

The Male Gaze in Margaret Atwood’s “I Dream of Zenobia with the Bright Red Teeth”

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Abstract

This thesis examines the male gaze, which is a term coined by Laura Mulvey, in relation to feminist author Margaret Atwood's short story "I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth". The ways in which the male gaze shows itself in the story are explained and the motives behind them are theorised.

The aim of my research is to illustrate the different shapes in which the male gaze exists in this piece of literature as well as the intentions behind Atwood's narrative choices regarding the character of Zenia. I intend to aid in filling a gap in research by connecting the male gaze theory to this short story by Atwood.

This thesis ultimately concludes that the male gaze is present in Atwood's story in many forms, but more importantly it is used as a narrative tool in the process of critiquing larger patriarchal structures of society. The need for research on feminist issues and the male gaze persists, and this thesis intends to partake in these important conversations.

Key words: the male gaze, feminism, objectification, feminine stereotypes, literary theory

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1 Introduction

Representation has become a widely discussed topic not only in the film industry but also in everyday life. The ability to find representation of oneself in the surrounding world can be helpful with building self-esteem, reducing harmful stereotypes, and feeling validated and supported especially in marginalised groups (Nadal, 2021). In other words, representation matters. Often, though, representation in film and literature is biased and highlights the represented people in a way that does not respect them as they truly are. An example of this phenomenon is provided by film theorist Laura Mulvey in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” that first introduced the concept of male gaze (Mulvey, 1975).

Mulvey and other scholars discuss the male gaze as a mode of representation in visual arts and literature which portrays the world from a heterosexual, male perspective, which then results in a false depiction of women. Film and literature are, according to the male gaze theory, often produced through a male lens for male viewers. In this paper I investigate the male gaze in relation to Margaret Atwood’s short story “I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth” from her short fiction collection *Stone Mattress* (Atwood [2014] 2022). When representation of women comes from a masculine point of view, it tends to depict women as passive objects that are present only for the pleasure of the male audience. Such a structure in the arts objectifies women, empowers men, and by extension creates an unfair power dynamic between men and women. For the scope of this thesis, I have chosen to obtain a dualistic female-male, or feminine-masculine perspective instead of a more inclusive gender spectrum.

Margaret Atwood is a Canadian author and a powerful voice in the feminist discussions in literature. Her works have been associated with feminist ideologies, and they often relate to conversations about gender issues. “I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth” is a continuation of Atwood’s widely known novel *The Robber Bride* (1993) and both works revolve around the same main characters who have grown older between the two publications. The short story is a sequel, but also a standalone work, and offers extensive material for analysing the impact of the male gaze in Atwood’s writing. I will support my analysis by selected references to *The Robber Bride* as appropriate. In the short story the three main characters are old friends whose boyfriends were in the past stolen by now deceased Zenia. Zenia has been dead for 20 years, but her presence is still felt in the three women’s lives on a daily basis.

In this paper I examine the different ways in which the male gaze permeates Atwood’s writing in “I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth”, but also how the story persistently

challenges and critiques the concept through the character of Zenia. Some research has been done examining the male gaze in relation to Atwood's work overall, but "I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Teeth" has not yet received the same attention as her bigger publications have. More research on Atwood and the male gaze is still needed, and especially by analysing this specific work of hers I intend to fill a gap in research. The male gaze theory has been gaining traction, as well as criticism, for a while now, but in the current political climate the importance of identifying and discussing gendered structures in society and in feminist conversations is significant. This is why I aim to shed light on the ways that patriarchal structures exist in society, often hidden in plain sight. It is important to question the narratives of feminists too instead of only focusing on those who do not identify as speakers for women's issues. This way it is possible to keep improving the field of research through those paths as well.

For reasons of brevity, I refer to the story as "I Dream of Zenia". Keeping in mind Atwood's history in the feminist space as well as the complex nature of Zenia's character, I bring forward examples which both highlight and speak against the power of the male gaze in the short story. I showcase and explain how these examples interact with the traditional principles of the male gaze. I begin with Zenia's connection to feminine stereotypes in the arts, and then I evaluate the power dynamics portrayed by the character's simultaneous compliance to, and rebellion against the male gaze. This section involves discussion about objectification, which I will further explain later, because it is a central tool of the male gaze and will aid in understanding the presence of the male gaze in the story. I then move on to dissect Zenia's physical appearance and how that interferes with assumptions that the reader might make of her. Following this, I analyse the relationships that Zenia has within the story pertaining to Roz, Charis, and Tony, who are the three central characters in "I Dream of Zenia". Finally, I conclude my analysis by reinstating my arguments.

2 Theoretical framework

To further understand the concept of the male gaze, it is important to define certain central terms in its context, such as objectification and dehumanisation. Additionally, a separate subsection is needed to explain Atwood's knowledge of the concepts of the male gaze.

2.1 The Male Gaze: Objectification

Objectification in its simplest form describes the perception as well as the treatment of an individual as an object. Paasonen et al. claim that “[a]s the opposite of subjects, objects do not have agency or the ability to control how they are seen by people – or, in fact, how they are treated by them” (2020, 1). Objectification theory suggests that women and girls are surrounded by a culture in which they are constantly at risk of being objectified (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997, 175). The result is that they are likely to internalise an external observer into their own selves (ibid.). In a study on the relationship between objectification and authenticity, Cheng et al. find that objectification negatively impacts a person's feeling of authenticity and subjective well-being (2021). The possible negative effects of objectifying an individual make objectification a relevant aspect of analysing the male gaze.

Objectification is also linked to dehumanisation, which refers to the denial of a person's humanity, by for example referring to a person as an animal. In this paper these terms are crucial for dissecting the male gaze within “I Dream of Zenia”. Research has been done to link objectification and the male gaze overall to some of Atwood's previous novels. To introduce an example, Nivetha & Hema connect the male gaze phenomenon to Atwood's writing in their study on the portrayal of the male gaze (2024). In the study they state that Atwood “critiques how women are objectified and viewed through a male lens, reflecting broader societal attitudes towards gender” (Nivetha & Hema 2024, 687). They claim that Atwood exposes the dehumanisation and controlling of women, which is made possible with the male gaze, and they also explain how this expresses Atwood's feminist ideas against patriarchal structures (688). These studies are helpful in conceptualising the effects and methods of the male gaze, which is integral for this thesis.

2.2 Atwood voicing the Male Gaze

Atwood's evident awareness of the male gaze phenomenon is another crucial point to consider. In her previous novel *The Robber Bride*, Atwood points out the gaze through which women exist in a patriarchal society:

[P]retending you aren't catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you're unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole, peering through the keyhole in your own head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. (Atwood 1993, 392)

The essence of the male gaze is spoken into this quote and the final sentence seems to capture it efficiently. Atwood acknowledges the performativity that is embedded into women's lives in a chilling manner. The impossibility of a woman truly having a life that she alone owns is extremely disheartening, yet it must be recognised to understand the depths of the male gaze. This is not to say that the male gaze is completely and utterly avoided in Atwood's works regardless of the consciousness she seems to have of it. The male gaze often bleeds into art and literature in one way or another, and a study examining the male gaze in Atwood's writing claims that "the concept of the male gaze is intricately woven into the narrative and thematic structure" (Nivetha & Hema 2024, 687). The study therefore defends the argument that the male gaze exists in the structures and details of Atwood's writing. This, among other factors, makes it fascinating to investigate Atwood's ability to critique the male gaze whilst it may impinge on her work unconsciously. Next, I discuss certain stereotypes of femininity in film and literature, under which Zenia's character falls in "I Dream of Zenia", and I also draw a parallel between Zenia and vampiric traits in film and literature.

3 Zenia as a stereotype of femininity

At first glance, Zenia is a classic example of a villain in “I Dream of Zenia”. The very first mention of her character is in the first sentence of the story when Charis tells her long-standing close friends, Roz and Tony, about a dream she had that involved Zenia. Immediately the reader knows that Zenia is an important piece of the puzzle, although not necessarily in a positive sense since mentioning her receives a surprisingly strong reaction: “Zenia! Unfuckingbelievable! Did she ooze out of a tomb?”, Tony asks (Atwood [2014] 2022, 168). This alleged oozing suggests Zenia to be an unwanted guest that the women thought had left them be long before. It links Zenia to the supernatural: she is some undead spirit coming back to haunt them, which makes the reader judge her based on how others perceive her. From the very beginning the story initiates the process of moulding Zenia’s character into a heavily negative entity. This is something that Zenia herself can not influence, since she does not get a chance to introduce herself. Zenia’s character is therefore implied by others and not by her own words. It is also one of many times that Atwood connects Zenia to monsters or other creatures assumed to be found terrifying by people.

The title of the story alone illustrates Zenia’s character. The “Bright Red Teeth” teases the suggestion that Zenia is perceived symbolically as a vampire in the story, since red teeth in literature are rarely a medical concern, and more often the result of drinking or sucking blood. Vampires in media are known to be immortal, which is an interesting identity to give to a dead character, and in “I Dream of Zenia” this expresses a certain agency and permanence to Zenia. Blood is often portrayed as a symbol and a substance of life that vampires need in order to survive. As the story goes on, one of the characters comments on Zenia having fangs that drip blood, which is an even more obvious nod to her vampiric persona (Atwood [2014] 2022, 170). For Zenia to be likened to vampires implies that she is at least symbolically immortal and still has power over the lives of the other characters in the story. Even after death she is still around.

“I Dream of Zenia” establishes early on that Zenia is dead, which evokes curiosity in the reader, given Zenia’s remarkable role and influence within the story. The power Zenia holds is highlighted by the fact that she is dead, and the interactions involving her even after death allow an interesting perspective through which the male gaze can be examined. In relation to power dynamics and the dead, Rebecca E. May coined the term necro-gaze, which she explains to be “an embellishment of Laura Mulvey’s ‘male-gaze’” (May 2009, 169). According to her definition the necro-gaze “delineates a masculinized gaze directed at a dead subject” (170), which in other words suggests that “men [...] direct their gazes at dead women” (170). To

incorporate Zenia in the story as a dead character can be linked to the necro-gaze as an extension of the male gaze. The necro-gazer perceives Zenia as a passive object on the basis of her dead state, which creates a space for different kinds of fantasies and encourages the gazer to imagine “the receptivity of the body” (170) of Zenia for the gazer’s pleasure. From the perspective of the necro-gaze it is evident that Atwood is able to utilise a dead presence to ultimately display “I Dream of Zenia” through the lens of the male gaze.

When Zenia shares traits with vampires, she is tied to an archetype of femininity. For as long as vampire fiction has included female vampires, they have been made into sexual temptresses to the point that a female vampire is easily imagined to be seductive and alluring but also a dangerous, powerful woman (Hobson & Anuyiwo 2016). Some examples of classic seductresses in vampire literature are two characters from Anne Rice: Akasha from *The Queen of the Damned* (1988) and Claudia from *Interview with the Vampire* (1976). Moreover, perhaps the most known of all vampire seductresses is Sheridan Le Fanu’s Carmilla from his novel *Carmilla* (1872). The female vampires’ power lies in their ability to seduce others, and this is fuelled by a societal fear of a woman’s sexuality. It has been said that “vampiric sexuality is the ultimate in destructive forces” (Hobson & Anuyiwo 2016, 10), which highlights that the power stems purely from being perceived as sexual, and then weaponizing that power for one’s own gain. In “I Dream of Zenia” these comparisons between Zenia and a vampire symbolise the real power Zenia holds but they also limit the way her character can be understood through a male perspective. Considering Atwood’s acknowledgement of the male gaze phenomenon, the question arises: Are the sarcastically delivered comments about the vampire-like Zenia shaped by the male gaze or just an ingenious way for Atwood to toy with the concept?

Very often the film industry as well as the world of literature rely on the fact that in order to make a female character powerful, she must be conventionally attractive and have a great deal of sex appeal. The sexualised outlook people often have towards female vampires immediately gives Zenia power within the story, since the assumption that Zenia is a vampire has her embodying a stereotype. The male gaze stereotypes female characters routinely, and far too often women “are pigeonholed into stereotypical roles rather than having their own agency and complexity” (Nivetha & Hema 2024, 687). To connect a character to a stereotype, the character must be gazed upon, and through a masculine gaze female characters mostly end up stereotyping archetypes such as the femme fatale or a seductress, both of which Zenia can be linked to as a villainess. Furthermore, the male gaze relies on women’s assumed weakness and pushes forward the overall ideal of femininity being fragile. It has been stated that a female vampire is an embodiment of “the cultural fears of women’s sexuality” (Hobson & Anuyiwo

2016, 12), which supports the argument that Zenia gains a noteworthy amount of power in the story through the vampire narrative. This gives the impression that Atwood purposefully uses sexual stereotyping as a way to empower Zenia while knowing that she must give in to the male gaze just enough to profit off of it. By this I mean that Atwood uses the traditions of the male gaze to emphasize the authority of Zenia. I now move on to analyse the way Zenia interacts with the male gaze directly and by her own actions.

4 Zenia interacting with the Male Gaze

The story proposes a certain duality in the character of Zenia in relation to the male gaze phenomenon. Depending on the perspective through which she is examined she either exists within the boundaries of the male gaze, in an idealistic frame from which she cannot escape, or she breaks free from the boundaries and functions as an activist for the authority and agency of women. Through Zenia's actions, the most important of which I explain in the following sections, Atwood gives in to the male gaze, though at times it seems intentional for a more impactful and layered effect.

On one hand Zenia seems to fall victim to the male gaze, but on the other hand she challenges it in powerful ways. The story shows this through extensive use of symbolism, such as Zenia's assumed reincarnation into the body of Charis' dog Ouida. Ouida seems to react strongly whenever Zenia is brought up in conversation, especially when someone badmouths her. In the beginning of the story Charis even states that she believes the dog has "special perceptive powers" (Atwood [2014] 2022, 167) and relays messages by smearing her muddy paws everywhere (*ibid.*). This is an example of Zenia taking part in conversations and putting her foot down when she does not agree with something. Ouida for example heavily dislikes Billy, who is introduced as Charis' ex-boyfriend. Billy has recently come back to Charis' life, and when he returned, Zenia appeared in Charis' dream to warn her about Billy coming back. Ouida growls at him and is "a little jealous" that Charis' attention is divided between her and Billy now (180). In the end of the story Ouida attacks Billy, biting him with enough force to send him to the hospital (181). This is an immediate reaction to how Billy dishonestly blames Zenia about something he did in the past that really hurt Charis. Here Zenia reclaims her own narrative instead of letting Billy paint her as a villain, which challenges the stereotype of a passive woman through a display of confidence and assertiveness. Zenia's actions through the dog shift her from an object of thoughts and assumptions to a subject with agency, which challenges the traditional male gaze dynamics.

However, the fact that Zenia must present herself as the dog to have a voice in the story can be a way to objectify her. To regard a person as less than human is a core element of objectification, and dehumanisation does just that (Morris and Goldenberg 2015). Portraying Zenia as a dog makes her materialise as less than human, which strips her of her uniqueness as a person. Dehumanisation in this context works as a tool that urges the other characters as well as the reader to view Zenia as not deserving of the status of a person. It convinces the reader to believe the negative narrative assigned to Zenia in the story, which in turn removes any sense

of empathy or compassion that the reader may feel towards her. Simultaneously the reincarnation of Zenia into a dog establishes her with autonomy and also objectifies her. The narrative technically only implies that Zenia exists in Ouida's body, by Charis attempting to make sense of the previously mentioned dog attack, but the implication is extremely obvious and therefore must carry a specific symbolic meaning. By objectifying Zenia's character the narrator illustrates the power dynamics, which on the surface level showcase Zenia as a mere animal. However, upon further inspection of the dynamics, it becomes clearer that through the inequality between an animal and a man, Zenia still dominates the interaction between them. She acts as a guardian of what Billy can and cannot do or say. Reincarnating into the dog Zenia reclaims her identity and asserts herself to be the one in control. Existing in a dog's body is better and more powerful than not existing at all, and a fascinating duality arises in the perspectives through which this reincarnation can be analysed. The male gaze occurs in "I Dream of Zenia" through the reincarnation aspect, but its presence is nuanced and perhaps purposefully leaves the reader with a sense of ambiguity. That said, I understand the objectification of Zenia to be a clever way to assert dominance and give power to her through a supposedly demeaning action.

To further examine the interaction between Zenia's character and the male gaze, I direct my focus on a specific manifestation of the male gaze, which Genevieve Valentine discusses in her article about a television series inspired by Atwood's work (2017). The series is called "Alias Grace" (2017), and it is an adaptation of Atwood's previous novel of the same name, "Alias Grace" (Atwood, 1996), which makes it especially relevant to this thesis. The article points out obvious, highly present patriarchal norms in Atwood's novel through the series, and Valentine states that in the series "Grace [...] often asks questions she doesn't answer, because the truth is both so obvious and so disheartening" (Valentine 2017). The unanswered questions spoken by Grace, the protagonist in the series, reflect the questions arising from "I Dream of Zenia". The many aspects of the short story that can be interpreted both from the angle of succumbing to the male gaze, and from the perspective challenging the male gaze, are parallel to the questions asked in the series: they are ultimately left for the audience to decipher. This suggests that Atwood points out the existing male gaze through the features of the male gaze itself without ever directly stating that action to the reader. This is because the existence of the male gaze is evident and obvious, and its weight is felt in the story even when it is left unspoken. I now move on to discuss Zenia's looks and the part that they play regarding the male gaze in "I Dream of Zenia".

5 Zenia's appearance: How her looks impact her agency

Zenia seems to cater to the male gaze through her physical appearance, especially through the clothes she wore when she was alive as well as the ones she wore while visiting Charis's dreams. In the story Zenia shows up in Charis' dreams to deliver messages from the afterlife, which is a way for her to stay in the minds of the women and have power over them. This proves to be effective since many of the women's conversations centre Zenia. Women's clothing in general is discussed and monitored in many different levels of a woman's life. This is evident in the way specific colours are assigned to boys and girls in kindergarten, how visible shoulders are a punishable offence for distracting boys through high school, and how in adulthood it feels impossible to pick out the perfect outfit to the office that is professional enough for people to take it seriously. These issues exist in relation to the male gaze: "Whether consciously, or as is usually the case, subconsciously, we as women are dressing and existing in the world through the male lens of who and what we are" (Mallon 2024). Therefore, the "ever-present watcher" (Atwood 1993, 392) must be influencing the stylistic choices that Atwood relays on Zenia's character.

5.1 What was she wearing?

"What was she wearing?", Roz asks when the women discuss Charis' first dream about Zenia (Atwood [2014] 2022, 169). The narrator describes Zenia to have been very well-dressed and glamorous, whereas Tony, who seems to jump into a witty insult every chance she gets, quickly chimes in: "Leather", she says, "With a silver-handed whip" (Atwood [2014] 2022, 169). The narrator's own description of Zenia attempts at an almost elegant touch on her character, but Tony's remark twists the narrative towards a dominating sexual tone. Charis then corrects Tony by describing Zenia's outfit as a white "sort of a shroud thing" (ibid.), which places Zenia in a more innocent twilight zone somewhere between glamour and dominance. The clothes that women wear are often "critiqued not simply as a matter of style; rather, there is concern about clothes' messages of sexual intentions as well" (Montemurro & Gillen 2013, 168). These underlying assumptions about women's clothing considered, a question arises: had Zenia been wearing leather or some other form of clothes often imagined on a seductive dominatrix, would the impression of Zenia be different? Illustrating an attractiveness to a character elicits superficial appreciation from the masculine viewer in charge of the male gaze. The choice of further pushing an assumed sex appeal, as Tony seems to do with her comment, feeds even more into the male gaze. This creates these fantasies and assumptions of Zenia that can

overshadow who she truly is and how she would describe herself if given the chance.

The question of what Zenia was wearing highlights the meaning of her appearance in the story. Furthermore, this kind of question is often heard in the form of victim blaming in cases of violence against women: “The scapegoat argument blaming women’s attire for sexual violence has been used in court countless times to the detriment of the sexual violence community” (Hutton 2020). This proposes a heavy connotation that persists in conversations surrounding women’s clothing, so it is intriguing that Atwood includes it in a narrative where a dead old friend has come back in dream form. Surely there are more important questions to ask rather than what her outfit of the day was, unless the question unlocks a particular side to Zenia’s character which the reader should understand.

5.2 The power of physical appearance

Since a character who has died many years ago and is therefore not physically relevant to the story does not necessarily need to be visualised, it is justified to assume that Atwood has a distinct reason to do so. She describes Zenia’s past stylistic choices through the short story as well as the other characters’ narratives in the story, which solidifies the impression that Zenia’s looks do play a part in how she should be viewed by the reader. There is a reason as to why her image needs to include, for example, a seductive outlook. Being viewed as a sexual being at times gives a female character agency, but at other times it is an indolent attempt at creating a nuanced, whole, and respectable female character. In the field of research regarding the male gaze it has been stated that characters that depict women are “frequently described with a focus on their physical attributes, attire and sensuality, reducing them to objects of male desire rather than fully realized individuals” (Nivetha & Hema, 687). In “I Dream of Zenia” the sexualisation of Zenia’s character seems to support the image of an evil, man-stealing woman who cares for nothing but her own amusement and benefit. Here Zenia falls into the category of a classic villainess, whose power is fuelled by her fierce, armed femininity. To further understand what Zenia’s identity and power consist of I will next analyse the relationships she shares with the other women in the story.

6 Zenia's relationships with other women

Zenia's relationships with the three other women relevant to the story, Roz, Charis, and Tony, seem to be fuelled by the male gaze as well. As is typical to the male gaze, a looming sense of rivalry is evident within the relationships Zenia shares with the women. The rivalry is implied in the fact that Zenia had stolen men from the other women when she was alive, since women fighting over men is a common trope in film and literature in relation to the male gaze. A study on rivalry between women, or "feminine rivalry", describes "comparisons and competition amongst women as never-ending and seemingly natural" (Anthony, Okorie & Norman 2016, 311). The study explains that the foundation of feminine rivalry is built from the pressure applied on women by society and media (319). Societal pressure is a device utilised by the male gaze as well, which demonstrates the relevancy of feminine rivalry in this thesis. The feelings of jealousy and inadequacy that the women in the story feel towards Zenia are fuelled by Zenia's confident demeanour and seductive abilities, which in turn remind the women of their own vulnerabilities. Zenia's role as a source of intrigue and desire to the men she stole from the women creates a divide within the female relationships and highlights the destructive nature of rivalry between women. Zenia becomes a projection of these men's desires and in turn the women tend to view her as competition, which incites jealousy in them. The fixations that men have on Zenia make her a threat to other women. From an alternative perspective, the complicated relationships between Zenia and the other women scrutinise the structures of the male gaze. These relationships that showcase feelings of jealousy and hostility towards Zenia can be understood as a critique of how the male gaze divides women, pitting them against each other often over men. Here Atwood illustrates a need for sisterhood and solidarity among women. This is done by criticising the societal expectations placed on women, which serve as ammunition for the male gaze.

The story ends with Zenia's final move regarding her relationships with the women, when Billy has left town, and a new man has moved into Charis' duplex. The man is a widower, and Roz and Tony seem to hope for a spark to ignite between Charis and this man. It is said that Ouida approves of him as well, "and flirts with him shamelessly" (Atwood [2014] 2022, 183). Considering that in the past Zenia stole men from these women, the fact that this quote is where the story ends is indicative of Zenia truly running the game by her rules all along. The shameless flirting seems to act as a reminder for the reader that a tiger cannot change its stripes.

Another factor in the making of these relationship dynamics is explained by Xiyun Zhang and Hongbin Dai in their article “Female Body in The House of Mirth from the Perspective of ‘Gaze Theory’” (2021) in relation to Lily, who is a character in a literary work they discuss. Zhang and Dai state that Lily is described by the novel’s narrator to be “elegantly and gracefully dressed”, which in part leads to her being approached by a man (Zhang & Dai 2021, 234). A parallel can be drawn between the narrative descriptions of Lily and Zenia when the portrayals of their clothing styles are compared to each other, and in both stories these women are objects of desire to men. The love experienced by the man towards Lily, according to Zhang and Dai is “a result of the male gaze, which is essentially male-centered, selfish and lacking respect for women” (ibid.). Through this analysis it can be proposed that the reason for the crumbling of the relationships between Zenia and the other women in “I Dream of Zenia” may have been the kind of love that the men felt towards Zenia, which is derived from the male gaze. Similarly to Zenia, Lily is said to be subjected to rumours about her connections to men and blamed for doing people wrong (ibid.). The structural manifestation of the male gaze almost seems to follow a pattern with characters such as Lily and Zenia, which acts as a supporting argument for the existence of the male gaze within Atwood’s short story. The many dimensions of Zenia’s relationships together with her striking style choices create a disconnection between her identity and the way she is perceived through the story. I will now conclude my argumentation and reiterate my findings.

Conclusion

My analysis of “I Dream of Zenia” shows the connection between the male gaze theory and the character of Zenia to be layered. Signs of conforming to the male gaze appear nearly as often as signs of challenging it, which signals certain ambiguity regarding Atwood’s stance. The male gaze permeates film and literature multidimensionally, so examples can be understood from opposing sides. My goal in this thesis has been to showcase the relationship and interaction between the male gaze and “I Dream of Zenia”.

Throughout the story Zenia continuously places herself in situations where she is able to manipulate the perceptions of others around her which actively reverses the power dynamics and therefore fights against the general function of the male gaze. In these moments the power is in Zenia’s control instead of taken away from her. A very literal example of this is seen in all the times she makes her presence known through Charis’ dog Ouida. Zenia symbolically speaks her mind and participates in conversation when she misbehaves while allegedly controlling Ouida’s body. The reincarnation is a substantial factor to the essence of “I Dream of Zenia”, which is indicative of an intentional game Atwood seems to play with the male gaze.

Atwood’s understanding of the male gaze and her open participation in feminist conversation adds a certain layer for the analysis of her work. It allows the reader to expect a level of knowledge on gender issues that acts as a foundation on which these complex interactions are built. Perhaps the most obvious way Atwood challenges the male gaze is by placing Zenia in situations where she can take on the role of empowerment and display authority. Examples of this are found in the way Zenia dresses herself or how she seems to be able to do whatever she wants regardless of other people’s thoughts or feelings. By granting her symbolic supernatural powers such as those of vampires, or the ability to reincarnate, Atwood amplifies Zenia’s ruthlessness and authority, which goes against the traditional norms of the male gaze. Zenia portrayed as the villain in the story makes her anything but passive and weak. The narrator does not apologize on behalf of Zenia or try to hide the bad things she has done, which gives the impression that Zenia deserves the villainess title. This can be understood as a critique of how the male gaze traditionally demands women to be perfect in order to be liked or even respected as people. In a patriarchal system no room for error, or self-governance exists for a woman.

The final conclusion on whether Atwood’s work falls under the norms of the male gaze or cleverly pokes fun at them with deeply implanted criticism is left somewhat ambiguous for the reader. Nonetheless, my take is that “I Dream of Zenia” is a statement to empower women,

made through just enough compliance to the male gaze. Therefore, in “I Dream of Zenia” Atwood critiques the male gaze through the character of Zenia, revealing how societal expectations and perceptions of female beauty coexist with themes such as power, manipulation, and self-identity. In the short story a push and pull relationship seems to present itself between Atwood’s writing and the male gaze, which intertwines the two together in a fascinating way. The points that Atwood makes critiquing the male gaze would not be as impactful as they are without giving in to the male gaze. By this I mean that the male gaze appears to have been used as a tool to deepen the arguments and to add more layers to the story. For example, objectifying Zenia’s character works as a hook in favour of the male gaze, that is then used to drive home the point about the amount of power that Zenia truly holds. The same phenomenon can be derived from the choices Atwood has made with Zenia’s physical looks, villainess aura, and her relationships with other characters in the short story. In “I Dream of Zenia” Atwood leans into the male gaze just enough that she can grasp the underlying issue and bring it to the surface while supporting her own narrative actions. Then, it is the readers’ responsibility to make of the argument what they will.

As this paper shows, the male gaze is present within the story, but it is for the reader to determine how they wish to understand it. The story clearly critiques the traditional rules and customs of the male gaze in interesting ways, as long as the reader knows how to look for it. It would be intriguing to investigate the roles of other characters in this story as well to better grasp Atwood’s stance regarding the male gaze.

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