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# **The male gaze in literature: the case of *They're not your husband* (1973) by Raymond Carver**

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## **Introduction**

In this essay, we will analyse how the male gaze is represented in literature, more specifically, in Raymond Carver's short story *They're not your husband* (1973), a story included in the short-story collection *Will you please be quiet, please?* (1976)

The male gaze is a theory developed in the 1975 essay entitled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" by film psychologist Laura Mulvey who states, "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 phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly" (p. 4). However, in recent years this theory has been applied to visual arts and literature. As regards literature, this theory allows writers to criticise women representations and their treatment in literature and also writing to change its traditional patriarchal perspective in which women are seen as beautiful objects or products for the heterosexual man viewer.

It will be analysed in this paper how Raymond Carver (1938-1988), being an author that "has taken the 'dirty' reality of day-to-day life and explored it" (Kita, 2014, p. 386), deals with the male gaze and its consequences in his short story *They're not your husband* (1973), in which psychological violence against a woman is perpetrated because of her appearance. In addition, it will be explored not only how the male gaze affects women, but also what happens to the male protagonist —as the male gaze shapes some aspects of masculinity as well— in order to reveal the consequences of this perspective on both women and men.

For the purpose of this analysis, we will consult different authors such as Simone De Beauvoir, Viola Kita and Michael S. Kimmel.

## Development

Raymond Carver is a representative of the American “dirty realism”, a term coined by Bill Buford in 1983. This kind of fiction includes simplified language and depicts ordinary aspects of life in a vulgar, mundane way. In his stories, Carver deals with marriage, working-class people and violence. According to Vanessa Hall, “ [the] male violence that infiltrates Carver’s stories is tied to the awareness of violence feminism helped bring to the mainstream during the 1970s and 1980s” (p. 62). In *They’re not your husband* (1973), the author includes an extreme psychological violence a woman, Doreen, has to suffer because of his husband, Earl, who hears two male customers objectifying her wife during her working time as a waitress:

“Look at the ass on that. I don’t believe it.”

The other man laughed.”I’ve seen better,” he said.

“That’s what I mean,” the first man said. “But some jokers like their quim fat.”

(p. 16)

Doreen is treated as a sexual object for the pleasure of the male viewer, in this case, the businessmen. One condition of the male gaze is that women have a passive role and they are dehumanised, which is the case of Doreen. The male gaze is presented in the text creating a double exposure effect on her body as she is sexually objectified by these businessmen and later, by her husband. The day after that episode, the first thing Earl tells her is “Look at yourself in the mirror.” (p. 17) and then, her oppression starts. Doreen acquires an “object” status, a quality which goes hand in hand with the main principles of the male gaze: the man prepares and models her to be a good spectacle for the pleasure of the other men.

Simone de Beauvoir explains in *The Second Sex* (1949):

The wife who accentuates her sexual attraction is considered vulgar in her husband’s eyes; he criticizes this boldness that would seduce him in an unknown woman, and this criticism kills all desire for her; if his wife dresses decently, he approves but coldly: he does not find her attractive and vaguely reproaches her

for it. Because of that, he rarely looks at her on his own account: he inspects her through the eyes of others. "What will they say about her?" He does not see clearly because he projects his spousal point of view onto others. (p. 658)

Although Earl will wonder "What will they say about her?", in this short story, the husband wants his wife to be "vulgar" to satisfy the heterosexual, masculine scopophilia which means, according to Mulvey, "the pleasure involved in looking at other people's bodies as (particularly, erotic) objects without being seen either by those on screen or by other members of the audience". (Oxford Reference)

We have explored how the husband prepares his wife for the businessmen or "those on screen", which applies to cinema, but it would be *those on the narrative* in literature. In addition, "other members of the audience" will include, in this case, the reader since from the very beginning of the story, it can be noticed how the focus is on Earl and his economic problems, "Earl Ober was between jobs as a salesman. But Doreen, his wife, had gone to work nights as a waitress..." (Carver, p.16) She is introduced as "his wife" and this perspective reinforces the gaze. The reader is in a position to imagine and judge the woman's body, "The white skirt yanked against her hips and crawled up her legs. What showed was girdle, and it was pink, thighs that were rumped and gray and a little hairy, and veins that spread in a berserk display." (p. 17) The depersonalized, fetishistic, detailed description motivates the readers to imagine her body, and the selection of words helps them to create a disgusting image in their minds in order to judge her.

As discussed before, women are victims of the male gaze since they are "reduced to a body, to sheer flesh", "a passive object—to be looked at" (Husain, 2018). Unfortunately, men have also fallen prey to the cultural expectations foisted on them.

Once Earl loses his position as provider, he steps away from the stereotype set for men—probably deflating his self-esteem. The article "Unemployment and Families: A Review of Research" indicates that "psychological consequences of unemployment are less severe for women than for men" since it is "acceptable among women because of the traditional gendered division of work" (Ström, 2003, p. 402). Hence, being unresourceful may be the first stage of Earl's emasculation. Unexpectedly, though, he becomes a laid-back opportunist who wastes Doreen's earnings on drinks. He even visits the diner to "order something on the house" (Carver, p. 16), while "at night he [counts] her tips" (p. 19). Lacking efficient financial management, he shows puissance over the economy of the house. Instead helping with the

domestic labour, Earl shamelessly lets his sleepless wife “[send] the children off to school,” while he rests in bed (p. 17). Perhaps he considers those menial, 'feminine tasks' as unsuitable for a man like him.

In either case, being a scrounger with no mission nor achievements makes him insecure with regards to the opposite sex. In his own words, he had “never felt [Doreen's shape] was a problem before” (p. 17), but *after* men in suits (probably with stable jobs and some degree of success) inveigh against her, he feels his masculinity shake. About this, Josef Benson explains that “manhood is demonstrated for other men’s approval” and it is received from them as well (Benson, 2009, p. 81). Figuratively, he is sized up through their gaze and is degraded by being called a “joker” who likes “*their* quim fat” (Carver, p. 16). Once again, this emasculates him, reducing him to a laughing-stock in comparison with them. As a result, deploying his power through huffs and complaints to manipulate Doreen into losing weight is the quickest way in which he can regain his status in the social hierarchy of men.

Doreen is criticised for her body shape as a result of Earl's previous subjection to the male gaze. For having been deemed unworthy, he deplorably consents to the criterion of others who had probably been victims of other people’s gazes as well. As Carver shows, most members of society have, in some way or another, been affected by the traditional stereotypes enforced on them.

## **Conclusion**

As we have seen, the concept of the male gaze illustrates how men’s conceptions of women are often circumscribed to the fantasies they have of them. That stigmatisation diminishes them to a mere product for the pleasure of men. Similarly, men are also subjected to this gaze when they allow to be incised by people's stereotypical impressions of them. Moreover, the reason why Earl is undermined by those men is because they themselves have been brought under society's hackneyed gaze. In escalating motion, the partial thoughts other people may have of us does not only sway the vision we have of ourselves, but it can shape the way we treat loved ones as well.

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