gaze for her own (sexual) satisfaction” (210). Waters gives a detailed illustration of how Margaret gazes at Selina praying with a violet when they first meet:

I studied her for, perhaps, a minute; and all that time she kept her eyes quite closed, her head perfectly still. There seemed something rather devotional about her pose, the stillness, so that I thought at last, She is praying!, and made to draw my eyes away in sudden shame. But then she stirred. Her hands opened, she raised them to her cheek, and I caught a flash of color against the pink of her work-roughened palms. She had a flower there, between her fingers---a violet, with a drooping stem. As I watched, she put the flower to her lips, and breathed upon it, and the purple of the petals gave a quiver and seemed to glow... (27)



Being a lady visitor from upper class family, Margaret has the power to gaze at every inmate as she likes because she is supposed to supervise them and cultivate them to be better and decent ladies. Thus, when gazing at inmates in Millbank, Margaret is using her "voyeuristic privileges of her class" (Madsen 211).

Yet, any gazer is also the gazed object. The position of subject and object is always changing when one's identity comes from others and from one's interactions with others. "This mechanism, whereby identity derives from the Other, allows one to occupy different subject and object positions simultaneously" (Shreiber 448). While Margaret can freely control her gaze over Selina, she is also in manipulation of Selina's gaze since her lesbian desire with Selina is nothing but a carefully plotted deception by Selina. The Foucauldian gaze rejects the total oppression of the gaze, and instead, power relations in the gaze so as to follow the principle of "practices of freedom." This means that any gazed object can "find the power in being gazed upon, or harness the control for their own purposes" (MacPherson, 2004: 205; cited in Madsen, 2013: 157). "Power relations are possible only insofar as the subjects are free" (Foucault, 1996: 441; cited in Krips, 2010: 96). "She had thrust my own weak self at me again. She looked at me, and her eyes had pity in them" (88). These lines are self-evident in showing that, though Margaret has the power of controlling her gaze on the surface, she is definitely not the real controller of her relationship with Selina since her love with Selina is merely Selina's strategy of escaping from Millbank.

In fact, not only has Margaret been subjected to Selina's gaze, but she has also been dragged into the dark underworld in Millbank with Selina and starts to identify herself as an Other who should also be imprisoned. Her desire is triggered and revealed during the process of her visits. Waters deliberately shows the readers the seemingly similarities between Margaret and Selina to call for readers' attention to the inevitable connection between the two, known as their being "affinity" to each other. "Margaret and Selina are both criminals in society and are punished for breaking cultural taboos and for being unacceptably different" (Llewellyn 209). This recalls Lacan's notion that the eye functions as an organ for desire, yet it also carries with it rich symbolization which enables us to see what we want to see. For Lacan, the gaze exists as "a possibility to escape Symbolic Order <sup>[4]</sup> and slides into imaginary relations which pulls us back to mirror stage and triggers our fantasy" (Dai 185). Selina's repeated emphasis on her and Margaret's affinity gives Margaret the fatal illusion that she is like her in the dark world, ready to be saved. The affinity means the resemblances between the two; in this sense, it can be suggested that Selina creates the fantasy for Margaret that she is her half, she is the mirror of herself. However, the perfect and desirable self in the "mirror" that Margaret "sees" is merely a fanciful and unreal existence. The mirrored Selina that Margaret tends to identify with, in true essence, is an illusory, Otherized, and alienated subject.

While the gaze triggers and carries desire, it can never be fulfilled. The desire is always the desire of the Other, always the lack, which does not have an object. To put it simply, the

“gaze is a projection of desire, a process of obtaining satisfaction through imagination, yet gaze itself only proves the absence and lack of the object of desire” (Dai, 185). However, Margaret still identifies and projects her desire onto Selina, who is also a social criminal living in the dark and trying to escape to regain her freedom. Margaret’s desire to escape social constraints just as Selina does and to betray her social status is clearly shown when she whispers to Mr. Dance at a dinner. “‘It is really I who should have been put there!--- not her, not her at all’” (255), and her monologue afterwards: “It isn’t dark enough! I wanted it darker. Where is it dark? I saw the half-open door of my closet; even in there, however, there was a corner that seemed darker than the rest” (257). Moreover, Madsen argues right to the point that “Margaret needs Selina to acknowledge her doings: she needs (Selina’s) recognition for her independence. In fact, Margaret reaches the extreme point where it is only through Selina’s recognition that her self can come alive” (158). Margaret’s illusory identification with Selina as her mirrored affinity precipitates her tragic ending and further reveals the impossibility of her self-fulfilling desire.

To sum up, power is always fluid in gazing relations. Margaret’s social status cannot prevent her from being objectified as the gazed object. As a matter of fact, it is through Selina’s gaze, the gaze of the affinity, and her design of their lesbian relationship that Margaret reveals her lesbian desire and starts to recognize her Otherness as a social outlaw trying to break away social restraints. Nevertheless, while Selina’s gaze further reminds Margaret of herself also being a social Other and gives her a utopian hope of living in the sunlight in Italy, the gaze is in fact only Selina’s carefully plotted fraud, leaving Margaret little resistance and leading to her tragic fantasy in the end.

### 2.3 Self-Gaze

Most academic studies on the topic of gaze relations in this novel tend to cover the forgoing analyses on the two gazes from different perspectives; however, few studies include the discussion on Margaret’s self-gaze. For some reason, Waters does not write many lines depicting how Margaret is actually gazing at herself. Nonetheless, this paper attempts to argue that her self-gaze further reduces her to the underworld and a broken heart in the end. Two most straightforward examples of Margaret’s self-gaze are the followings: “I gaze about me, at the wooden door, the iron louvers on the windows.” (273); “I gaze at my own flesh and see the bones show pale beneath it. They grow paler each day” (289).

On one hand, “paler each day” hints that Margaret is getting weaker and weaker in the mainstream society, and that she is reducing herself more to the underworld with Selina. On the other hand, it is Margaret’s fantasy of becoming Selina’s mirrored affinity and living with her in the dark underworld with “paler” hope. Lacanian psychoanalysis points out that the gaze helps to escape the Symbolic Order, and enters imaginary relations where fantasy functions. Laplanche and Pontalis write that “fantasy is not the object of desire, but its setting” and the way in which “subjects structure or organize their desire; it is the support of

desire” (Homer 86). Because we are unable to obtain our desires, fantasy functions as a strategy to maintain desire, to try to fill the sense of absence. “It is through fantasy that we learn how to desire and we are constituted as desiring subjects” (ibid.). Margaret fantasizes their erotic relationship and projects her sexual desire onto her body, or her imagined mirrored Selina, in order to fill the lack of her desire. She gazes at herself, or the mirrored Selina as herself in her own imagination, yet, what she sees is nothing but her fantasized self in “paler” and more hopeless imagination. Pathetically, it is not the ideal Selina but only Selina’s deception.

In addition, Mr. Prior’s gaze that Selina thinks she sees, to some extent, can also be regarded as Margaret’s symbolic self-gaze: “Selina says she sees him gazing at me even now, and smiling; but I am not sure. How could he gaze at all my quickening and queer longings---and my desperate scheme, and my falseness---and only smile” (291)? Mr. Prior is both absent and present in the novel. Margaret misses her father very much, as she writes at the very beginning in her diary: “I wish that Pa was with me now” (7). Her remembrance for her father and the tendency for her to identify with her father are well manifested in the novel. Unlike Pris and Stephen who are like Ms. Prior, she confesses in her diary that she tends to resemble her father, which grants her the position and ability to be the assistant to her father’s scholarly research and makes her tough and independent on the surface that counters the patriarchal standard of femininity. Llewellyn considers that “Margaret’s hankering for her father reflects her desire for ‘masculine’ mental empowerment” (207). It is not so much that her father gazes at her and smiles at her all queer doings, but rather it is Margaret’s desire of trying to identify with his father and her psychological hint of wanting to get approval from her father. Her father’s consent on her outrageous betray of social laws is nothing but Margaret’s innermost desire of wishing to fulfill the “desperate scheme and falseness” in order to gain rebellion and freedom.

From another angle, although it is written in Margaret’s diary that it is Selina who thinks she can see her father’s gaze, the gaze can also be unreal, considering that Margaret may be an unreliable narrator whose diary is a subjective form of recording the events and emotions of her life. If the fantasy world of lesbianism and freedom that Selina creates for Margaret reduces her to pathetic imagination, then Mr. Prior’s gaze can also be interpreted as Margaret’s fantasy or her deepest desire to get in touch with his father unconsciously. If the gaze of the affinity precipitates Margaret’s fatal fantasy, her self-gaze reassures her tragic ending in the abyss of desire.

## **Conclusion**

The above analyses demonstrate how a simple gaze can function in the most mysterious and powerful way in fictional interpersonal relationships. The M-Other gaze emphasizes Margaret’s marginalized position as an unmarried female with knowledge. The gaze of the affinity (Selina’s gaze) pulls Margaret into the dark underworld and helps to bring out her



deepest desires of female erotic love and freedom. Nonetheless, Margaret's desperate hope to elope with Selina results in nothing other than Selina's intrigue and deception, which indulges Margaret in fantasy and endless yearning. With the fantasized world Selina creates for her, Margaret's self-gaze, or her gazing at the unreal mirrored Selina, leads to her further dissolution. Selina creates a beautiful fantasy for Margaret and drags her down to the abyss of desire, leaving her the expectation of mirrored self, only to walk away with her own affinity, Ruth Vigers, into the sunlight. Nevertheless, even when Margaret realizes Selina's lies in the end, she still fantasizes that Selina could love her and be her affinity: "Selina. You will be in sunlight soon. Your twisting is done, you have the last thread of my heart. I wonder: when the thread grows slack, will you feel it" (351)? Her response exemplifies Lacanian psychoanalysis, which takes fantasy as a strategy to deal with trauma. Traumatized people tend to resort to fantasy unconsciously to help them live on in the world. Since Margaret is traumatized by her father's death and her frustration against her mother's scolding, this may explain to some extent Margaret's fantasy and her tragic ending.

Waters weaves a seemingly beautiful dream for readers, yet, it is full of mystery. She does not merely present us a sad love story, as *Affinity* might seem to be at first sight; instead, she shows the readers the darkest secret and desire of human beings. We human beings are deceived subjects in this world, forever chasing after some elusive aim for life. We are mere grains of dust flowing in this colorful world which are desperate to sustain desire through fantasy and try to heal trauma with imagination, and *Affinity* demonstrates this insight with a particularly thought-provoking visual imagery. The fictional world and its characters in *Affinity* resemble much Lacan's depiction of the world as an illusory, fragmented, heart-broken place, where all of us tend to float around in confusing and sometimes illusory reflections, attempting to articulate our desires even though we are not fully in control of them.

#### Notes:

[1] Sarah Waters is a Welsh novelist who is famous for her Victorian lesbian trilogy: *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), *Fingersmith* (2002). The three novels have all been adapted and brought to the screen as serials and movie. Her second novel *Affinity* revolves around the lesbian relationship between a spirit medium and a lady visitor in Millbank prison in the Victorian Era. *Affinity* won the *Stonewall Book Award* and the *Somerset Maugham Award*.

[2] M-Other gaze represents the mother gaze. The ensuing discussion will give a detailed explanation for the deliberate separation of the word "mother" in the novel.

[3] All the quotations of the novel are from Sarah Walters's 2001 novel *Affinity*, published in London by Virago. The following citations of this book will be omitted.

[4] The Three Orders (the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real) are major concerns in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan considers the symbolic a language-structured system that “marks the limit of the human universe” (Homer 44). One’s subjectivity and social attribute are shaped in the symbolic order through language, or discourse.

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