

Female Oppositional Gaze in Scopic Regime: A Case Study of Tess of the d'Urbervilles

Fangyun Guo 

College of International Studies (CIS) at Southwest University, China

Received: 14-09-2023 **Revised:** 22-11-2023 **Accepted:** 25-11-2023

Abstract

In the conventional scholarship surrounding Thomas Hardy's works, Tess is commonly perceived as an object of desire for the male gaze, as well as a victim of the sexual politics of her time. This research addresses this critical issue from a (post-)feminist perspective, with a particular focus on the dimension of the female oppositional gaze. The aim is to explore the defiant gaze strategy that Tess employs when confronted with Alec, a representative of the male Scopic Regime, and to elucidate its profound implications. Through an inquiry into Tess's use of both external anti-gaze techniques and spiritual insight as means of resistance against the abuser's attempts at alienation, this essay argues that Tess effectively dissolves, impedes, and ultimately thwarts the abuser's will to conquer, thus inducing a sense of counter-alienation regarding sexual politics. Consequently, Tess's oppositional gaze not only contributes to the development of a unique Scopic Regime among British women but also assists in constructing a special visual poetics in the Victorian era.

Keywords

Tess of the d'Urbervilles; Scopic Regime; Oppositional Gaze

Female Oppositional Gaze in Scopic Regime: A Case Study of Tess of the d'Urbervilles

Fangyun Guo

Introduction

Inquiry into the role of gaze as a tool of literary criticism has gained considerable traction within the academic sphere. Thomas Hardy's renowned novel, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, presents a particularly insightful case in point. Traditional Hardyian scholarship posits that despite the author's attempts to navigate the conflicting discourses surrounding sexuality, Tess is ultimately unable to extricate herself from the dual fetters of male legal and moral codes. As a result, she is reduced to an object of male desire and falls prey to the machinations of the sexually politicized gallows (Pykett, 1993: 157-66). Such analysis accentuates the existentialist elements present in this novel, but fails to acknowledge the earnest and productive endeavors of Tess in resisting the patriarchal scrutiny of the male gaze. Furthermore, such an interpretation is to some extent incongruous with the political philosophy of Thomas Hardy, as demonstrated by Keith Wilson's research, which reveals that owing to his lower social status, Hardy was deeply influenced by John Stuart Mill's liberalism; Hardy himself declared in 1924 that "my pages show harmony of view with" Mill (Wilson, 2009: 55). In addition to advocating for social class freedom, gender equality is a key concern for Mill, who asserts that "women in general would be brought up equally capable of understanding business, public affairs, and the higher matters of speculation, with men in the same class of society" (199). These ideas provide a solid foundation for examining Hardy's novel from a (post-)feminist perspective, and it is precisely this aspect that motivates the current inquiry into Tess's counter gaze.

Closely associated with the act of gazing, the notion of "Ocular Centrism" possesses a rich and enduring historical legacy within the Western philosophical tradition. Notable philosophical perspectives, including Plato's conception of absolute truth, Aristotle's theory of visual cognition, Augustine's notion of divine vision, and Descartes' understanding of spiritual insight, among others, have collectively contributed to the ontology of Western visual culture. This ontological framework has given rise to the hegemonic "scopic regime of the modern era", as Martin Jay describes it, which permeates other fields of study and imposes a dichotomy of subject and object, self and other, active and passive in the dialectic of visible and invisible, seeing and being seen. From this vantage point, the subject (typically male) is afforded a dominant status within the binary system of the scopic regime, thereby subordinating and suppressing the object (typically female) (Jay, 1993: 21-147). In contrast, Bell Hooks (Gloria Jean Watkins), an esteemed American scholar, addresses this conceptual gap with her theory concerning oppositional gaze. Hooks' examination explores the original notion that children are frequently disciplined for staring, for engaging in direct, hard, and intense gazes with adults, which are perceived as acts of defiance, challenges to authority, and confrontational gestures (115-16). These researches therefore provide a sturdy theoretical foundation and logical linkages for the present inquiry.

Furthermore, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* was published in 1891, a time when Queen Victoria had already reigned for over five decades and had reached the pinnacle of her authority. Nevertheless, the Victorian era was a period fraught with contradictions and dilemmas, as social

conditions remained unsettled. On the one hand, the era marked the zenith of the formidable British Empire, bolstered by the affluence garnered through industrialization and colonial expansion. On the other hand, it was also characterized by turbulence, as radical ideas and beliefs surfaced, presaging the eventual decline of the Empire. As such, the entrenched patriarchal tradition began to waver, and rebellious sentiments surged both within and outside of British society, thereby exerting a considerable impact on Hardy's creative oeuvre. In the midst of the intense confrontation between tradition and the government under Queen Victoria's rule, the British intellectual circle underwent a complex transition towards the end of the 19th century. According to the American scholar Gail Cunningham (1978), the New Woman in Britain, when faced with unjust or inadequate norms, "began to emerge with a distinct identity," allocating her efforts towards professional success rather than that of the marital nature and adopting a "radical stance" regarding matters of personal choice (8-10). From this perspective, the manner in which Hardy reconciles the dictates of the Queen's government with the expression of rebellious sentiments warrants scrutiny. Thus, this study centers on the oppositional gaze representations in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, aiming to explore the profound implications and the circuitous trajectory of female visual culture at the end of the Victorian era, thereby providing an additional interpretive dimension to the scholarship on Hardy's works.

Female Oppositional Gaze in Scopic Regime in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

Physical Oppositional Gaze of Tess

Upon conducting a close reading of the text, it becomes apparent that at the outset, Tess does not exhibit a confrontational attitude, but rather appears as a gentle and obedient child in the eyes of her mother. When her mother learns that Tess will be working for the d'Urbervilles, she instructs Tess to wash and change clothes, urging her daughter: "You must zee yourself!" (Hardy, 2005: 55). It is then that Tess discovers her own beauty in the mirror for the first time, while Alec d'Urbervilles has already set his sights on her. Initially, Alec only perceives wisps of blue smoke diffusing through the tent, glimpsing "her pretty and unconscious munching" (47). The movement of Tess's small mouth greatly reinforces the sexual connotation of Alec's gaze. While traditional social norms restrain Alec's voyeurism, they simultaneously represent the subject's pre-judgment and evaluation of the potential value of the target prey. As desire swells, Alec's voyeurism evolves into prolonged fantasies, continually staring at Tess and believing that "she was made to appear more of a woman than she really was. She had inherited the feature from her mother without the quality it denoted" (48). This paves the way for Laura Mulvey's famous feminist theory of the "phallogocentric gaze" in contemporary Britain, where she posits that "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle" (Mulvey, 1989: 19). Alec, in turn, embodies the role of a photographer of his time, capturing women through a lascivious lens and immortalizing them on the screen of his consciousness to be savored and enjoyed in the future.

Without a doubt, the young protagonist in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, who is on the brink of blooming, has been provoked by lascivious imagination to prematurely mature into a woman, becoming the conquest object of male desire under the Western phallogocentric regime, which urgently requires the cultivation and favor of power. The impatient Alec embarks on a journey of sexual aggression from contemplation to action, and the intense confrontation between the two characters thus commences: on the galloping carriage, with Alec holding the reins, he suggests that Tess hold onto his waist. With unwavering will, Tess looks at Alec's lascivious face. "Never!

said Tess independently, holding on as well as she could without touching him” (66). At this moment, Tess’s rejection and direct gaze towards male linguistic obscenity embody the concept of “reciprocal gaze” proposed by American scholar Margaret Olin: although the gazing subject possesses a destructive power over the gazed object in a lower position, this does not negate the possibility of “reverse gaze,” thus forming a contradictory unity in visual culture (1996: 318-29). Through Tess’s firm gaze and upright posture, which assert her independent identity like a calf unafraid of a tiger, she declares the pioneering feminist significance of an independent woman in late nineteenth-century England, while also ushering in the opening of the scopic regime of women.

The brazen Alec’s advances persist as he proposes to kiss Tess’s “holmberry lips,” thereby startling her and causing her to slide “further back still on her seat, at which he urged the horse anew, and rocked her the more” (61). When men exercise control over the direction and weight of life’s decisions, virtuous women encounter the danger of losing their first kiss. Thus, Tess is confronted with the decision of either resisting or compromising within a limited timeframe. Such a dilemma poses the first major challenge of life to a naive and inexperienced rural girl from Wessex, as evidenced by her desperate plea: ““Will nothing else do?” she cried at length, in desperation, her large eyes staring at him like those of a wild animal” (61).

At this juncture, the term “staring” in Tess’s response to Alec’s relentless advances encapsulates her intricate psychological state, which is marked by the entanglement of two contrasting emotions. Firstly, in the face of Alec’s persistent advances, Tess instinctively defends her chastity, and her glare and angry expression conveyed by “staring” reveal her unwavering will to resist. Secondly, her cries and entreaties significantly weaken the power of vision. The distorted field of vision formed by the transition from anger to anguish mirrors the struggle of women to maintain their true selves in the face of male dominance and helplessness. All of these complex emotions are represented through the eyes, underscoring the powerful symbolism of the visual metaphor. Simultaneously, it challenges the conventional (male) phallogocentric gaze theory, which posits that “our only genuine sense of community comes in the form of an Us-object when we perceive ourselves along with others forming the object of the gaze of an Other. Our attempt to feel ourselves one with all of mankind necessitates the presence of a Third who looks at us all collectively but upon whom no outside gaze may be directed” (Sartre, 1992: xxxviii). In essence, Alec’s gaze amplifies the visual pressure mechanism of traditional male power, forcing Tess to expose herself under the microscope of desire. Her words and actions, which encompass both observation and escape, vividly illustrate the arduous task for women in the early stages of feminism to resist their oppressors.

In the critical moment on the carriage, Tess succumbs to Alec’s advances and allows him to “give her the kiss of mastery”; nevertheless, “unweeing of the snub she had administered by her instinctive rub upon her cheek” (61). This gesture of symbolic wiping does not only eradicate the marks of male domination but also preserves the dignity of the subject. Furthermore, Tess devises a plan to make Alec stop the horse by pretending to pick up her hat, thereby escaping the trap laid by the male. When Alec requests that Tess rejoin him on the carriage, she resolutely declines, revealing “the red and ivory of her mouth as her eye lit in defiant triumph” (62). In this moment, the momentarily secure woman manifests her triumphant counteroffensive through her unwavering gaze, and her seductive and tempting cherry lips with gleaming white teeth heighten the subversive and awakening power of women’s resistance against authority. The lewd male, both incensed and resentful, is incapable of stopping her. This portrayal of female scopic regime in Hardy’s work witnesses the emergence of the image of the Victorian New Woman.

As the narrative unfolds, the lecherous master on horseback devises a scheme to seduce Tess, who has just awakened from a dream. Tess, however, resists his advances and pushes him

away, while the scheming Alec lavishes her with attention, pleading for her to become his lover. Despite her exhaustion, Tess “drew a quick pettish breath of objection, writhing uneasily on her seat, looked far ahead” (79). The female protagonist’s gaze once again becomes the narrative medium for the novel, but with a distinct difference: her vision is directed towards the distance. This shift of focus from person to scenery on the part of the protagonist not only exemplifies Tess’s efforts to find a possible way out but also objectifies her annoyance as external landscape, symbolizing the subject’s rebellion and rejection. Furthermore, Tess’s struggle with conflicting desires to stay or leave and her battle with the objectification of others are a poignant reflection of the plight of women under pressure. This is in line with Frantz Fanon’s notion of the “confrontational gaze territory”: “But just as I reached the other side, I stumbled, and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye” (2008: 82). Similarly, the “look” from the place of the Other fixes the subject not only in its violence, hostility, and aggression but also in the ambivalence of its desire (Hooks, 1999: 116). Thus, Tess’s defiance and resistance against objectification and male domination resonate with the larger struggles faced by women, as they strive to assert their autonomy and agency in a patriarchal society.

Currently, Tess confronts a sorrowful destiny in which she observes a distant horizon that is nothing but a murky valley veiled in mist during the night. Despite her utmost exertion to locate an escape route, she gradually descends into the depths of despair. Despite her exhaustion and famishment, Tess endeavors to dismount her horse and take a rest, yet she is unable to withstand the burden of life’s hardships and the seductive words of Alec, causing her to lapse into a trance once again. Concealed by the double obscurity of darkness and mist, Alec, who has been coveting his “prey,” ultimately overpowers her resistance. He approaches Tess’s white muslin figure, which is shrouded by the dark surroundings, and finds her breathing gently and regularly. With a lowered stance, D’Urberville kneels and draws nearer until her breath warms his face. In an instant, his cheek makes contact with hers (82).

Allusively, Thomas Hardy offers a portrayal of Alec’s sexual assault on Tess that appears subdued but holds significant implications. Hardy employs the lens of visual literature to present women as objects of male lustful desires, their consciousness numbed under the social and sexual domination of men, as evidenced by Tess’s state of unconsciousness. This portrayal is not exclusive to Hardy’s work but echoes the theme of sexual violence illustrated in Shakespeare’s renowned poem, *The Rape of Lucrece*, where Prince Tarquin sexually violates the wife of Roman general Collatine while she is sleeping. Tess’s ethereal form shrouded in gray clouds and mist also evokes the archetypal figure of Gaia, the mother of Earth in primitive mythology. Moreover, the darkness of the night alludes to Laura Mulvey’s depiction of cinema as a dark, voyeuristic space that is indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy (1979: 17).

In contrast to the densely packed audience within an enclosed theater, Alec finds himself as the solitary observer in the expansive valley at that moment. The absence of illumination generates a sense of indeterminate pleasure in his act of secret beholding, while Tess’s unconsciousness deprives her of a visual presence, thereby transforming her gaze into an objective manifestation of power that facilitates the fulfillment of Alec’s insatiable carnal desires. However, one may wonder whether women in such a state of slumber are entirely unable to evade their fate. The tears that linger in Tess’s eyes bear witness to the fact that even when temporarily blinded, women’s subconscious resistance to the injustice of society remains steadfast. Although the villain has forcibly taken her virginity and sight, the tears of indictment metamorphose into new eyes that glare accusingly at Alec’s abominable transgressions. Thus, the equitable visual realm is perpetual, particularly because the fluid mechanisms of women, as exemplified by “menstrual blood, milk, and tears,” refuse to be constricted to a singular, fixed male identity. Instead, they

can dissolve entrenched notions, beliefs, and forms in a distinctly feminist manner (Jay, 1993: 535). Alternatively, women's bodily fluids can act as a metaphor for the dissolution of fixed identity categories.

In due time, the dormant woman shall awaken from her stupor and confront the nature of her tribulations. In the case of Tess, who was impregnated as a consequence of a heinous act of rape, she is castigated by society and abandoned by her erstwhile lover. The moral boundaries, established through male dominance, offer her no escape. On the Sabbath day, Tess is devoid of respite and instead bears witness to the dissemination of religious doctrines by a mysterious artisan who engages in the production of the *Bible*. His proclamation, "THY, DAMNATION, SLUMBERETH, NOT" (87), subjects female victims to the scrutiny of mainstream culture and the retributive moral system established by privileged males. However, it is precisely such irrational and untenable utterances that awaken Tess to the dreadful reality of a society that is reminiscent of the Edenic epoch, dominated by men. As Tess flees her home and ascends to the ridge to glance back upon the valley of her birth, she perceives that "the serpent hisses where the sweet birds sing" (87). Tess experiences a profound awakening from the symbolic illusions of an unsophisticated world dominated by the male gender.

Spiritual Oppositional Gaze of Tess

Undoubtedly, Tess undergoes a process of retrospection and scrutiny that not only challenges patriarchal norms but also expedites her maturation, yielding a vital reflective function in the development of her identity. According to Hardy, "her views of life had been totally changed for her by the lesson" (87), which propels her to attain the "the Buddha's gaze at flower" stage of Luce Irigaray's feminist philosophy. In Irigaray's conception, such a gaze does not entail "a distracted or predatory gaze, it is not the lapse of the speculative into the flesh, it is at once material and spiritual contemplation that provides an already sublimated energy to thought" (1991: 171). As an antidote to the predatory male gaze, this introspection transmutes external sexual-political encounters into internalized scrutiny, generating new structural and psychological rationales and thus constituting the very essence of the feminist gaze. As a result, Tess surpasses the conventional cognitive domain, enabling her to construct a female scopic regime.

Regrettably, four years later, Tess's encounter with Alec at a preaching meeting reveals that he has transformed into a "magnificent" priest: "the glow on the cheek that yesterday could be translated as riotousness was evangelized to-day into the splendour of pious rhetoric; animalism had become fanaticism, Paganism Paulinism; the bold rolling eye that had flashed upon her form in the old time with such mastery now beamed with the rude energy of a theolatri that was almost ferocious" (325). After enduring multiple adversities such as abduction, sexual assault, infant mortality, social ostracism, and marital abandonment, Tess has refined her powers of discernment. Despite being obscured among the fervent religious assemblage, her cognitive prowess remains unimpaired. Upon meticulous observation, Tess detects that Alec, now a preacher, is even more frightful. When the seven cardinal sins of Christianity, encompassing pride, wrath, avarice, and lust, are enveloped in the Victorian ecclesiastical guise of Methodism, Alec's preferred faith, the pernicious repercussions generated by the amalgamation of "riotousness," incendiary rhetoric, bestial conduct, mental derangement, pagan spirituality, Christian moral principles, immense depravity, and hypocrisy cause Tess to recoil in terror. From an ocular perspective, Alec's once cunning and lustful gaze, which previously aimed to engulf Tess, has transmuted into the fanatical eyes of a religious zealot. In contrast, Tess assumes the conventional male peeping posture to challenge the disingenuous sermon of a pseudo-priest. However, dissimilar to Alec's prurient yearnings and physiological cravings when peering at Tess, her vision is fraught with intricate emotions such as astonishment, disdain, and repulsion, which should not be commingled.

If any reader were to deduce that Alec, who had undergone religious baptism, had to some degree reformed his conduct, his act of harassing Tess at the corn-market while she was dining exposes the true nature of this phony prophet: "It was obvious at a glance that the original Weltlust had come back; that he had restored himself, as nearly as a man could do who had grown three or four years older, to the old jaunty, slap-dash guise under which Tess had first known her admirer, and cousin so-called" (348). Upon rational contemplation, Alec's pious and solemn demeanor during preaching is supplanted by his innate lustful and licentious conduct. However, the hypocrite fails to introspect on his own utterances and actions, and instead blames Tess's defiant gaze for disturbing his spiritual purity:

Those very eyes that you turned upon me with such a bitter flash a moment ago, they come to me, just as you showed them then, in the night and in the day. Tess, ever since you told me of that child of ours, it is just as if my feelings, which have been flowing in a strong puritanical stream, had suddenly found a way open in the direction of you and had all at once gushed through. The religious channel is left dry forthwith; and it is you who have done it!" (349

In the view of Alec, there exist two fallacies in Tess's verbal expressions and actions: first, Tess gazes at him with the eyes of an adversary, inflicting a lasting psychological wound on his unsullied heart. Second, Tess has not assumed complete responsibility for their illicit offspring and has ultimately caused its demise owing to her own egocentric motives. Had Alec been cognizant of Tess's ordeal of being ravished and deserted by immoral men, enduring the aspersions and ostracism of society, undergoing the agonies of ten months of gestation, and the insanity and helplessness she experienced during the baptism of her dying child, he would have comprehended the rectitude and legitimacy of Tess's resistance through her confrontational stare. When male perpetrators do not exhibit remorse for their actions and instead hold female victims culpable for their own transgressions, and hypocritically espouse moral and ethical principles, the Decalogue of Moses as propagated by Christianity and the concept of public decorum and morality championed by British society have become a derisive farce of the epoch, drowned out by the clamor of the Wessex harvesting apparatus, Tess's furrowed brow, and her dwindling tears.

Alec's relentless teasing of Tess concerning her emotional attachment to Angel Clare, in which he belittles Angel as "rather a mythological personage" and derides him for having abandoned Tess as a polluted woman, has had severe and detrimental effects on Tess's psychological state. Alec's disparaging comments, akin to a form of emotional toxicity, have completely shattered Tess's last remaining hopes and faith. As evidenced by the following depiction: "She could not get her morsels of food down her throat; her lips were dry, and she was ready to choke" (351). Alec's relentless attacks have rendered Tess unable to eat, speak, or even articulate her thoughts—Alec not only holds Tess responsible for the heinous crime of infanticide and the seduction of a saint, but also attributes Angel's cruel abandonment of her to Tess, thus ensnaring women within the constricting confines of faith and emotion. This situation has left Tess incapacitated, incapable of expressing love and deprived of fundamental aspects of human existence. This represents a scathing indictment of the condition of British women, who were subjugated under male hegemony during the latter half of the 19th century.

In the context of being relentlessly pursued by a malevolent pursuer, women who lack power often face limited options. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, when Alec attempts to touch Tess's delicate waist in a lascivious and sullied manner, she is no longer able to tolerate it. In response, Tess glares at him, seizes a rough leather glove and fiercely strikes him on the mouth. The blow leaves a scarlet oozing mark on Alec's face, and blood begins to drop from his mouth onto the straw (351). For the first time in her life, Tess defends her own dignity with her frail hands and punishes the evildoer. Undoubtedly, such an act of resistance plays a pivotal role in the

development of Tess's independent personality. The transition from being a passive observer to taking action is indicative of the increasing strength of female resistance. The blood that flows at this moment is not only the result of a momentary outburst of anger from an oppressed woman but also a call for vengeance. Additionally, strength inherited from her ancestry is revitalized, for her ancestors were warriors who fought on the battlefield, and "the act as the recrudescence of a trick in which her armed progenitors were not unpractised" (351).

Drawing a definitive conclusion that women have completely overturned their subordination would be hasty, as exemplified by Alec's passive response to being wounded. Rather than retaliating, Alec calmly wipes the blood from his mouth with his handkerchief, revealing both the brutal and numb bloodthirsty mentality of the male party and unsettling Tess's sense of stability. As she implores Alec to punish her, she adopts a hopeless and defiant demeanor, reminiscent of a sparrow's gaze before its captor twists its neck: "Whip me, crush me; you need not mind those people under the rick. I shall not cry out. Once victim, always victim: that's the law" (351-352). Tess's initial rebellious gaze, which was expected to be sharp, instead embodies helplessness and desolation. This can be attributed to three key factors. Firstly, Tess adheres to a gentle philosophy of interpersonal relationships that precludes her from resorting to violence. Secondly, it is well-established that women are vulnerable to men who are physically stronger, possess stronger personalities, and enjoy institutional authority. Thirdly, Tess's traumatized psyche remains bound by the fatalistic mindset of female victims, wherein the feminist existentialist concept of "eternal victimhood" exerts a destructive influence on her confidence. The confluence of these factors weakens the sharpness of Tess's rebellious gaze and bears witness to the continued prevalence of traditional male dominance and ubiquitous coercive rule.

Moreover, despite Tess's efforts to escape, Alec always manages to find her, constructing a panoptical surveillance cage that aligns with Foucault's perspective on panoptic society. This punitive gaze follows Tess like a shadow, "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault, 2012: 201). The totalitarian rule achieved through disciplinary training permeates Tess's life like capillaries, while Alec's male gaze acts as an invisible web of power that tightly concentrates Tess at its center, making it difficult for her to break free. As a result, the construction of a female scopic regime appears to have regressed.

Surprisingly, the ultimate visual portrayal of Tess and Alec's relationship materializes as a result of the spying and eavesdropping of their landlady, Mrs. Brooks. Following the encounter between the disheveled and forlorn Angel Clare and Tess, which concludes with his abrupt departure, Tess is consumed by a sense of hopelessness, trauma, and remorse. She accuses Alec of engaging in a pattern of duplicity and manipulation, which robs her of the chance to reunite with her beloved husband. The actions of Mrs. Brooks serve to finalize the visual perspective of Tess and Alec's relationship:

and that her lips were bleeding from the clench of her teeth upon them, and that the long lashes of her closed eyes stuck in wet tags to her cheeks. She continued: "And he is dying he looks as if he is dying and my sin will kill him and not kill me! . . . O you have torn my life all in pieces made me be what I prayed you in pity not to make me be again! . . . My own true husband will never never—O God—I can't bear this! I cannot! (403)

At this juncture, Tess finds herself in a state of great vexation and despair, having been overwhelmed by the capriciousness of fate. Her tightly clenched lips reveal the depth of her predicament, for she is unable to articulate her grievances or seek redress for the injustice she has suffered. In contrast to her prior outburst against Alec, Tess now shuts her eyes and bemoans the arbitrary nature of fate, the unfavorable circumstances, and her own helplessness, teetering on the

verge of collapse. It is Alec's ultimate miscalculation to have underestimated the strength of female despair, for as the profound wisdom encapsulated in the adage "the sound of the great bell covers the sound of the wooden fish" suggests, Tess's rebellious gaze reaches an unbeatable pinnacle, rendering the wrongdoer's existence superfluous in her tightly shut eyes. Seizing a knife and fixing Alec with a fierce stare, Tess "sprang to her feet" and thrust the blade at his corrupt heart (403), thereby extinguishing the possibility of his being. This killing ultimately terminates the protracted and tumultuous struggle and confrontation that has persisted for almost four years, along with Tess's endeavor to build a female-centered scopic regime.

Overall, Thomas Hardy portrays Tess as undergoing a Lacanian process of twice-leveled gazing. Initially, Tess witnesses her mirror image in the small mirror at home and in the handsome eyes of Angel, which represents her ideal ego and imaginary identification in the realm of imagination. Later, after enduring a series of humiliations at the hands of Alec, Tess enters the symbolic realm, which is the realization of human sociality and culture, as well as the normative regulation of human sexuality and aggressive instincts. More specifically, at the level of vision, the subject gazes at the objective object, while the object being viewed also gazes back at the subject. This reflexivity of the gaze from the object world is called the reverse gaze. Tess's observation of Alec's lewd and evil appearance belongs to the "seeing" level in Lacan's view, while her insight into his evil nature belongs to the metaphysical core of the gaze. Ultimately, this insight generates a powerful counterattack, leading to the tragic end of both parties.

Conclusion

It is commonly assumed that the visual perception system belongs to the domain of empirical experience. However, the etymology of the term "theory" suggests underlying properties of theorization. The term originates from the Greek *θεωρία* and the Latin word *theōria*, which originally meant "contemplation, speculation" (Simpson & Weiner, 1989: 902). This highlights the natural semantic correlation between contemplation and essential exploration and emphasizes the importance of elevating the discussion of contemplation to the level of theoretical inquiry. Analyzing Tess's representation of women in Thomas Hardy's novel reveals that despite being subject to the oppression of sharp or even lecherous visual violence, women can avoid positive collision by utilizing the low gaze, characterized by a physical height difference. This strategy establishes a passive communication barrier that rejects authority invasion at the lowest level. Women can also block the negative impact of male scrutiny by closing the internal entrance of their spiritual vision, thereby gaining freedom of the soul. Alternatively, women can adopt a more direct and explicit visual counterattack, using the powerful force of vision to confront and even repel the conqueror's alienation attempt, producing a "Defamiliarization" effect of reverse contemplation, and constructing an experimental prototype of the female visual political system. In contrast to Martin Jay's male scopic regime, the female visual political system focuses on women's struggle for equal rights and initially has defensive and involuntary features, evolving into a subversive counterforce. Hence, Tess's oppositional gaze assists in generating new interpretive dimensions and theoretical significance at a higher level of visual poetics.

As widely recognized, Tess embodies feminine frailty and resolute willpower. Unlike her mother, she does not passively accept her fate. Nor does she blame women's tempting looks for male domination, as her fellow female harvesters do in Hardy's novel. Tess bravely challenges traditional gender norms, ends the life of the oppressor, and becomes a feminist pioneer and a symbol of the New Woman in late nineteenth-century England. In fact, a similar concept was nurtured by Queen Victoria's promotion of the "New Education Code," which encouraged gender equality in education. *The Matrimonial Causes Act* gave women the right to a (partial) division of property, and the rise of the anti-child prostitution movement in Britain brought the public's attention to the issue of protecting girls' sexuality. These measures, enforced at a large scale,

collectively propelled the first wave of feminist movements in nineteenth-century Britain (Kennedy, 2004: 259-80). Accordingly, Tess wields the powerful weapon of reverse gaze, which is of paramount importance in constructing her female identity and launching a fierce counterattack against male discrimination and humiliation, epitomized by Alec. Ultimately, the gender pioneering significance of her female scopical regime cannot be overlooked.

Works Cited

- Abraham, William J. & James E. Kirby. *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Cunningham, Gail. *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1978.
- Fanon, Franz. *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 2008.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: Vintage, 1978.
- Hardy, Thomas. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Hooks, Bell. *Black looks: Race and Representation*. Brooklyn: South End Press, 1999.
- Irigaray, Luce. "Love between Us." *Who Comes after the Subject*, eds., Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Jay, Martin. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-century French Thought*. California: University of California Press, 1993.
- Kennedy, Meegan. "Syphilis and the Hysterical Female: The Limits of Realism in Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins*". *Women's Writing*, vol. 11, 2004, pp. 259-80.
- Lacan, Jacques. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Penguin, 1979.
- Mill, John Stuart. *The Subjection of Women*. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Visual and Other Pleasures*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1989.
- Olin, Margaret. "Gaze". *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Robert S. Nelson & Richard Shiff. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Pykett, Lyn. "Ruinous Bodies: Women and Sexuality in Hardy's Late Fiction." *Critical Survey*, vol. 5, 1993, pp. 157-66.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square, 1992.
- Simpson, John A., and Edmund S. C. Weiner eds. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 17. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Wilson, Keith. *A Companion to Thomas Hardy*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2009.

The Author:

Fangyun Guo

College of International Studies (CIS) at Southwest University. China

Email: davyguo@swu.edu.cn.

Biography of the Author:

Fangyun Guo: Holds the position of a professor and doctoral supervisor within the College of International Studies (CIS) at Southwest University. Furthermore, he serves as the director of the

Research Center of Literary Cartography (RCLC) at the same institution, as well as the director of CIS's Library and Archive Center. Notably, he also assumes the role of vice director at the Shakespearean Research Center at Southwest University. In parallel, Professor Guo's academic contributions extend to his role as the Executive Director of the Shakespeare Association of Chongqing. Additionally, he actively participates as a researcher in the Center for Modern Linguistics and Foreign Language Education, a significant entity engaged in social science research at the municipal level in Chongqing.

Professor Guo's involvement in academic endeavors is multifaceted. He is a member of the panel of reviewers, authorized by the Ministry of Education of China (MEC), tasked with evaluating the qualifications of applicants for the prestigious National Distinguished Scholars program. Furthermore, he serves as an evaluator of doctoral dissertations for the Center of China Academic Degrees and Graduate Education Development.

His scholarly contributions have found a place in the academic sphere, with his articles being featured in successive editions as the Vanguard Paper of *Foreign Literature Review*, the most authoritative journal for foreign literature studies in China. Additionally, Professor Guo has led several projects funded by the National Social Science Fund and other provincial and ministerial-level grants, showcasing his scholarly dedication. His academic achievements are underscored by his dual receipt of the National Scholarship Council's Visiting Scholar and Post-doctorate Program, affording him the opportunity to collaborate with distinguished scholars such as Professor Lena Orlin at Georgetown University in 2009 and Professor Richard Burt at the University of Florida in 2016.

Notably, Professor Guo has received accolades such as the "Academic Conference Award" from the Shakespeare Association of America (SAA) and the Outstanding Teaching Achievement Reward from the Ministry of Education of China. His contributions to graduate education in Chongqing have also been recognized with a High-Quality Reward in Graduate Teaching.

In the realm of literary scholarship, Professor Guo has established himself as a specialist in spatial literary studies, particularly within the domain of Literary Cartography in British and American literature. Over the past decade, he has published over 20 peer-reviewed articles in esteemed academic journals in China, including *Foreign Literature Review*, *Foreign Literature Studies*, *Foreign Literature*, *Foreign Literatures*, and *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*. 11 of these publications are indexed in CSSCI, and six have been featured in *Foreign Literature Review* within an span of eight years. His scholarly endeavors have been further supported by his leadership in hosting four research projects granted by the National Social Science Committee and the Chinese Ministry of Education.

Professor Guo's contribution to the field reached its zenith with the publication of his monograph, entitled *Literary Cartography*, in the year 2020 by The Commercial Press, widely acclaimed as the preeminent publisher of erudite works in China. This book, characterized by its groundbreaking and theoretical nature, delves into the intricacies of the ontology and methodology underpinning literary mapping. Notably, Professor Guo's opus has elicited substantial scholarly attention and garnered widespread popularity within the academic community, to the extent that it necessitated two reprints within the span of a single year.

Furthermore, the merit of this monograph was underscored by its inclusion in the prestigious Index of Chinese Translational Fund of Social Sciences in the year 2022. This accolade highlights the scholarly value and influence of Professor Guo's literary cartographic exploration. Additionally, a section of this work, titled "The Attributes of British and American Literary Maps: An Exploration," has transcended linguistic boundaries through translation into English. It has been

incorporated as a chapter in the compendium titled *Spatial Literary Studies in China*, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2022.

Professor Guo's scholarly impact extends beyond print, as his works have been featured on the Official Website of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and reprinted in the Information Center for Social Science of Renmin University of China. These accolades have earned him the distinction of being the Most Indexed Scholar in Humanities on two separate occasions. Furthermore, his research has been cited extensively by *Social Sciences in China*, the premier domestic journal in humanities. His achievements have garnered the attention of prominent Chinese mainstream media outlets, including the official website of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and CETV (China Education Television), which have devoted special reports to his research and accomplishments.