Redeploying The Male Gaze: A Feminist Mythological Reading of Turgenev's "First Love"

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Across different time periods and countries, two men write two stories: a Greek god rapes a beautiful woman in a temple; a man degrades a vivacious woman with physical and emotional abuse until she becomes hollow. Both Greek mythology's Medusa and Ivan Turgenev's Zinaida Zasyekina from his short story "First Love" are female characters constructed to serve the male gaze, which stands in for the paradox of male fear and desire. Turgenev's "First Love" tells the story of a lively, intelligent young girl surrounded by older male suitors—including the narrator. By the end of the story, however, it is revealed that Zinaida has been engaging in an affair with the narrator's father, an affair that ultimately strips her of her autonomy, boldness, and power. In this essay, I will explore the sovereignty available for female characters in nineteenth century Russian literature through their construction under the male gaze. My argument will be situated in contrast to Medusa, who reflects classic or archetypical portrayals of the male gaze. Depending on the historical context, Medusa is either a victim or villain. But to what extent does she claim power through her victimhood? In this paper, I will use Medusa to explore Turgenev's Zinaida Zasyekina from "First Love." Ultimately, I will demonstrate how an actualization under the male gaze allows female characters to redeploy male desire for their own self-interest.

The male gaze produces a female character and works to subjugate her through that production. She is produced to serve male desire and imprisoned by these expectations. Both Medusa and Zinaida are constructed by the male-gaze. Upon first reading, both characters crumble under this actualization: Medusa

doomed as both monster and temptress and Zinaida doomed as both virginal bachelorette and faithful maiden. Yet both women defy these impossible expectations by seizing emancipatory opportunities. It is because of their production under the male gaze, and not in spite of it, that each character is able to weaponize male desire for her own power and control. Medusa and Zinaida redeploy male desire in the three distinct realms of the physical, the emotional, and the intellectual. In each realm, both characters use their manufacturing under the male gaze to claim agency. Ultimately, an actualization under the male gaze enables Zinaida to reject victimhood. Turgenev employs the male gaze to challenge the process of fictionalization: he has created a fictionalized character with the ability to reject the grounds of her creation.

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Medusa weaponizes her physical body, attractive to the male gaze, to reclaim her power. Susan Bowers' academic project, "Medusa and the Female Gaze," cites academic Annis Pratt's views on the process through which the male gaze dehumanizes Medusa: "Myths in which heroes conquer dragons and gorgons and snakes and other monstrous figures are essentially stories of 'riddance' in which the beautiful and powerful women of the pre-Hellenic religions are made to seem horrific and then raped, decapitated, or destroyed." The need to conquer women compels Greek myth to produce Medusa as monstrous as means of justifying violence against her. Yet Medusa uses this urge to create a lustful paradox by maintaining both her beauty and her horror. Bowers defines Medusa as both "feminine and fragile," maintaining a "juxtaposition of her extraordinary beauty and her horror." By infusing beauty with horror, Medusa makes herself irresistible. She targets both male lust and the male need to conquer to attract her enemies. It is Medusa's production under the male gaze that enables her to redeploy male desire for her own physical power.

Zinaida Zasyekina from Turgenev's "First Love" is also able to exert physical control over the men around her because of her production under a physical male gaze. Zinaida is produced by a lustful male gaze: "so delicate were the features," describes the narrator, "her sumptuous golden hair, the pure nape of her neck, her sloping shoulders and her soft, placid bosom." Yet, like Medusa, Zinaida is imprisoned by a paradox of physical lust and physical threat. While her charm lures the male suitors to her, it is her harnessing of the male need to conquer her body that enables her to exert power. Zinaida controls her male suitors with just a tap of her fingers; "The young men offered their foreheads so willingly," the narrator says, "that I nearly gave a cry of astonishment and pleasure and would have given anything in the world, I believe, if only those charming fingers had tapped me on the forehead as well." Zinaida's paradoxical construction of horror and lust is most apparent in her spiritual apparition that both haunts and attracts the narrator. "The image of the young girl still floated in front of me," he says in one passage, and in another: "The image of Zinaida continued to dwell in triumph in my heart." Through her apparition, Zinaida exerts

such a powerful control over the narrator that her spirit remains with him even when she is corporeally absent.

Zinaida claims agency through her understanding of the male desire for physical superiority. This securing of agency is demonstrated when Zinaida uses pain to subjugate one of her male suitors, Lushin. The narrator recounts that she "occasionally took a particularly malicious pleasure in making him feel that he was in her hands...'All right, then! Give me your hand and I'll stick a needle in it ... !' Lushin went red, turned away, bit his lip, but ended by offering his hand. She stuck in a needle and he did start laughing... and she laughed too, forcing in the needle fairly deeply and looking him in the eyes, which darted about in a helpless way." By using pain as a humiliation tactic, Zinaida exerts physical control. She constantly commands the men: when to meet, what games to play, who should have the upper hand. "'Write the ticket, I tell you,' the young princess repeated. 'Why all this rebelliousness? Monsieur Voldemar is with us for the first time and so the rules don't apply to him today. No more complaints. I just want you to write it out.' The Count shrugged his shoulders, but humbly bowed his head, took the pen in his white, ringed-deck hand, tore off a piece of paper and began to write on it.'" The men offer little in the way of physical resistance; they are putty in her hands. Zinaida targets the male relationship between physical lust and fear of physical weakness. Ultimately, it is her knowledge and subversion of her production under the male gaze that enables her to exercise corporeal control.

Additionally, Medusa targets the emotional male gaze to exert emotional control over her enemies. According to Freud, the Medusa-head was constructed to represent castration fears. By slaying Medusa, as Theodore Reik argues in his essay "Modern Medusa,"Greek heroes are able to assuage their emotional fears, as "decapitation often replaces castration in neurotic fears." By dominating Medusa, Greek heroes are able to claim emotional control over these castration fears. But Medusa is ultimately able to target this need to defeat castration fears for her own power by emotionally luring her enemies to her. Medusa uses the paradox of erotic and castration fears to her own advantage: "In the Romance of the Rose, for example, Perseus arms himself 'with the mirror of reason to resist the dangerously feminine, to neutralize the erotic power that threatens to immobilize him.'" Medusa understands the power that male desire gives her. While her physical control lies in the need of men to physically conquer, here Medusa targets the male desire to emotionally conquer perceived threats to his masculinity. It is this emotional drive that allows Medusa to lure and ultimately petrify her enemies, a further demonstration of her understanding and subsequent manipulation of the male gaze.

Likewise, Zinaida employs the male gaze to exert emotional control over the men around her. Zinaida understands the emotional implications embedded in her identity as single maiden. Her winning suitor achieves emotional domination, while the losers risk emotional demasculinization. Zinaida uses the fear of the latter outcome to toy with the men around her, wielding humiliating tactics to control her suitor Malevsky. In a tense scene, after Malevsky offends her, Zinaida orders him to leave. "I've never given your Excellency the right to be

rude and I therefore ask you to leave," she tells him. "'For heaven's sake, I hadn't expected anything like this,' responds Malevsky. 'There was nothing in what I said, I think... It didn't enter my head to insult you... Forgive me.' Zinaida encompassed him with a chill glance and chilly smiled. 'Stay if you wish,' she said with a careless gesture of the hand. 'Monsieur Voldemar and I have no occasion to be annoyed. You enjoy stinging people, then do so to your heart's content.'" While Malevsky apologizes profusely, the narrator remarks "that a real queen could not have shown an impudent fellow the door with greater adroitness than she did." Zinaida triumphs; Malevsky is humiliated.

Zinaida, with her "eyebrows lifted in amusement", wields taut emotional control over her male suitors. "I'm a coquette, I'm heartless, I'm an actress by nature," she tells Lushin. Zinaida leers, pouts, flirts, and giggles until each man is trapped in a unique chokehold. The narrator recounts his first visit to Zinaida's home, when Belovzorov brings Zinaida a kitten: "'A kitten!' cried Zinaida and, jumping up from her chair, threw the ball of wool into [his] lap and dashed out." It is this childlike joy, reminiscent of Christmas morning frivolity, that specifically targets the infantilizing nature of male subjugation. Zinaida employs the male desire for a little girl's naiveté for her own emotional control. She dismisses the kitten just as quickly as she coos over it. "Zinaida stood up and, turning to the maid, said indifferently: 'Take him away.'" The emotional control of this interaction is summed up in a few short words by Belovzorov. To the princess, he says: "Your word is my command." The narrator describes being under a spell, a magnetic force drawing him to expose his vulnerability and trust Zinaida completely. "I was ordered to tell her my secret," he recounts during a game. When Zinaida stabs Maidanov with the needle, she tightens her emotional grip on him. "You'll feel ashamed in front of this young man," she says. "You'll feel pain, but still, Mister Truth-teller, you'll laugh!" Zinaida targets the shame of demasculinization to subvert her suitors. She uses her feminine identity of playful game-master to assert dominance. In all of these ways, Zinaida redeploys the emotional male gaze for her own self-interest.

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Lastly, Medusa uses the male desire for intellectual superiority to assert agency. She understands her construction under male morbid curiosity. "The dream interests us not only as a modern variation of the mythological form of the Gorgon's head, but also as an individual analogy to the myth-producing imagination of ancient people," writes Reik. "We conceive of myths as of dreams of the masses, of collective productions of the people in which their unconscious wishes and fears are expressed." Medusa, a "widely-recognized symbol of divine, female wisdom" understands that her continued replication as a villainous symbol under the male gaze stems from the male desire for intellectual understanding. She uses this intellectual desire to compel her enemies to look. "According to Hazel Barnes, 'it was not the horror of the object at it which destroyed the victim but the fact that his eyes met those of Medusa looking at him.'" By looking, Medusa is able to intellectually reconstruct

herself; she claims agency by becoming a "Looker" along with her enemies. Bowers asserts that "The 'Look' is so disturbing because it constitutes judgment of the self outside the self, judgment which can neither be controlled nor even known precisely." Instead of embracing the identity of a submissive animal in a cage at the zoo, Medusa uses the intellectual male gaze to encourage eye contact, thus petrifying her victims. It is again her understanding of the male gaze from which she was constituted that allows her to redeploy male intellectual desire for her own power.

Zinaida, with the same self-knowledge of her construction, is able to exert intellectual control over the men around her. With her "intelligent half-closed eyes," she uses her education and sharp wit to control her suitors' thoughts. "Listen," she tells the narrator, "'You don't know me properly yet. I'm the strangest kind of person: I always want people to tell me the truth... you've always got to tell me the truth and do what I say" . It is this intellectual assertion that convinces the narrator to do what she says; Zinaida's orders are situated on a strong intellectual foundation. She converses in French with the narrator's father, reads in the garden, and meticulously plots her game for control and amusement. She compels each male suitor to assert his intellectual power. "I wanted to show her that she was not dealing with a boy," the narrator recounts, which leads him to adopt "as far as possible a worldly-wise and serious look."

Zinaida is an intellectual puppeteer: "she understands everything, she sees everything," and uses it all to her advantage. Her intellectual hold is strongest over the poet Maidanov. "He strove to assure her," says the narrator, "that he adored her, wrote endless verses in her honor and declaimed them to her with a kind of natural and yet sincere enthusiasm". Maidanov's desire for Zinaida urges him to produce intellectual gifts for her, his poetry. She not only receives this intellectual labor but uses her own education to quietly subjugate him. The narrator recounts: "She didn't entirely trust him and, after listening to his outpourings, made him read some Pushkin 'in order to clear the air.'" Zinaida wields her education as a weapon, using her vocabulary and poetic knowledge to convince Maidanov to play along with her games. "Maidanov," she commands him, "as a poet you should be magnanimous and surrender your ticket to Monsieur Voldemar, so that he'll then have two chances rather than one." Zinaida ultimately targets the male desire to be intellectually superior for her own power.

It is in this exertion of intellectual power that Zinaida ultimately challenges her own fictionalization. Turgenev is explicitly aware of the role the male gaze has in constructing Zinaida. By confining her to one perspective, Turgenev gives Zinaida the power to reject her own construction, or, at the very least, redeploy it for her own self-interest. Turgenev does not endorse but instead challenges Zinaida's actualization by the male characters in "First Love," presenting emancipatory opportunities for a woman in a story about the loss of free-will. Both Medusa and Zinaida Zasyekina are products of male desire, male fear, male needs. Yet both women subtly challenge their own fictionalization and subsequent replication by the reader. By employing the male gaze, Turgenev arms his primary female character with the power to challenge her own construction.

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