

## Introduction

This thesis explores the representations of the female protagonist in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* and its television adaptation by BBC, investigating how "the techniques of vision" function in the two occasions to characterize the heroine. Based on the definition in the realm of visual studies, the techniques of vision refer to "the means or media by which images are produced and circulated" (Evans & Hall 4). They are the technical methods to visualize characters, whether they are embodied in the novel or on the screen. This thesis argues that both the novel and the adaptation of *Wives and Daughters* appropriate the mechanism of observation in presenting the heroine; nevertheless, the same mechanism functions in opposite directions in the two versions of representation. In Gaskell's novel, the use of visual techniques dwarfs the image of the heroine, attenuating her power of action; yet in the adaptation, visual techniques work in the direction of strengthening the heroine's self-image and fulfill her potential. Consequently, the images of the same heroine are different in the novel and the adaptation—whereas the novel visualizes a vulnerable image of the heroine as a girl-woman, whose character wavers between courage and dependency, the television adaptation presents an independent female protagonist, whose capability is fully developed, and whose autonomy remains intact.

My analysis follows the path that has been indicated by Jonathon Crary and Nancy Armstrong, who rethink via Michel Foucault the modern vision in a complex network of technology and power. Both Crary and Armstrong hold that the practice of vision is deeply related to the power of control, determining what is visible and what remains invisible. In *Techniques of the Observer* (1990), Crary discusses the process of normalization through vision. Crary enumerates several optical devices in the European history that came in different shapes and functions—they were invented either as aids to human vision, or as instruments that experimented on the capability

of the human eyes, ranging from *camera obscura* since the seventeenth century, to stereoscope, phenakistoscope, and photography in the nineteenth century. Following Foucault, Crary considers visual technology as both a product and a part of constitutive power. He argues that visual apparatus embodies the “sites of both knowledge and power that operate directly on the body of the individual” (7).

Nancy Armstrong is also concerned with how the power of vision influences the formation of subjectivity. In *Fiction in the Age of Photography* (1999), Armstrong analyzes how the reproducible images enhanced by photography and realist novels authorize each other, and together they create a classifying system based on vision.

Armstrong states:

As Victorian photography established the categories of identity—race, class, gender, nation, and so forth—in terms of which virtually all other people of the world could be classified, literary realism showed readers how to play the game of modern identity from the position of observers” (26).

In this paradigm of visual perception, images become the basic tools of identification: “individuals were hailed into various social categories, more by recognizing themselves in an image than, as Althusser assumes, by recognizing themselves as the target of ‘a verbal call or whistle’” (Armstrong 22). In other words, to find themselves a place in the symbolic order, the Victorians establish their identities based on vision—how they look similar to or different from others in the archive of images (19).

Based on Armstrong’s theory, it can be inferred that the practice of vision dictates certain kinds of female images as the visible, and thus the standard. It is through the circulation of realist novels and other visual media that the “standard” ways of representing women are circulated, and then reinforcing the stereotypical ways of seeing and reading. Although Armstrong focuses on the formation of

stereotypes in the Victorian period, I suggest that the practice of vision she proposes could be found not only in Gaskell's novel, but also in the modern television rendition of the novel. As I will demonstrate later, whereas the practice of vision produces a semi-independent female heroine in a nineteenth-century novel, the same practice rules out feminine images for the heroine in the contemporary adaptation, and instead focuses on female autonomy.

Sharing the same conviction with Crary and Armstrong that visual technology is subordinated to the larger part of cultural and social force, therefore, my concern is to examine how the practice of vision functions respectively in textual and visual representation, probing how the practice of looking manifests itself in different media—a novel and its television adaptation in this case—and how it affects the meaning production when shaping the heroine's image. The novel and its televised version are ostensibly different in their media and dates of creation. One, first serialized from 1864 to 1866, resorts to words to depict the story; the other, produced in 1999, relies on moving pictures to present the story. However, I suggest that these two works could be connected through the issue of observer—an indispensable role in the practice of looking. The followings are two reasons.

First of all, both Gaskell's novel and the television adaptation employ the mechanism of observer to present stories. In the framework of visual culture, an observer is one "who sees within a prescribed set of possibilities, one who is embedded in a system of conventions and limitations" (Crary 6). The observer does not refer to an individual or a specific character, but to a practice of looking under certain observation rules or conventions. It bears no name or identity, but simply represents a position of looking. Thus the technique of observation in Crary's sense is applicable not only in photography, but also in novel writing, and even in rendering stories on the screen. In the case here, both the novel and the adaptation make use of

the apparatus of observer: while the omniscient narrator of the novel is like a reporter who accounts to readers what he/she witnesses, the camera of the adaptation functions as a voyeur watching how the characters behave in or react to certain situations.

Besides, when exposed to the gaze of the observer, characters are like objects under scrutiny: whereas the novel uses language to visualize characters' facial expressions and manners, the adaptation uses camera to trace their reactions and movements.

Thus, even though the novel and the adaptation belong to different media of representation, they rely on the same mechanism to visualize characters.

Consequently, this legitimizes a study that focuses on the “compositionality” of the novel and adaptation—the arrangement of the elements in a scene that “dictates how an image is seen by its audience” (Rose 25).

Moreover, in spite of the time span separating the two, the novel and the adaptation could be regarded as the same product of modern visual techniques. Both critics mentioned above inspire us to locate the rise of modern visual experience in the nineteenth-century. According to Crary, it was a transitional period when photography was replacing the status of *camera obscura*—a time when the paradigm of perception was going through a drastic change. In the paradigm of *camera obscura*, there is a clear distinction between object, the site of representation, and human body as an observer.<sup>1</sup> However, when it is replaced by the paradigm of photography, the position of the observer conflates with the site of representation. As the observer sees the world through the camera lens, the reflection of the world is

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<sup>1</sup> *Camera obscura* is an optical device that allows the light travels through a little hole and projects an image on the wall of a darkened room, so that the observer in the room could look at the projected image as a referent to the reality. The image projected on the wall is treated as a copy of the world: it is a direct reflection of the world without the mediation of human beings. Under this circumstance, the observer's position is located outside the trajectory of the light from the exterior to the interior space—he or she does not intervene between the object and its reflection.

projected on the human eye directly, rather than on another site of representation, such as the wall in *camera obscura*. Therefore, since the site of representation is relocated from an exterior site to the observer's eyes, the process of representation became subject to fallible human body. As Crary puts it, the advent of photography marks a moment when vision "escapes from the timeless order of the *camera obscura* and becomes lodged in another apparatus, within the unstable physiology and temporality of the human body" (70). Consequently, unlike the image produced by *camera obscura*, which is a reflection of the world and is unmediated by human agency, the image taken by photography is a mediated one, and a result of human production.

The visual paradigm of photography depicted by Crary is radically different from perception habits in the ancient and medieval worlds, and becomes a prevailing practice throughout the modern time. As Nicholas Mirzoeff explains, "visual culture is new precisely because of its focus on the visual as a place where meanings are created and contested" (6). Armstrong also states that the visual experience created by photography is thoroughly modern, because there is a strong connection between vision and knowledge. This relation between vision and knowledge is not yet broken, as is the situation of several postmodern visual experiences, such as the simulacrum in Baudrillard's sense (Rose 8), or what Guy Debord called "the world of spectacle" ("Separation"). In the analysis here, although *Wives and Daughters* and its television adaptation are composed in different periods, they could be examined together under the same rubric of visual culture, in which the operation of visual techniques dominates the process of meaning generation.

Chapter one investigates the visual culture in Gaskell's time, arguing that the practice of vision is an important element in realist novels—it is a mechanism that determines the visuality of female characters. Firstly, this chapter will sketch a brief

history of visual technology, examining how the advent of photography impacts the Victorians' understanding of vision, arguing that photographic technology and positivist ideology reinforce each other, and together they contribute to a prevailing reliance on images, a belief that it is possible to achieve verisimilitude by visual technology. Then examining Victorian novels against this cultural background, I define the "photographic impulse"—the novel's propensity to visualize stories—as a driving force of realistic novels; several visual techniques in the novel, which are paralleled to the skills in photography, could be defined as the "photographic techniques of the novel." These visual-oriented techniques in realist novels, as Armstrong implies, would enhance the formation of stereotypical ways of seeing and reading female characters.

Chapter two probes how the visual techniques interact with narrative techniques of Gaskell's novel, resulting in an aesthetic of feminine vulnerability in terms of characterization of the heroine. As a novel of realism, *Wives and Daughters* is without doubt narrative in format. The sum of its narrative techniques—its plot sequences, narrating devices, and the structural design—aims at delineating the heroine's development from innocence to experience. However, based on Armstrong and Crary, the novel is also driven by what I term the photographic impulse—the novel's disposition to present stories with techniques identical to photographic representation: to frame images, capture details, and to produce photographic effects through the observer's eye. I will argue that due to the photographic hindrance to the narrative structure, Molly's image wavers between a capable woman and a vulnerable girl who needs guidance and protections. First, Molly's development is underlined with tensions: although the narrative framework attempts to push Molly toward matured womanhood, the visual techniques always emerge and thwart this purpose. Besides, in terms of the heroine's potential,

whereas the narrative technique attempts to present Molly's capability, the photographic impulse usually intervenes and tones down her endeavors. Whenever she manages to muster up courage to handle a critical situation single-handedly, there are descriptions that diminish her capability; even when she successfully tackles a problem, her triumph is countered by the plot that tones down her achievement. It seems that as the narrative technique pushes Molly toward maturation, the visual technique would often emerge and pull her back to a vulnerable state. And the effect of the pushing and pulling between the two techniques is that Molly's development becomes an incoherent process, and she never reaches the stage of self-fulfillment.

Chapter three investigates the operation of visual techniques in the novel, analyzing how they empower the heroine's image. It will analyze the compositionality of images to illustrate how the adaptation characterizes Molly as a lively and self-sufficient heroine. By means of techniques of *mise-en-scène* such as costumes, properties, image compositions, camera movements, and shot angles, the adaptation not only reinforces Molly's mental strength and physical health, but also brings out a vivacious image from her. And through several other visual techniques, such as spatial arrangements, lightings and outdoor settings, shot distance, as well as shot angles, the adaptation preserves the heroine's autonomy, and presents an equal power relationship between the heroine and her social companions.

We can see from this study how visual techniques function in textural and visual representation. Since visual techniques are embedded in the larger cultural and social force, they determine the visibility of certain social or cultural facts, and in this case, condition the characterization of the female protagonist. Therefore, after comparing the heroine's image in the novel and adaptation, I conclude that the major factor that contributes to the difference is the practice of visual techniques. In either case, the practice of looking is a coercive power that shapes the female character's

image that would conform to the dominant ideology of the time. In Gaskell's novel, the visual techniques function to hinder the heroine's development. But in the modern television rendition, the visual techniques work in another direction, which rules out vulnerable images of female characters—instead of turning the heroine into an icon of vulnerability, the visual techniques in the adaptation present an independent and autonomous female character.