

## “We All Want to Be Seen”: The Male Gaze, the Female Gaze and the Act of Looking as Metaphor in Emma Cline’s *The Girls*

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**Abstract:** Emma Cline’s 2016 novel *The Girls*, famously inspired by the Manson family and the murders committed by the group in 1969, is in fact a feminist bildungsroman. Its middle-aged protagonist-cum-narrator reflects not only on her own life and identity, but, most importantly perhaps, on what it means to grow up as a woman in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The present article centers on the ocular trope which Cline uses in her novel in order to showcase issues such as self-perception, self-worth and the shaping of young women’s identity. Focusing on the metaphorical dimensions of the act of looking, I propose to read Cline’s novel in light of Laura Mulvey’s seminal feminist theory of the male gaze and the opposite notion of the female gaze formulated by later feminist scholars. My analysis foregrounds those aspects of *The Girls* which make it a protest novel, denouncing the female condition in patriarchal societies and suggesting ways of opposing the objectification and indoctrination which lead to women being manipulated and victimized.

**Keywords:** Emma Cline, *The Girls*, Laura Mulvey, the male gaze, the female gaze, feminism, American novel

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In 2016, which saw the appearance of her much-publicized and much-discussed debut novel *The Girls*, Emma Cline was interviewed by *The Paris Review*. When asked about her work, inspiration and the ideas expressed in her bildungsroman, the young American author noted:

[As a teenager,] you start to reckon with the world around you, beyond the confines of your family, for the first time. I think it’s a time when people look around to see what other models there are for living. You’re susceptible to whoever presents the most charming model of living or lifestyle. I was also thinking a lot about the male gaze. And then I thought about what the female gaze might look like, what kind of objectification and self-objectification happens at that age—especially with this hyperawareness of other people’s appearances—when everything feels right on the surface. (Love)

Most of the novel’s action takes place in the late 1960s, the time when second-wave feminism gained momentum. Cline was born in 1989, when the second wave was nearing its end, but a new, third wave was about to begin, and published her first novel when the fourth wave of feminism was already in progress. Predictably, the women’s rights movement comes up in discussions of *The Girls*, a work written by a woman and dealing in large part with young members of her own sex. The interviewer’s comment on the attitude of the protagonist’s mother, “It’s like feminism hasn’t truly touched her yet”, prompts the writer to remark: “Somebody asked me before if I had read a lot about the feminist movement during that time, and what that moment meant in feminist history.... I feel like I encounter that personality [like the mother’s] a lot even

in our moment. It's interesting that her character may be dovetailed with a pre-feminist moment" (Love). The aim of the present article is to examine Cline's recent and therefore critically unexplored novel in light of the feminist theory at which she hints in the interview quoted above, with particular emphasis on the seminal notion of the male gaze. My analysis centers on how the female characters are shaped by the way the male characters look at them, in both the literal and figurative senses of the verb *look*, and, more importantly perhaps, how they perceive themselves and how their self-perception is affected by the perspective of other people, especially the men who surround them.

The very title of Cline's novel suggests that the author's focus is not only on youth, but also—or perhaps first and foremost—on the female experience. The eponymous "girls" are a group of very young women living on a Californian ranch. They are members of a commune or cult created by Russell Hadrick, a character modeled on Charles Manson. Unsurprisingly, the female devotees' infatuation with Russell culminates in a mass murder. *The Girls* is thus not only a bildungsroman, but also a roman à clef, set largely in the 1960s, often referred to as "the decade of protest" or "the decade of discontent." Of all the social, cultural and political developments that the period in question saw, the emergence of second-wave feminism seems to be particularly relevant to Cline's work. *The Girls* does not contain any direct references to the women's movement. Nevertheless, one cannot help reading it as a feminist protest novel whose author examines the female condition past and present. Most of the action takes place in the summer of 1969, the year of Nixon's Presidential inauguration, the Stonewall Riots, the first Moon landing, the beginning of American withdrawal from Vietnam, the "Vietnamization" of the war and the My Lai Massacre, the Manson murders, the Woodstock festival, but also the "Rights, Not Roses!" feminist demonstration in Washington, D.C. As the novel opens, Evie Boyd, the main character-cum-narrator, is fourteen, but the events are told by a now mature protagonist who looks back on her life from the perspective of the twenty-first century. Based on her own experience and that of the next generation of women, Evie tells a coming-of-age story. The focal point of her narrative is what "was" and—despite the achievements of second-, third- and even fourth-wave feminism—to a large extent still is "part of being a girl" (Cline 55). Cline's novel undertakes an unflinching examination of female as well as male behavior, male-female relationships, patriarchy, sexism and the way they shape women's destinies. Evie recalls the life-changing summer when she became involved with Hadrick's group, but she also reflects on her post-Hadrick life and observes the relationship between Julian, her friends' twenty-year-old son, and his teenage girlfriend Sasha.

Towards the end of the novel, Evie recalls a date she went on a few years after the fateful summer which indelibly marked her life:

The night an older man took me to a fancy restaurant when I wasn't even old enough to like oysters. Not yet twenty. The owner joined our table; and so did a famous filmmaker. The men fell into a heated discussion with no entry point for me. I fidgeted with my heavy cloth napkin, drank water. Staring at the wall.

'Eat your vegetables,' the filmmaker suddenly snapped at me. 'You're a growing girl.'

The filmmaker wanted me to know what I already knew. I had no power. He saw my need and used it against me.

My hatred for him was immediate. Like the first swallow of milk that's already gone off—rot strafing the nostrils, flooding the entire skull. The filmmaker laughed at me, and so did the others, the older man who would later place my hand on his dick while he drove me home. (Cline 350)

The scene is of course a textbook example of a situation in which a very young, unconfident woman is isolated, ignored, intimidated and ordered around by a group of older, more experienced, more powerful and richer men. Active and self-assured, the men fail to see her as an equal and a partner, instead objectifying her, assuming she has no mind, personality or opinion of her own and treating her largely as an ornament and sex object, passive and submissive. Inevitably vulnerable due to her sex and age, the woman is likely to be patronized and victimized.

There is, however, another reason why the passage in question is interesting for the purpose of the present analysis. Elsewhere in the novel, Cline uses a metaphor which emphasizes the connection between film and predatory male behavior: "I should have known that when men warn you to be careful, often they are warning you of the dark movie playing across their own brains" (286). The most dominant, forceful and aggressive of the three men featured in the restaurant scene happens to work in an industry which is notorious for perpetuating gender inequality and discrimination against women, who are underrepresented in the film business and stereotyped by it. Recent years have seen increasing denunciation of discriminatory practices ranging from the lack of worthwhile, non-decorative roles for women and ageism directed at actresses through the gender pay gap and the marginalization of female directors and producers to sexual harassment and violence. Cline reluctantly calls her work "a historical novel in that it's set in the past," specifying that she nevertheless "do[es]n't think of it as a historical novel" (Love). Contrary to claims that "[t]he novel's attempts to link the story of 1969... with questions of present-day ideology and manners seem a bit thin" (Wood), *The Girls* inscribes itself into the fourth wave of feminism, the first phase of modern feminism in which most women of the writer's generation can actively participate from its very beginning. The references to the film industry in the novel, though not very numerous, suggest the undeniable link between sexism and show business, confirmed by the Harvey Weinstein sex scandal, which occurred a year after Cline's novel was published and spurred the #Me Too movement. *The Girls* is, as its author would have it, "a timeless story" in the sense that its problematics are not strictly confined to one historical period, so that "you could access the truth that was at the core of it without getting too pinned down to the sixties" (Love).

*The Girls* strikes the reader as a literary work which is highly cinematic and would easily lend itself to being made into a film. A profile of Cline published in the popular press revealed her lack of interest in working on the script of the planned screen adaptation of her novel, but also the fact that she was a cinephile and that the research she had done when preparing to write her first novel included watching films dating from the 1960s and 1970s, namely Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* and Robert Altman's *3 Women* (Meltzer 164). Set in California, *The Girls* does not deal with the cinema per se, but contains several allusions to it. While Evie's own

connection with the film industry does not go beyond the disastrous restaurant date, her maternal grandmother is a retired Hollywood star, which, incidentally, works to the teenager's disadvantage, because it makes her interesting in the eyes of the Hadrick circle, supposedly antiestablishment, but in reality willing to mix with the rich and famous. Another cinematic allusion in Cline's novel is Evie's recollection of what her grandmother once said about her acting career: "All the other girls thought the director was making the choice. But it was rather me telling the director, in my secret way, that the part was mine" (119). The film industry, a field in which decision-makers are usually male and heterosexual, is thus presented as an arena on which the male element confronts the female one. While such a confrontation is more often than not uneven and asymmetrical for a woman, taking control through sheer willpower becomes a way of rising above the status of a passive object, regaining agency and counteracting the male gaze, the phenomenon I have chosen to focalize on in the present article.

The term *male gaze* was coined by British feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey six years after the pivotal events in *The Girls* took place. Published in the prestigious scholarly journal *Screen* in 1975, Mulvey's essay "Visual Cinema and Narrative Pleasure," in which she formulates the concept of the male gaze and elaborates on the phenomenon in a cinematic context, has received innumerable citations, gained wide academic as well as mainstream currency, entering popular consciousness, culture and language. Crucial to film studies and feminist theory, the concept has transcended the boundaries of the two disciplines it originated in and has been applied to, among other fields, literature. Relevant, as the present article demonstrates, to Cline's novel, the term *male gaze* originally denotes the way women are portrayed in film. They are presented from the viewpoint of the film director – in most cases a heterosexual man—and the protagonist—in many, if not most, cases a heterosexual man. The filmmaker/protagonist derives visual and sexual pleasure from being able to exercise the male gaze, as a result of which the woman under scrutiny is turned into a passive sex object. The man, by contrast, is active, dominant, powerful and in control. It must, however, be remembered that such a division of roles is not limited to the world of film:

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 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 leit-motif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. (Mulvey 11)

The male gaze, which reduces woman to being an exhibitionistic spectacle, is inextricably linked not only with the film industry or, more generally, with show business, but with patriarchal society in general (6).

Expounding the notion of the male gaze, Mulvey draws on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, concentrates on the psychological phenomena of scopophilia and voyeurism, and applies her scholarly instrumentarium to Alfred

Hitchcock's classics such as *Rear Window*, *Vertigo* and *Marnie*. *Rear Window* features a protagonist who spends his time peeping through the eponymous window and spying on his neighbors. L. B. Jefferies alias Jeff, played by James Stewart, is a successful international photojournalist, trapped in his cramped apartment by a leg fracture. In an attempt to combat boredom, he observes the inhabitants of a rather dingy tenement with the help of, among other things, a telephoto lens. The monotony of his convalescence is broken by visits from his nurse, Stella, and his girlfriend, Lisa Fremont, a beautiful, sophisticated Park Avenue socialite, who, it might be inferred, works in fashion as either a model or magazine editor. Despite the young woman's unquestionable love for him, Jeff believes that their lifestyles are incompatible and that a steady relationship with a glamorous, high-maintenance it-girl would put an end to his career. Lisa, impersonated by Grace Kelly, is frustrated by Jeff's reluctance to marry her and his opting for a no strings attached arrangement instead. When the protagonist starts suspecting that one of his neighbors has killed his wife, he drags both Lisa and Stella into an amateur investigation during which all three reach the height of voyeurism and put their own lives in danger. In her essay, Mulvey provides viewers of the film, whose storyline reads like an exciting mystery, with an insightful feminist and psychological interpretation:

In his analysis of *Rear Window*, Douchet takes the film as metaphor for the cinema. Jeffries [*sic*] is the audience, the events in the apartment block opposite correspond to the screen. As he watches, an erotic dimension is added to his look, a central image to the drama. His girlfriend Lisa had been of little sexual interest to him, more or less a drag, so long as she remained on the spectator side. When she crosses the barrier between his room and the block opposite, their relationship is re-born erotically. He does not merely watch her through his lens, as a distant meaningful image, he also sees her as a guilty intruder exposed by a dangerous man threatening her with punishment, and thus finally save [*sic*] her. Lisa's exhibitionism has already been established by her obsessive interest in dress and style, in being a passive image of visual perfection; Jeffries' [*sic*] voyeurism and activity have also been established through his work as a photo-journalist, a maker of stories and captor of images. However, his enforced inactivity, binding him to his seat as a spectator, puts him squarely in the phantasy position of the cinema audience. (15-16)

In *The Girls*, Evie is acutely aware of being eyed up by men, of being scrutinized and objectified. This is observable in the scene where she is introduced to Mitch Lewis, a repulsive music star, who will later deflower her and with whom the tragedy central to the novel is associated. In a moment of crisis, Mitch turns to Russell, who ingratiates himself with the successful musician by pimping out the girls from his circle to him. An aspiring but untalented singer, Russell hopes that Mitch will advance his musical career. When this does not happen, an infuriated Russell sends three girls and one boy from the ranch on a killing spree. Mitch narrowly escapes being killed, but four other people, including a small child, are brutally murdered. "Mitch studied me with a questioning, smug smile," the grown-up Evie remembers. "Men did it so easily, that immediate parceling of value. And how they seemed to want you to collude on your own judgment" (Cline 193). Mulvey reminds us that Freud "associated scopophilia with taking other

people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (8). For Lewis, Evie is not just easy prey for sexual abuse, but also an object to be looked at, dissected, assessed, classified, fixed and commodified, as the businesslike expression “parceling of value” suggests. In addition, she is expected to subject herself to the male gaze, to “play to” it, as Mulvey would put it, to be submissive and eager to please, to conspire with the beholder. Most importantly, however, the fragment cited above implies the connection between being looked at and being judged, between the male gaze and a woman’s self-perception and self-esteem, an important subject in Cline’s novel.

“[W]hat’s universal about adolescence,” Cline points out in another interview, is the “longing to be seen, to be noticed” (Salazar-Winspear). Even the mass murder committed by the young people from the ranch is indirectly associated with the process of attention-seeking, for which attracting others’ gaze and being looked at is a metaphor in the novel. When one of Hadrick’s girls is arrested for a petty crime, she confesses to the massacre in order to impress a fellow inmate. She does so because “[w]e all want to be seen” (Cline 352). In *The Girls*, Cline often gives prominence to the acts of looking and seeing, the beholder not necessarily being a man. The novel opens with a depiction of the epiphany Evie has when she first sees nineteen-year-old Suzanne Parker, the most charismatic of all the young women on the ranch, accompanied by two other hippiesque girls from Hadrick’s circle. An heiress who has run away from home, Suzanne—rather than Russell—is the one who really attracts Evie and is the reason why the protagonist joins the commune. From the moment she first lays eyes on her, Evie is fascinated with Suzanne, whom she will later fall for and have sex with:

I *looked up* because of the laughter, and kept *looking* because of the girls.

I *noticed* their hair first, long and uncombed. Then their jewelry catching the sun. The three of them were far enough away that I *saw* only the periphery of their features, but it didn’t matter—I knew they were different from everyone else in the park....

I *studied* the girls with a shameless, blatant gape: it didn’t seem possible that they might *look over* and *notice* me. (Cline 3-4, italics mine)

While in this particular case the beholder is female and the accumulation of verbs denoting visual perception underlines the importance of the process around which the passage in question revolves, the act of looking itself is by no means empowering. Evie finds it hard to believe that someone she considers interesting might find her interesting as well, that someone she gazes at might return her gaze in both literal and metaphorical terms. The ocular trope plays a key role in Evie’s account of her first meeting with the ranch girls, which is continued later in the novel. Feeling compelled to watch them, the protagonist follows the three young women with her eyes, which culminates in her and Suzanne making eye contact. Evie looks on in awe as the insouciant trio commits minor transgressions, their brashness only bringing out what she believes to be her own deficiency. In fact, the opening of *The Girls* betrays what the later section dealing with the same situation confirms, namely that the essence of Evie’s personality is a mixture of insecurity, self-consciousness, lack of self-confidence and the resultant impressionability. Evie’s story is a story of “what happen[s] to weak girls”



(96), especially those who cannot rely on their families. "Suzanne *saw* the weakness in me, lit up and obvious: she knew what happened to weak girls" (96, italics mine), Evie reflects with hindsight.

The acts of looking and seeing are important in Cline's novel because one of the problems it is concerned with is the way what other people "see in us" determines our self-image and self-worth. "And what had the girl *seen* when she *looked at* me?" (Cline 41, italics mine) is the question still rolling around inside Evie's brain when she recalls "the first time [she] ever *saw* Suzanne" (41, italics mine). Immediately after their first encounter, the protagonist starts associating Suzanne's supposed perception of her with the way she was probably perceived by a boy whose attention she tried vainly to attract in the street on the same day:

For a moment, I tried to *see* myself through the *eyes* of the girl with the black hair [Suzanne], or even the boy in the cowboy hat, *studying* my features for a vibration under the skin. The effort was *visible* in my face, and I felt ashamed. No wonder the boy had seemed disgusted: he must have *seen* the longing in me. *Seen* how my face was blatant with need, like an orphan's empty dish. And that was the difference between me and the black-haired girl—her face answered all its own questions. (41-42, italics mine)

Evie tends to see herself through other people's eyes, in which she hopes to find confirmation of her value. Whether they are a man's or a woman's eyes, the erotic component is present: this is the case with both the anonymous boy whom she finds attractive and Suzanne, whom she soon develops a sexual interest in and who electrifies her from the very beginning. Self-confidence and self-perception are intertwined with sexuality in Cline's novel.

In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey establishes a direct connection between the visual and the erotic, between heterosexual male desire and the act of looking. Adolescent Evie is acutely aware of this interrelation, having leafed through men's magazines containing photographs of nude women found at her family home. When she recalls being introduced to Russell Hadrick, she also remembers that at the time "[s]ex was still colored by the girls in [her] father's magazines, everything glossy and dry. About *beholding*" (Cline 116, italics mine). Conscious of the fact that the other girls on the ranch are Russell's lovers, Evie starts to contemplate becoming sexually intimate with him and the scene in which they meet ends in her performing fellatio on Hadrick. Like the scene of her first encounter with Suzanne, it is replete with ocular references. Much is made of Russell's eyes and the way he looks at Evie, who is impressed by the fact that "[h]is *eyes* d[o]n't seem to water, or waver, or flick away" (117, italics mine) and convinced that "he t[akes] [her] in, like he want[s] to *see* all the way through" (117, italics mine). The power of Russell's piercing gaze is reinforced by the writer's use of metaphors and similes, such as "his *eyes* avalanch[ed] over me" (119, italics mine) or "[h]is *eyes* were like hot oil" (118, italics mine), both rhetorical figures having a sexual subtext and equating the act of looking with the sex act or at least suggesting that the former is a prelude to the latter. The way Hadrick looks at her leads to Evie "let[ting] [herself] feel like Suzanne, the kind of girl a man would startle at, would want to touch" (118). Being looked at by a man—in this case,

Russell, whom Evie admires for being the person he seems to be, but also because the other girls on the ranch, in particular Suzanne, admire him—is a mark and means of elevation, of being anointed as both sexual and human being. “[P]ower and sex ... are themes I’m really interested in” (Salazar-Winspear), Cline declares; *The Girls* shows how male power is exercised through sex.

Hadrick’s gaze as well as other aspects of his personality intimidate the protagonist, but his interest in her simultaneously flatters her, making her feel more attractive, sophisticated and sexier. Penetrating and overwhelming, the look in Russell’s eyes also boosts her self-assurance and self-esteem, and, most importantly perhaps, connotes the acceptance which Evie, an emotionally neglected child from a broken home, craves. In no time at all she comes to believe that Hadrick possesses mind-reading skills, which is disquieting, but does not prevent her from associating the ranch with a sense of security and belonging. In her comments on *The Girls*, Cline makes it clear that, contrary to what might be expected of a novel inspired by Manson and his “family,” Hadrick is not central to the story, referring to him instead as “sort of a pathetic character” and stating that “[she] liked the idea of the Manson character and cult leader being peripheral” (Meltzer 164). The novel itself, however, hints at the mechanism for attracting young people to cults and communes, which is based on brainwashing and indoctrination, and of which Russell’s transfixing gaze, which effortlessly lures Evie, is perhaps symbolic. Throughout their first encounter, which turns from social to sexual, Hadrick closely observes the protagonist and makes a point of maintaining eye contact with her. He also strokes her ego by claiming that her sharp eyes are—like his—a sign of superior intelligence. The power of Russell’s male gaze, accompanied by verbal clichés, serves to manipulate his young female victim, make her believe and do what he wants her to without any resistance on her part. Interestingly enough, Cline combines the mechanisms pointed out by the feminist theory I draw on in the present analysis and indoctrination when, in the interview referenced earlier in this article, she describes her own younger self as “[feeling] indoctrinated into this male gaze [because] [y]ou absorb it in this almost thoughtless way” (Love).

Explaining why Russell Hadrick is not the prime object of her writerly attention, Cline notes: “The men in this book are sort of unimportant even though they set things in motion. ... It’s really about the shifting relationships of the girls” (Meltzer 164). Towards the end of the novel, Evie makes a statement which proves Cline’s point:

No one had ever *looked at* me before Suzanne, not really, so she had become my definition. Her *gaze* softening my center so easily that even photographs of her seemed aimed at me, ignited with private meaning. It was different from Russell, the way she *looked at* me, because it contained him, too: it made him and everyone else smaller. We had been with the men, we had let them do what they wanted. But they would never know the parts of ourselves that we hid from them—they would never sense the lack or even know there was something more they should be looking for. (Cline 348, italics mine)

While the above declaration is, of course, one of the many marks of Evie’s undeniable affection for Suzanne, which even knowledge of the atrocious crimes the latter has



committed cannot fully erase, it also goes beyond one particular love story or even beyond the more general realm of amorous and sexual fascination. It is in fact a statement on the importance of female understanding, compassion, solidarity and support in a world ruled and dominated by men, who all too often mistreat women and even more often fail to take the trouble to understand them. Inherent in Evie's statement is the belief that women have a secret garden to which men have no access and that members of her own sex form a community from which they should perhaps attempt to draw strength. The male gaze stands in sharp contrast to the way Suzanne looks at her, unique and incomparable to anything else. Despite this uniqueness, Suzanne's gaze is extended to women in general: "Girls are the only ones who can really give each other close attention, the kind we equate with being loved. They *noticed* what we want *noticed*" (34, italics mine), the protagonist-cum-narrator observes. There can be no doubt that Suzanne does not care for Evie the way Evie cares for her. Nevertheless, they are both unloved and both become devoted to one person, who turns out to be the wrong one, Suzanne's blind attachment to Russell paralleling Evie's attachment to her. The difference is that Russell pushes Suzanne to commit murder, thereby bringing out the worst in her, turning her into a monster and ruining her life. By contrast, Suzanne herself is protective of the younger girl: just before the mass murder is committed, she throws Evie out of the car which will take members of Hadrick's group to the future crime scene, thereby preserving her innocence or what is left of it. In a hellish scheme of things for which patriarchy and the subjugation of women are at least partially responsible, female care and solidarity turn out to be the remedies.

*The Girls* is a reflection on why women let men dominate them, both in the past and nowadays. Cline, born twenty years after the second wave of feminism, wonders why men all too often succeed in taking control of women. Additionally, she wonders why this is also the case with women whose male partners have little to offer and lack strong personalities. At the root of the problem lies patriarchal culture, which breeds unassertive girls who grow into unassertive women. The reason why Russell Hadrick manages to manipulate the girls who surround him is simple: "Already he'd become an expert in female sadness—a particular slump in the shoulders, a nervous rash. A subservient lilt at the end of sentences, eyelashes gone soggy from crying" (Cline 125). Russell prompts them to do things which are first disgusting or antisocial and then atrocious. The truth is, however, that he is only a catalyst, because the fault is an inherent one. In the essay on which I draw in the present article, Mulvey points out woman's patriarchal positioning as a castrated, penisless and, consequently, immanently deficient being (6-7). When Suzanne and two other girls from the ranch committed mass murder, "[t]hey didn't have very far to fall—I knew just being a girl in the world handicapped your ability to believe yourself" (Cline 282). The girls Russell attracts may be skinny college dropouts neglected by their parents, but the problem extends to young women in general.

While it is true that "[i]n Cline's depiction, Russell's cult has special allure for young women who lack the power and confidence to seize the freedom that feminism is preparing for them" (Wood), the advances in women's rights which the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen fail to answer all the problems. When one of her interviewers delicately suggests that the female characters' predicament may be

due to the fact the novel is set half a century ago, Cline replies: “[I]n the contemporary frame around the story that’s set in the sixties there’s also a young female character, so by putting those two things together I did wanna think a lot about what has changed and what hasn’t” (Salazar-Winspear). Elsewhere, the American novelist remarks: “I think teenage girls today and societies are more aware of these issues facing women, and there’s a little bit more social structure in place to protect women. But I think we see gendered and sexual violence all the time, I think there’s a lot of similarities, I wish it was better but I’m not sure that it is” ([www.foyles.co.uk](http://www.foyles.co.uk)). Many decades after her involvement with Hadrick’s circle, middle-aged Evie observes Sasha. The meek and mild teenager lets her boyfriend Julian, a failure and a sociopath, humiliate and brutalize her in both public and intimate situations. Evie’s conclusion is that of the novel itself:

Poor Sasha. Poor girls. The world fattens them on the promise of love. How badly they need it, and how little most of them will ever get. The treacled pop songs, the dresses described in the catalogs with words like ‘sunset’ and ‘Paris.’ Then the dreams are taken away with such violent force; the hand wrenching the buttons of the jeans, nobody looking at the man shouting at his girlfriend on the bus. (Cline 149)

Patriarchal culture lures women with romantic mirages, which are in fact a cover-up for male vulgarity and brutality. Sentimental myths allow men to snub, abuse and exploit the women they supposedly love. The possible female answers to such a state of affairs include, the American author seems to suggest, the cultivation of a sense of self-worth, which inevitably boosts self-confidence and assertiveness, becoming a means of protection.

Mulvey equates the aim of her seminal essay with “the thrill that comes from leaving the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, or daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire” (8). Since the publication of “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” the notion of the male gaze, a patriarchal phenomenon par excellence, has found its pro-female counterpart. The twin terms are binary opposites, the female gaze being defined as “[a] recent feminist modification of Laura Mulvey’s definition of ‘male gaze’ or the notion that classic cinema positions the male as voyeur and the woman as static, passive, subject-less object of his gaze” (Boles and Hoeveler 123). While the concept of the male gaze, on which I draw in the present article, is used by numerous scholars and critics, it is associated first and foremost with Mulvey and her landmark essay. The female gaze, by contrast, is, so to speak, multiauthored and is more of a collective term for a set of scholarly and critical propositions. As Boles and Hoeveler point out, “[n]oting that women also view films, recent feminist film critics have proposed that women take pleasure in viewing similar scenes of men as sex objects or objects of violence and beating” (123). Basic though the above definition may be, it nevertheless suggests opposition to the female submissiveness and objectification the notion of the male gaze entails. In the words of Mary Ann Doane, the alternative to “the masochism of over-identification and the narcissism of becoming one’s own object of desire” may be found through ways “to manufacture a distance from the

image, to generate a problematic within which the image is manipulable, producible and readable by the woman" (qtd. in Boles and Hoeveler 124). Whatever its particular definitions, in modern academic discourse, as many other, more recent scholarly studies demonstrate, the female gaze stands for, broadly speaking, the female point of view, as opposed to the male heterosexual one.

Cline's own use of the term *female gaze*, cited earlier in this article, appears somewhat problematic in the context of the above explication, because it associates the phenomenon with "objectification and self-objectification," thereby implying that the female gaze as she understands it is largely molded by the male one. As such, the female gaze would simply be an extension of the male gaze, the result of the male-generated image being superimposed on young women's self-image, a self-definition which is really the effect of being defined by somebody else. While, as we have seen, this is certainly the case with the protagonist of *The Girls* as well as, it may be argued, with other female characters in the novel, such an understanding of the concept brings it closer to the masochistic and narcissistic attitude which Doane does not see as recommendable since it complies with the male gaze. The American scholar proposes that women try "to see in a different way" (qtd. in Boles and Hoeveler 124). Significantly, this is also what Cline does in *The Girls*. Most bildungsromane—especially classics of the genre—deal with the growing-up of a man. In *The Girls*, the hero is replaced by a heroine. Not only does the author focus on the growing-up of women, but she also adopts a pro-female and feminist perspective. As a reviewer puts it, "[o]ne of the best things in 'The Girls,' in fact, is its alert vision of the way that gender structures Evie's life... [as] she herself is learning to be noticed, drifting through gendered time and space" (Wood). Cline argues that at a very early age girls are made to face the fact that they are minor characters in the narratives of life. All too often, the major characters are men. In addition, they are the ones who actually write the narratives they feature in. Crucial in this respect is the metaphor of the waiting room, again combined with the metaphors inherent in the acts of seeing and being seen: "I waited to be told what was good about me. I wondered later if this was why there were so many more women than men at the ranch. All that time I had spent readying myself, the articles that taught me life was really just a waiting room until someone noticed you—the boys had spent that time becoming themselves" (Cline 28). The essential belief that informs the young American writer's novelistic debut is that women should reject passivity and regain agency, thereby reducing their vulnerability and the risk of victimization. They should, in short, stop waiting and being looked at and defined, and start acting, looking at the world critically and defining both themselves and the world around them.

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