

## **Beneficial Blindness: Literary Representation and the So-Called Positive Stereotyping of People with Impaired Vision**

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### **Abstract**

Though a critical response to negative stereotyping becomes intuitive for people who strive to be unprejudiced in their attitudes, so-called positive stereotypes remain frequently unchallenged or even unnoticed. On this premise the paper examines the “positive” stereotyping of people with impaired vision that is perpetuated by Anglophone literature. The resulting myth is found to be somewhat paradoxical, for far from being positive, the idea of beneficial blindness can serve only to diminish the talent and achievements of people with impaired vision. The paper is relevant to disability studies as well as literary studies because it is through critical reading that the myths and stereotypes of “blindness” are defused. Indeed, it is a deficiency in the taxonomy of approaches to literary studies that has enabled the myths and stereotypes to flourish for so long.

## Introduction

In ancient times impaired vision was considered a fundamentally debilitating condition, confining its bearers to death or a life of beggary, but even then there were exceptions to prove the rule. In Israel, for example, due to a supposedly immense store of memorised knowledge, people with impaired vision from the “higher” strata of society were hailed as living libraries (Kirtley, 1975). Though admittedly not in a manner that is as overt as is the ascription of asexuality, in animation, animalisation, obliviousness, uselessness and so on, the idea of a living library is itself objectifying for people with impaired vision. This historical detail illustrates the fundamental point that alterity can seem positive, that it is not always overtly negative:

The Other is invested with all of the qualities of the “bad” or the “good.” The “bad” self, with its repressed sadistic impulses, becomes the “bad” Other; the “good” self/object, with its infallible correctness, becomes the antithesis to the flawed image of the self, the self out of control. The “bad” Other becomes the negative stereotype; the “good” Other becomes the positive stereotype. The former is that which we fear to become; the latter, that which we fear we cannot achieve. (Gilman, 1985, p. 20)

People with impaired vision experience these “positive” stereotypes regularly, the content being characteristically sensory, artistic or intellectual (Kirtley, 1975). A popular myth about musical genius, for example, is illustrated in a biography of the late Ray Charles: “Ray had authority. A guy who can’t see, rehearsing a big band in a tiny room, and he knew if one cat was playing a wrong note. He could hear everybody at once, the ensemble and every little thing. There was no way he could not be in control” (Lydon, 1999, pp. 100-101). These assertions will be analysed in the conclusion, but the point to note here is that while it is through negative stereotypes that people with impaired vision are predominantly depicted, the “positive” formation is by no means rare. Indeed, the paper will refer to a sample of 30 works of Anglophone literature that perpetuates positive stereotyping in relation to employment, the senses, reality and sexuality, the analysis of which reveals not only details that are erroneous but effects that are psychosocially negative.

## **Employment**

The depictions of Beneficial Blindness that pertain to issues of employment fall into two ostensibly antithetical sub-categories: first, the negative characters who have little or nothing with which to occupy their

time; and second, the positive characters who thrive without effort in whatever they do.

Dramatic illustration of the first subcategory is provided in *The Well of the Saints*, for when addressing his fellow sighted characters the saint refers to Mary and Martin Doul by saying, “Men who are dark a long while and thinking over queer thoughts in their heads, aren’t the like of simple men, who do be working every day, and praying, and living like ourselves” (Synge, 1905/1996, p. 103). The difference between the “queer”, “thinking”, blind characters and their “simple”, “working”, sighted counterparts is marked, as is the way in which the saint associates himself with the latter by addressing them with the pronoun “ourselves”. Such differentiation (see also Stevenson, 1883/1962) contributes to the way in which the mere mention of a “blind man” can conjure up the image of a beggar (Monbeck, 1973). Of course the historicity of the representation cannot be ignored, but nor can the fact that a 21<sup>st</sup>-century uncritical reading would degrade those people with impaired vision who now work in a wide variety of jobs, including Stone Mason, Lawyer, Chef, Futures Trader, Computer Programmer, Script Reader, Small Business Manager and Security Guard (RNIB, 2005), as well as writer, rehabilitation officer, piano tuner, musician, aromatherapist, social worker, teacher, lecturer and so on.

That said, in so far as three out of four people with impaired vision are presently unemployed (RNIB, 2005), there is a kernel of truth in the unemployment stereotype. The problem is that literary representation has tended to situate the cause of this unemployment in the individual rather than society. In *The Well of the Saints*, for example, when Timmy asserts that Martin Doul is a “lazy, basking fool” (Synge, 1905/1996, p. 82), the tenor of the message is that people with impaired vision *choose* not to work. This sentiment is also advanced in “The Blind Man”, the short story whose narrator refers to the central character by saying, “His brothers let him know that he was growing visibly fatter. That came from his easy life. If things went on like this he might eventually get too fat to squeeze through a door” (Brecht, 1920-4/1992, p. 22). They “tried to get him to work”, adds the narrator, but “had absolutely no success. He was so purposely clumsy that he ruined the material” (p. 23). Invoking a parallel with the dialectic of the colonised and coloniser (Memmi, 1974), these portrayals do not only ascribe “the blind” unbelievable laziness, for “the sighted” are simultaneously exalted with a virtuous taste for action. Indeed, because nothing can better justify privilege than industry, nor destitution than laziness, an uncritical reading of the latter obscures fundamental issues of social prejudice, serving only to naturalise the underrepresentation of employed people with impaired vision.

As well as to the overtly negative portrayals of employment for people with impaired vision, the notion of an “easy life” is central to the second subcategory, the ostensibly positive formation. In the short story “The Gift of Sight”, for instance, when Kusum is blinded due to her husband’s gross negligence, the primary concern is that a blind woman “cannot be a housewife” in the “outer, physical world” (Tagore, 1898/1991, p. 252). These anxieties are addressed when she goes on to say, “Within a short time I had learnt to carry out my customary tasks through sound and smell and touch. I even managed much of the housework with greater skill than formerly” (p. 253). Similarly, in the novel *La Symphonie Pastorale*, due mainly to her blindness Gertrude is initially thought of as an idiot” who “can’t speak or understand anything, yet her learning is so amazingly rapid that it leaves the pastor wondering whether this infirmity was not in many ways an advantage (Gide, 1919/1963).

The reasoning behind this effortless success often pertains to a supposed lack of distraction from which stems the ability to concentrate. This argument should be recognised as sophistry because it is premised on a contrast between what is perceived through open and closed eyes, on the ability to voluntarily negate the visual aspect of perception and direct inward the energy that usually would be consumed visually. In other words, the concentration myth is an ocularcentric paradox, for the

extraordinary powers that are ascribed to sightless characters are dependant on sight.

As with other aspects of beneficial blindness, the concentration myth has a long and distinguished literary history. For instance, in *La Symphonie Pastorale*, Gertrude “showed more sense and judgement than the generality of young girls, distracted as they are by the outside world and prevented from giving their best attention by a multitude of futile preoccupations” (p. 35). The implication is that extraordinary powers of concentration are an organic by-product of the isolation and asexuality that are frequently associated with visual impairment. The myth is perpetuated further when, subsequent to her cure, Gertrude “closed her eyes and kept them shut for a time, as though to concentrate her thoughts or to recover her former state” (p. 69, see also Milton, 1671/1968; Tagore, 1898/1991). Still more concerning is the myth’s perpetuation in a number of late 20th-century novels. For example, the narrator of *Death Kit* ponders the notion that ninety percent of all knowledge is acquired visually by saying, “What about the other ten percent? Do those who have to make do on that small fraction discover the ninety percent to be a distraction?” (Sontag, 1967/2001, p. 162, see also Shreve, 1989; Norman, 2000).

### **Extraordinary Senses**

In constructs of Beneficial Blindness, even more common than the ascription of extraordinary powers of concentration is that of Extraordinary Senses. This is demonstrable in 20th-century novels such as: *Sir Nigel*, where Black Simon refers to Andreas by saying, “it often happens that when a man has lost a sense the good God will strengthen those that remain” (Conan-Doyle, 1906/1918, p. 287); *Ulysses*, where Leopold Bloom thinks that “the other senses are more” (Joyce, 1922/1998, p. 173); and *The Insult*, where Martin Blom goes so far as to say, “Your eyes go, and the efficiency of your nose and ears and all the rest instantly increases by hundreds of per cent” (Thomson, 1996, p. 247). Before considering the representation of the contact and distance senses individually, it should be acknowledged that none of the studies in which the sensory acuities of people with impaired vision and those with unimpaired vision were compared showed any superiority of the former (Lowenfeld, 1981). People with impaired vision might well learn to use such capacities more effectively, but, far from being automatic, any compensation is the product of persistent practice (Kirtley, 1975).

The most awkwardly placed of the three contact senses is that of smell, for although an odour impinges on the body before perception, the impingement can occur from quite a distance. It is this anticipatory quality that makes the sense important in the animal kingdom, providing a fairly reliable signifier of potential pleasure or pain. Accordingly, the



ascription of an extraordinary sense of smell often results in animalisation, in "the blind" belonging to a lower evolutionary order than "the sighted". For example, the narrator of the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century short story "The Country of the Blind" refers to a group of characters by saying, "Their sense of smell was extraordinarily fine; they could distinguish individual differences as readily as a dog can" (Wells, 1904/1958, p. 135). An uncritical reading might regard the canine reference as nothing more than an inappropriate use of simile, which proves erroneous when the same characters are said to "halt and sniff the air" before one "struck" Nunez's "trail in the meadow grass, and came stooping and feeling his way along it" (p. 137). Similar representation can be found in late 20<sup>th</sup>-century writing, although the species evoked is somewhat vaguer in the novel *Blindness*, where the doctor's wife "watched" the blind internees "twitching, tense, their necks craned as if they were sniffing at something, yet curiously, their expressions were all the same" (Saramago, 1995, p. 40). This animalisation is sustained when a group of blind characters "stopped, sniffed in the doorways of the shops in the hope of catching the smell of food" (p. 214), much as when an old blind woman appeared "on the landing of the fire escape to sniff out the sounds that were coming into her flat" (p. 244). Indeed, it is by "touch and smell" that the protagonist of the novel *Blind Assassin* knows not only the Temple but the city, being able to "run" the latter "like a rat in a

maze” (Atwood, 2000, p. 267). Thus, though separated in their publication by nearly a century, the only change is relatively superficial, from canine to vermin, from the dogs that are invoked in “The Country of the Blind” to the rat in *Blind Assassin*.

Closely related to the sense of smell, the second of the contact senses is that of taste. Though ultimately beneficial, the sense that “the blind” are ascribed is manifestly inferior to that of “the sighted”. In *Ulysses*, for example, Leopold Bloom infantilises the blind stripling by pondering, “slobbers his food, I suppose. Tastes all different for him. Have to be spoonfed first” (Joyce, 1922/1998, p. 173). The bizarre implication is that visual impairment brings about significant alterations in the bearer’s sense of taste, a notion that is furthered as Bloom’s thoughts continue: “Tastes. They say you can’t taste wines with your eyes shut or a cold in the head. Also smoke in the dark they say get no pleasure” (p. 232). Echoing the late 19th-century novel *The Light That Failed*, where it is asserted that “tobacco would not taste in the darkness” (Kipling, 1891/1988, p. 140), this notion that tobacco is somehow too sophisticated a taste for people with impaired vision emerges in several 20th-century novels. In *Invitation To The Waltz*, for example, Timmy Douglas “didn’t smoke his cigarette, but let it burn away between his long fingers” (Lehmann, 1932/1981, p. 258), much as in *Night Without Stars*, Giles Gordon says, “I drew at the cigarette but didn’t get much fun out of

it. Half the enjoyment goes when you can't see the smoke" (Graham, 1950/1997, p. 53).

Not until nearly a century after the first publication of *The Light That Failed* did the departure from this tradition appear in the short story "Cathedral", the narrator of which asserts, "I remembered having read somewhere that the blind didn't smoke because, as speculation had it, they couldn't see the smoke they exhaled. I thought I knew that much and that much only about blind people" (Carver, 1983/1993, p. 299). Because this is presented as the view of a bigot, it seems that the author is only acknowledging the bizarre stereotype in order to do likewise with the just basis of its disruption, an inference that is confirmed when Robert is said to have "smoked his cigarette down to the nubbin and then lit another one" (p. 299). When juxtaposed with previous works this short story appears indicative of progress, a sense of change that is compounded by the provision of over fifteen references to Sammy's smoking in the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century novel *How Late It Was, How Late* (Kelman, 1995). Moreover, in *Blind Fear*, Jack Donovan is portrayed "leaning back in his favourite leather chair in his library, smoking a cigar (Norman, 2000, p. 17), the "expensive cigars" that he is said to have smoked "because he genuinely liked them" (p. 37). That is to say, the myth of beneficial blindness appears reduced because these later works

recognise that people with impaired vision might well submit to the lure of nicotine.

Touch is the most common of the contact senses that are depicted in terms of beneficial blindness. In *The Well of the Saints*, for example, Timmy addresses Martin Doul by saying of his wife Mary: "It's well you know the way she is; for the like of you do have great knowledge in the feeling of your hands" (Synge, 1905/1996, p. 75). The premise of Timmy's assertion is that the Douls share a physical relationship, yet Molly later introduces newly sighted Mary to Martin's physique by asking, "What is it you think of himself, with the fat legs on him, and the little neck like a ram?" (p. 80). In other words, Timmy assumes that Martin is physical towards Mary, and Molly, that Mary is not so towards Martin. This discrepancy can be explained in terms of hegemony, the covert propagation of ideological messages, for it serves the eugenic cause to construct the "blind man" sexually as both active and unattractive (see Bolt 2005). Comparable references to tactility can be found in *Ulysses*, when Leopold Bloom imagines how the blind stripling might experience a woman's beauty: "His hands on her hair, for instance. Say it was black for instance. Good. We call it black. Then passing over her white skin. Different feel perhaps. Feeling of white" (Joyce, 1922/1998, p. 173). As well as excluding people with impaired vision from the Implied Readership, the pronoun "we" is applied to indicate that for Bloom a

divide exists between "the blind" and their sighted counterparts. This differentiation is bolstered by the suggestion that "the blind" refer to the colour black by another name, the full absurdity of which is obscured by the more intriguing - but equally absurd - evocation of synaesthesia, the notion that people with impaired vision might distinguish colours by touch.

Consideration should also be given to the infantilising references to the blind stripling's hands: "Like a child's hand his hand. Like Milly's was. Sensitive. Sizing me up I daresay from my hand" (Joyce, 1922/1998, p. 173). Assuming that Bloom does not bear some resemblance to his hand, and that the blind stripling is not accomplished in the practice of palmistry, it is difficult to imagine how such an immediate assessment might be possible and even more so to imagine why it might be accurate. Yet, a corresponding scenario is depicted in *Invitation To The Waltz*, the narrator of which refers to Timmy Douglas and Olivia Curtis by saying, "His hand, holding hers, vibrated as if it had a separate, infinitely sensitive life - long fingers, exquisite nails. He'll guess what I'm like from my voice, from touching me" (Lehmann, 1932/1981, p. 248). In both cases the authors go so far as to convert the sense of touch into that of sight, for the blind stripling has "fingers" that "must almost see" (Joyce, 1922/1998, p. 173) and Timmy "seems to see with his fingers"

(Lehmann, 1932/1981, p. 290, see also Eliot, 1863/1956; Kelman, 1995; Saramago, 1995).

It is as if a “lidless eye had opened at the tip of the fingers”, as if “one eye too many had just grown right next to the nail” (Derrida, 1993, p. 3), but something of a departure from this “positive” Othering can be found in the novel *Happiness is Blind*, where the sense of touch is portrayed without allusion to synaesthesia. The protagonist Helen Bourne says, “Music and poetry bring me beauty, and so does the touch of silk and fur and things like that. Normal people know little of the beauty of touch, but it is there for those who can appreciate it” (Sava, 1987, p. 157). This portrayal appears unusually progressive, acknowledging not only that beauty is beheld in tactility, but that its beholder may have impaired or unimpaired vision. Nevertheless, the use of the adjective “normal” should be recognised as problematical, for it evokes and depends on the “deviant” antithesis, abnormality.

In the case of “the blind”, it has been asserted that hearing “goes farther than the hand, which goes farther than the eye” (Derrida, 1993, p. 16). Accordingly, as is illustrated when the blind assassin, X, is ascribed “acute”, “sensitive” hearing that is automatically “conferred on him by his blindness” (Atwood, 2000, p. 22), it is the distance sense of hearing that receives most attention from subscribers to the notion of beneficial

blindness. Indeed, the usage of this deviance is so common that it forms two subcategories: first, animalism; and second, enchantment.

As with the extraordinary sense of smell, many depictions of extraordinary hearing are underpinned by animalism. In "The Country of the Blind", for example, the inhabitants of the mountain valley are ascribed senses that "had become marvellously acute; they could hear and judge the slightest gesture of a man a dozen paces away - could hear the very beating of his heart" (Wells, 1904/1958, p. 135); in *Sir Nigel*, Black Simon says that Andreas has "such ears that he can hear the sap in the trees or the cheep of the mouse in its burrow" (Conan-Doyle, 1906/1918, p. 287); and in *Under Milk Wood*, the blind character who "hears all the morning of the town" is called Captain Cat (Thomas, 1954/1992, p. 40). A more extensive illustration of animalism can be found in *How Late It Was, How Late*, the reader of which is informed that Sammy "once read this book about bats; they have this incredible sense of hearing, it's sonic or somefuckingthing like they've developed their own radar, compensating the blindness" (Kelman, 1995, p. 100). It is significant that this memory is articulated immediately before that of a "blind guy" who could "stand on one side of a wall and know what was happening on the other", who could "actually pick up what was going on in a different room, whereabouts people were standing and all that" (p. 101). Indeed, with allusion to the "blind as a bat" maxim, the narrator

goes so far as to suggest that the “blind guy” developed “some sort of different sense-organ” (p. 101).

The second of these subcategories pertains to instances in which the hearing of people with impaired vision is portrayed as both fascination and fascinating, as a dialectic of enchantment. For example, much as in *Treasure Island*, when Pew’s “deviance” enables him to “hear a finger stirring” (Stevenson, 1883/1962, p. 20), the sighted characters, the Implied Reader and perhaps the actual reader are all mesmerised when in *A Dream Play* the blind man listens to his son travelling across the sea: “Now I hear the cable screech, and - something flutters and swishes like clothes drying on a line - wet handkerchieves, perhaps - and I hear how it snuffles and sobs, like people crying - perhaps the small waves lapping against the nets, or is it the girls on the shore” (Strindberg, 1901/2000, p. 227). The observed is effectively drawn into the activity of the observer, as the blind character’s obsessive listening becomes the object of a broader obsession with “the blind”. Though published in the late 20th century, the same dialectic of enchantment is evident when the sighted characters in “The Langoliers” turned toward Dinah “curiously”, before she “dropped Laurel’s hand and raised both of her own. She cupped the thumbs behind her ears and splayed her fingers out like fans. Then she simply stood there, still as a post, in this odd and rather weird listening posture” (King, 1991, p. 150, see also Shreve, 1989; Thomson,



1996). Published at the brink of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, moreover, a particularly revealing illustration is provided by *Blind Fear*, when Joanna Guthrie is captivated by a ball game between Jack Donovan and his sighted friend: “sometimes Donovan caught one-handed, other times he used both hands, but he caught every single ball thrown at him, before tossing it back” (Norman, 2000, p. 124). This scenario is revealing in the way that the “uncanny accuracy” is resolved as a “prime example of Murdoch Lambert’s patience and meticulousness combining with Donovan’s hyper-developed senses” (p. 124), in the way that the blind character is passive in the ostensibly positive deviance to which his sighted counterpart actively contributes.

The only sense that may be justly considered "deviant" among people with impaired vision is that of sight. After all, the vast majority of persons who are legally blind have some residual vision, so this distance sense is not an extraneous detail. In fact, only five or ten percent of the legally blind are “unable to make out anything more than changes in light levels”, and an “even smaller percentage will be totally unable to perceive even bright sunshine” (Dodds, 1993, pp. 1-2). If at all, however, subscribers to Blind Mythology tend to portray vision in terms of loss, as a warning of imminent sightlessness. In *The Light That Failed*, for instance, Dick Heldar’s anticipation of blindness is described thus: “I don’t know when my eyes may give out. The spots and dots and the

pains and things are crowding worse than ever” (Kipling, 1891/1988, p. 132). Similarly, the narrator of the short story “The Other” addresses his younger self by saying, “When you reach my age, you’ll have almost totally lost your eyesight. You’ll be able to see the color yellow, and light and shadow. But don’t worry. Gradual blindness is not tragic” (Borges, 1975/2001, p. 10). While such depictions represent an improvement on the binary system of sight and sightlessness, the implication is still that any official deviation from the former constitutes an absolute shift to the latter. Consequently, the vast category into which most people with impaired vision fall is at best rendered temporary and at worst not represented at all.

Rather than considering the sight of people with impaired vision, authors tend to displace it in favour of what can thus be thought of as a Fifth-Sixth Sense. The inhabitants of the country of the blind, for instance, are described as “marvellous” due to the “confidence and precision they went about their ordered world. Everything, you see, had been made to fit their needs” (Wells, 1904/1958, p. 135). The contradiction is clear, for efficiency in such adapted surroundings can hardly be regarded as marvellous. In fact, when developing the ability for independent travel, a person with impaired vision will learn to concentrate on faintly audible clues to her or his immediate environment: “These clues include echoes from nearby objects and structures, echoes

which anyone can detect if he [or she] listens closely, but which if never noticed would lead to the belief that there is some sixth sense that enables blind people to avoid obstacles” (Monbeck, 1973, p. 17).

The problem is that more than covertly animalising people with impaired vision by invoking the order Chiroptera, the Fifth-Sixth Sense frequently reaches far beyond logistical matters. There is a whole range of beliefs that is anchored in the stereotype, including the assumption that people with impaired vision draw on special channels of information, that they are subject to unique judgement (Goffman, 1968, p. 16). A relatively mundane illustration of this stereotype can be found in “Cathedral”, when Robert challenges the assumption that he has no interest in television by saying, “I have a color set and a black-and-white thing, an old relic. It’s funny, but if I turn the TV on, and I’m always turning it on, I turn on the color set” (Carver, 1983/1993, p. 299-300). In addition, Robert refers to a television with which he is unfamiliar by saying, “This is a color TV, [. . .] Don’t ask me how, but I can tell” (p. 300). A more traditional take on the theme can be found in *Happiness is Blind*, where Helen Bourne argues that persons who cannot “see the physical world” can nonetheless “see deeper into the soul and the underlying reality”, that they have the “inner vision that the philosophers and mystics talk about” (Sava, 1987, p. 192, see also King, 1991; Norman, 2000).

## **Life is but a Dream?**

In the case of Sara Hallett, the peripheral blind character in *Blind Fear*, it is the state of dreaming that provides forum for the fifth-sixth sense.

References are made to the “infinite mind’s eye” of her “slumbering state” (Norman, 2000, p. 252), the way in which her dreams “appear to be semi-psychic” (p. 47), having a “presageful quality to them” (p. 34).

Indeed, there are more than twenty instances in which Sara is associated with dreaming, a link that in itself proves significant when consideration is given to related philosophy. Dualism, for example, blurs the distinction between dreaming and the waking state, suggesting that certainty can be attached to neither: “How many times have I dreamt at night that I was in this place, dressed, by the fire, although I was quite naked in my bed?” (Descartes, 1641/1968, p. 96, see also Rée, 1999).

The counter argument is that such philosophy “makes use of that faith in the world it seems to be unsettling” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 5), that falsity cannot be defined without the reference point that is provided by truth. Nevertheless, The relation of visual impairment to dreaming is a topic that has long interested psychologists, as well as curious laypersons, both with impaired and unimpaired vision (Kirtley, 1975). The erroneous premise is that people with unimpaired vision can cover their eyes in order to understand visual impairment, from which it follows that

resonant in the time spent with closed eyes is the experience of people with severely impaired vision. This notion is substantiated by the example of a man with impaired vision who is asked how he knew when he was awake (Scott, 1991).

The blurring of the line between the dreaming and waking states is a feature in many literary portrayals of people with impaired vision. The best known example appears in the novel *Jane Eyre*, when the eponymous protagonist arrives at Ferndean to find that Rochester's blindness has transformed his reality into a chain of episodic dreams: "Gentle, soft dream, nestling in my arms now, you will fly, too, as your sisters have fled before you: but kiss me before you go - embrace me, Jane" (Brontë, 1847/1994, p. 429). Also, though originally published more than half a century later than *Jane Eyre*, the short story "They" contains the assertion, "I have never seen the faces of my dead in any dream," to which Miss Florence responds by saying, "Then it must be as bad as being blind" (Kipling, 1904/1987, p. 242). These two examples are significant because confusion is articulated by the blind characters, a respect in which the critical analysis of subsequent publications reveals some progress.

Rather than implying that people with impaired vision are unaware of the difference between dreaming and the waking state, in some instances this is depicted as the belief of people with unimpaired vision:

In *La Symphonie Pastorale*, it is the pastor who refers to Gertrude by asking, “in what way do her waking hours differ from her sleeping?” (Gide, 1919/1963, p. 12-3); in *Ulysses*, it is Leopold Bloom who refers to the blind stripling by pondering, “What dreams would he have, not seeing? Life a dream for him” (Joyce, 1922/1998, p. 174); and in *Blind Fear*, it is the perspective of Joanna that is being articulated when the narrator says that Jack Donovan has the appearance of “a man moving through some kind of intense dream” (Norman, 2000, p. 162). Thus, blindness-dream confusion is manifest in these examples, but a critical reading reveals a counter-hegemonic criticism of attitudes toward people with impaired vision.

Embedded with the concept of blindness-dream confusion is the idea that people with impaired vision have no access to the reality of those with unimpaired vision. This idea is implicit when the introduction to Maeterlinck’s *The Blind* evokes a “nightmarish fear” that relates the drama to “the world of dreams” (Slater, 1997, p. xi), before stating that the characters represent “feeble, puerile, unadventurous people, with an obvious handicap preventing them from seeing the realities of life” (p. xvii). Similarly, with reference to *The Well of the Saints*, it has been argued that the “dream of perfection” that is “possible to the blind cannot be sustained in the world of reality” (Skelton, 1971, p. 99). According to these readings the dream-state of blindness situates its bearers

somewhere beyond reality, a notion with which the short story “The Cricket on the Hearth” unifies, for although Bertha *believes* her “enchanted home” is without “scarcity and shabbiness”, the sighted characters *know* it to be “a little cracked nutshell of a wooden house” (Dickens, 1845/1954, p. 182).

The problem is that because knowledge relates to reality, the suggested dream-existence ultimately is interpreted as one of ignorance. Indeed, predicated on the erroneous notion that visual impairment is borne as a dream, the implication is often that bearers are epistemologically inferior to people with unimpaired vision. This lack of knowledge is illustrated in “The Cricket on the Hearth”, for more than “the size, and shape, and true proportion of the dwelling”, Bertha “never knew” that “sorrow and faintheartedness were in the house”; that “iron was rusting, wood rotting, paper peeling off”; that “ugly shapes of delf and earthenware were on the board”; that “Caleb’s scanty hairs were turning greyer and more grey, before her sightless face”; that “they had a master, cold, exacting, and uninterested” (Dickens, 1845/1954, pp. 182-3). While the repetition of the phrase “The Blind Girl never knew” is a persuasive device, a combination of common sense, touch and smell alone would be more than enough to enlighten someone with impaired vision on the details that are listed.

## **Dream Lover**

The constructs of effortlessness, extraordinary senses and blindness-dream confusion culminate in a category of beneficial blindness that pertains to sexual prowess. This is exemplified in *The Insult* when Martin refers to his relationship with Nina by saying, “This whole thing with me, it’s not because she’s sorry for me, but it is because I’m blind. Because I can’t see her. That’s what she likes - being invisible. It makes her feel less pressured. More free. It’s kind of a fantasy for her” (Thomson, 1996, p. 109). The positive aspect of this portrayal is ostensible because individuality has no bearing on Martin’s appeal to Nina, the implication being that due to his blindness she is “free” to deceive him, that for some reason she is “less pressured” to please than when in a relationship with a sighted person. In brief, it is not to Martin but the myth of blindness that Nina is attracted, an interpretation that is bolstered by the suggestion that he is irreplaceable, to which she retorts, “What are you telling me? [. . .] You’re the only blind man in the city?” (p. 126).

When sexually attractive, visual impairment is usually portrayed with reference to haptic seduction. In “Cathedral”, for example, the narrator refers to his wife by saying, “On her last day in the office, the blind man asked if he could touch her face. She agreed to this. She told me he touched his fingers to every part of her face, her nose - even her neck! She never forgot it. She even tried to write a poem about it”



(Carver, 1883/1993, p. 292). Haptic seduction is implied by the way in which the narrator's wife allows Robert's hands to wander from her face down to her neck, as well as by the fact that she "never forgot" and "even tried to write a poem" about the experience. Though published at the brink of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, an extended and explicit example of haptic seduction can be found in *The Blind Assassin*, for, again, the hand of the Blind Man wanders down from a woman's face, but in this instance, because it is the "knife" hand and because it "passes" to her "throat", the evocation is initially of rape (Atwood, 2000, p. 256). Consequently, haptic seduction is all the more evident when the woman "trembles", "lets the red brocade fall away" and eagerly "guides" the assassin's hand (p. 256, see also Shreve, 1989; Norman, 2000). Again it is the case that sexual prowess derives from the myth of blindness, the psychosocial influence of which is problematical on at least three counts: first, no matter how attentive a person with impaired vision might be, any sexual prowess is explained in terms of blindness or compensatory power; second, resonating with negative eugenics, the person with impaired vision is portrayed as a necessary threat to people with unimpaired vision; and third, if in relation to Blind Mythology the person with impaired vision is disappointing, it is likely that he or she will be rendered asexual in order that the illusion of Otherness is retained.

## Conclusion

The problem with these and other such portrayals is that they situate achievement in a causal relationship with blindness, effectively removing the person from the equation. If left uncriticised, moreover, the fictional portrayals have a psychosocially damaging effect, for they inevitably influence attitudes towards the factual achievements of people with impaired vision. An English undergraduate with impaired vision, for example, might work hard on her or his essays and assignments, while struggling to overcome the multiple access problems that are faced during Higher Education (see Bolt 2004), only to be told ultimately that compensatory powers of concentration must have made her or his learning very easy. Also pertaining to employment, interpersonal relationships, creativity and so on, the perpetuation of beneficial blindness is degrading in all of its forms because it diminishes the efforts and achievements of people with impaired vision. Granted, the introductory assertion about Ray Charles's musical "authority" cannot be denied, nor is there any compelling argument against the observation that he would notice a single incorrect note when a whole ensemble was playing (Lydon, 1999, p. 100). However, there is an implication of "positive" Otherness in the assertion that he "knew" if one musician was playing a wrong note, "could hear everybody at once, the ensemble and every little thing" (p. 101). Moreover, the idea that his "authority" was not

achieved but compensatory and therefore automatic is implicit in the reference to a “guy who can’t see” and the assertion that there was “no way he could not be in control” (pp. 100-1). The point to emphasise is that the so-called Positive Stereotyping of People with Impaired Vision is no better than the overtly negative formation, for either way an object position is being defined, the subject position is necessarily held by someone with unimpaired vision. Indeed, beneficial blindness is only beneficial to prejudiced people who wish to maintain the binary logic of “the blind” and “the sighted”, them and us.

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