

Caught in the Chasm: Literary Representation and Suicide among People with Impaired Vision

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Abstract

Both fictional and factual discourses have situated visual impairment in a causal relationship with suicide. The paper compares samples of these discourses in order to suggest that the fiction may have some bearing on the facts. This alternative explanation becomes all the more thought-provoking when it is considered that not only visual impairment but visual restoration has been posited as a cause of suicide.

Introduction

The premise of this paper is that “the blind” and “the sighted” are representational constructs that bear no intrinsic relationship with the people for whom they are meant to stand. People with impaired vision and people with unimpaired vision exist in society, while “the blind” and “the sighted” are products of culture, emerging from art, literature and related intellectual activities. The problem is that “the blind” are constructed as a deviant group that helps to render “the sighted” normal, a psychocultural scenario that can have a disabling effect on people with impaired vision. Indeed, because ‘representation shapes the reality that it supposedly reflects’ (Thomson, 1997: 304), a disabling culture necessitates a disabling society. In order to expand on this hypothesis the paper will consider how visual impairment is posited as a cause of suicide in literary representation, the shaping force of which will be evidenced with reference to a sample of sociological case studies. To

avoid the obvious challenge that the facts are simply reflected in the fiction, the paper will then give consideration to the converse scenario that situates visual restoration in a causal relationship with suicide. The conclusion will focus on the division that exists between “the blind” and “the sighted”, a metaphysical chasm that cannot be crossed but can be displaced by an awareness of the frequently obscured reality that visual acuity has no bearing on ontological status.

Suicide in Depictions of Visual Impairment

What can be found in a number of nineteenth and twentieth-century depictions of people with impaired vision is a suicide motif that takes three forms: invocation, contemplation and action.

The invocation of suicide is not always of consequence to character or plot, sometimes only serving to refer readers to the ancient paradigm of blindness. For example, although in the late nineteenth-century novel *The Light That Failed*, Mrs Beeton’s erroneous assertion that Dick is ‘going to shoot himself’ (Kipling, 1891/1988: 188) anticipates his subsequent suicide, there is no such justification in the early twentieth-century novel *Invitation to the Waltz*, where Marigold refers to the blind character Timmy by saying, ‘If it was me I’d shoot every one I could lay hands on and then myself’ (Lehmann, 1932/1981: 289). Nevertheless, it is at this level that twentieth-century novels are most progressive. In *Death Kit*, for instance, the myth is disrupted because not the blind character Hester but her sighted lover, Diddy, attempts suicide by taking an overdose of sleeping tablets and lies in his bed, on the verge of post-coital slumber, wanting to say, ‘[L]et’s die together. Let’s kill ourselves’ (Sontag, 1967/2001: 6, 273). Moreover, in *Snakewalk*, Patrick Todd derides the ‘very high rate of suicide’, jokes with Tania that due to her absence he ‘contemplated suicide a couple times’ and teases a bus driver as follows:

"Where you headed, boss?" the driver said.
I turned slowly, a very sober look on my face, and pointed. "Out there," I said.

"There ain't no buses runnin' that way, boss. That's the bridge."

"I know," I said, straight-faced, fucking with him. What the hell. A blink can't walk out on a bridge without blowing skirts up. (Wheeler, 1989: 11, 125, 266)

The tenor of this portrayal is ridicule, for there is an implicit criticism of the suggested link between suicide and visual impairment, much as in *The Insult*, where it is suspected that Martin 'might be harbouring suicidal thoughts', that he 'might have been about to swallow bleach or some other convenient domestic poison' (Thomson, 1996: 21). The problem is that while Timmy, Hester, Patrick and Martin make no attempt to kill themselves, the spectre of suicide is raised and the reader referred covertly, perhaps unconsciously, to an ancient mode of representation.

The second form of depiction involves not parodic or cursory invocation but a blind character's consideration of suicide as a viable option, a scenario that tended to appear as a prayer in writing of the Victorian era. For instance, in the novel *Jane Eyre*, Rochester says, 'I supplicated God, that, if it seemed good to Him, I might soon be taken from this life' (Brontë, 1847/1994: 441); in *The Light That Failed*, Dick 'prayed to God that his mind might be taken from him, offering for proof that he was worthy of this favour the fact that he had not shot himself long ago' (Kipling, 1891/1988: 170); and in the novel *The End of the Tether*, Captain Whalley says, 'It seems to me that, like the blinded Samson, I would find the strength to shake down a temple upon my head. [. . .] I've been praying for death

since' (Conrad, 1902/1995: 266). Bearing in mind the myth that blindness constitutes an end of life, it is somewhat paradoxical that these prayers are for death rather than sight. After all, if such an entity exists, God will be no less able to improve or grant vision than to induce death. Perhaps it is for this reason that the deity is less common in the suicidal contemplations that can be found in mid and late twentieth-century novels. In *Night Without Stars*, for example, Giles Gordon refers to suicide by pondering, 'Till now it had been just a thought, a threat, a promise with a hint of bravado. Now it leered at me like a challenge to my own integrity and guts. You can't be so very sorry for yourself if all the time it's in your own hands to do something about it' (Graham, 1950/1997: 28). Similarly, in *Happiness is Blind*, Helen is said to have 'grown suddenly thoughtful. Her face was tense and her hands clenched hard. This desire in her was ridiculous, suicidal, but it was almost overwhelming' (Sava, 1987: 187-8). It also proves relevant that the reader of *How Late it Was, How Late* is informed that Sammy 'would be as well parking the head in a gas oven', for although this is a result of the combined loss of love and sight, the latter eventually takes precedence: 'He couldn't even fucking see man know what I'm talking about, and he still had to listen to them, these fucking bampot bastards. And ye get angrier and angrier, angrier and angrier, till ye feel like ramming yer fist through the fucking kitchen window and with a bit a luck ye'll slice right through the main artery' (Kelman, 1995: 29, 119).

The third form of depiction, the act, is by definition the most evident, but that is not to say that it is never ambiguous. Hence, with reference to *The Light That Failed*, where Dick is said to have persuaded himself that suicide would be a 'ludicrous insult to the gravity of the situation as well as a weak-kneed confession of fear' (Kipling, 1891/1988: 170), it has been asserted that, like Oedipus, he 'rejects suicide' (Kleege, 1999: 73). However, bearing in mind that 'the term suicide is applied

to any death which is the direct or indirect result of a positive or negative act accomplished by the victim' (Durkheim, 1897/1970: 42), the detail to note is that Dick makes his final journey expecting to be shot, that on reaching his destination he says, 'Put me, I pray, in the forefront of the battle' (Kipling, 1891/1988: 208). Because deliberately standing in the line of fire is every bit as suicidal as is pulling down the building in which one stands, Dick's death is linked paradigmatically with that of Samson, as are those of numerous early twentieth-century blind characters. Captain Whalley, in *The End of the Tether*, decides to drown himself, putting pieces of iron into his pockets in order that the chances of survival are negligible (Conrad, 1902/1995: 294); Wolf Larsen, in the novel *The Sea Wolf*, sets fire to the mattress on which he sleeps (London, 1904/1993: 283); and the title character in the short story 'The Blind Man' sets fire to the house in which he lives, before descending towards his death in a stream (Brecht, 1920-4/1992: 24-5). Even in the mid twentieth-century novel *The Day of the Triffids*, Doctor Soames launches himself at a window and crashes through (Wyndham, 1951/1981: 16, see also 19, 56). Finally, more than a century on from *The Light That Failed*, where Dick Helder meets with the 'crowning mercy of a kindly bullet' (Kipling, 1891/1988: 208), the newly-blind colonel, in the late twentieth-century novel *Blindness*, initiates a similar end by shooting himself in the head (Saramago, 1995: 104).

Suicide and Visual Impairment

It is evident that in the form of invocation, contemplation and action, suicide is incessant in its literary association with visual impairment. In order that these fictional tendencies can be evaluated, tested against something approximating the facts of the matter, consideration must be given to a sample of three pieces of research that focuses on suicide among people with impaired vision. What emerges from the sample corresponds with a psychologist's assertion that some clients cannot 'bear'

to face the fact that they are 'firmly stuck with their blindness for the rest of their lives', deciding 'there and then that life is not worth living. They will either retreat into a world of passivity and self-pity from which they may never emerge, or they may even initially panic and try to take their own lives' (Dodds, 1993: 2). Indeed, the third of the studies concludes that the psychological autopsy findings suggest that 'those with worsening sight and the prognosis of eventual blindness are at comparatively high risk of suicide' (de Leo et al, 1999: 343).

The first study (Blank, 1957) refers to a thirty-five-year-old woman with newly impaired vision who becomes profoundly depressed and cannot tolerate the inevitability of remaining hopelessly dependent. Spending time in inactive hatred of herself and others, she angrily refuses to undertake the study of Braille and to associate with anyone who has impaired vision. She becomes useless at her job and eventually arranges an appointment with a psychoanalyst, several days before which she attempts suicide by swallowing a large number of barbiturate capsules. The second study (Caplan, 1981) relates to a thirty-year-old man who has undergone two unsuccessful eye operations. While awaiting a third operation he visits a friend in an unfamiliar area and attempts to navigate a dimly lit hallway. He trips over a low obstacle and falls down a flight of stairs, cutting his face in several places. A couple of days after the incident he commits suicide. The third study (de Leo et al, 1999) refers to twelve cases, one of which involves both hearing and sight loss, but is classified with the latter because the deceased had begun to lose his eyesight shortly before committing suicide. Another case involves an eighty-one-year-old woman who has no known psychopathology or recent traumatic life stressors, but commits suicide the day she is told that the prognosis of her condition' is blindness.

Notwithstanding the assertion that actual attempts at suicide among people with impaired vision are very rare (Hine,

2000), there is some evidence to suggest that on the topic of suicide, a significant contrast does not exist between fact and fiction, between people with impaired vision and "the blind". However, the premise of this paper is not that there is no link but that there is no intrinsic link between people with impaired vision and the cultural construct of "the blind". The point is that if people with impaired vision are in any way prone to suicide, the degrading nature of Blind Mythology must be recognised as a contributory factor. After all, one's 'reputation, whether false or true, cannot be hammered, hammered, hammered' into one's 'head without doing something to one's character' (Allport, 1954: 142). This assertion is substantiated in the first study because the woman's anger is based on the idea of learning Braille and associating with "the blind" (Blank, 1957); in the second study because the man fantasises about blindness, about 'being led helplessly through a dark maze of dangerous streets and alleys' (Caplan, 1981: 169); and in the third study because the man commits suicide as he begins to lose his eyesight and the woman on the day she is given the prognosis of "blindness" (de Leo et al, 1999). In other words, in each case the suicidal act is based on belief rather than experience, on the fiction of "blindness" rather than the facts of visual impairment.

Suicide in Depictions of Visual Restoration

Consideration must also be given to what has been rendered a counter intuitive position, for literary discourse links not only visual impairment but visual restoration with depression. In the early twentieth-century play *The Well of the Saints*, for example, Martin Doul defends himself and Mary by saying, 'We're not asking our sight, holy father, and let you walk on your own way, and be fasting, or praying, or doing anything that you will, but, leave us here in our peace, at the crossing of the roads, for it's best we are this way, and we're not asking to see' (Synge, 1905/1996: 100). More explicitly, in *Happiness is Blind*, Helen is rendered 'depressed and worried' after her 'first glimpse of the

light'. Her depression is said to have grown 'as her goal drew nearer', culminating in a sense of gladness as her eyes are covered with bandages. It was not a 'brave new world she was encountering', says the narrator, but a 'cold, rather depressing world' (Sava, 1987: 185-7). Similarly, in the late twentieth-century play *Molly Sweeney*, Mr Rice remembers the eponymous protagonist's stay in a psychiatric hospital by saying, 'I knew I had lost contact with her. She had moved away from us all. She wasn't in her old blind world - she was exiled from that. And the sighted world, which she had never found hospitable, wasn't available to her anymore' (Friel, 1994: 59).

More than with depression, it is sometimes the case that literary depiction links visual restoration with suicide. In the novel *La Symphonie Pastorale*, for example, subsequent to the restoration of her sight, Gertrude stoops and disappears while crossing the garden bridge, and, though initially it seems that the suicide has been thwarted, dies after 'a night of delirium and exhaustion' (Gide, 1919/1963: 66-70). It might also be argued that a suicidal reaction to the restoration of sight is implicit at the end of *The Well of the Saints*, for Timmy refers to Martin and Mary by saying, 'I'm thinking the two of them will be drowned together in a short while', to which the saint says, 'They have chosen their lot' (Synge, 1905/1996: 105).

Corresponding with Plato's Pharmakon, - which will 'always be apprehended as both antidote and poison' (Derrida, 1989: 235), the glorious, life-enhancing restoration of vision is evidently problematised in a number of twentieth-century literary works. Though apparently radical, a point to note about these depictions is that notwithstanding the syntagmatic variation in which sight, sightlessness and melancholia becomes sightlessness, sight and melancholia, Gide, Synge, Sava and Friel do not move beyond the paradigm of blindness from which sight, sightlessness and melancholia are all

selected. Indeed, Gide and Synge make a further selection from that very same paradigm by including the act of suicide in their depictions of visual impairment. In other words, although it is not always apparent, these depictions relate to, and thus refer the reader to, those that define visual impairment as a socially acceptable reason for suicide.

Suicide and Visual Restoration

Again it is worth comparing fiction with facts, “the blind” with people who have impaired vision, for according to one study (Lester, 1971), a woman with a forty-five-year history of deteriorating vision is found to have dislocated lenses, but after having her vision partially restored by glasses becomes distraught and depressed. Another woman complains to her father that everything she sees causes her a disagreeable emotion, saying that she had been much more at ease in her blindness. The research also refers to a large proportion of senile patients who have undergone cataract operations and become psychiatrically disturbed. Moreover, according to a subsequent study (Lester, 1972), a man whose occipital lobe is injured in a car crash denies his visual impairment until it passes and then becomes severely depressed, as does a thirty-three-year-old man who has his sight restored after twenty-seven years of visual impairment.

As well as with depression, visual restoration has been linked with suicide, for, according to the first of these studies, a farmer jumps to his death four days after having cataracts removed, a couple of people attempt to take their lives after similarly successful surgery and a fifty-two-year-old man kills himself within a year of having his vision restored (Lester, 1971). The second study refers to a woman who becomes suicidal after the restoration of an appreciable amount of vision without which she has been since childhood, concluding that visual restoration constitutes the removal of a ‘crutch’, that

when there is 'no clearly definable source of frustration' other than her or his own personality, then 'suicide becomes a more viable option for the patient' (Lester, 1972: 757). This explanation is problematised, however, by the aforementioned fictional and factual discourse that situates visual impairment in a causal relationship with suicide.

Conclusion

According to the fictional discourse that has been considered in this paper, people with unimpaired vision can become prone to suicide if they are faced with visual impairment, as can people with impaired vision if they are faced with visual restoration. Moreover, both scenarios have been reported in factual discourse to induce temporary and longer term psychopathology that is usually followed by psychosocial readjustment, but that sometimes results in suicide (de Leo et al, 1999). In order that some sense might be made of this incongruity, the way in which visual impairment and restoration are both situated in a causal relationship with suicide, it should be born in mind that cultural constructs of "the blind" and "the sighted" are divided by an unbridgeable chasm. Thus, owing to the internalisation of stereotypes, the conscious and unconscious influence of Blind Mythology and its affect on common sense discourse, it is quite logical that sight-loss and sight-restoration both present the bearer with the same disturbing sense of a chasm to cross. In short, suicide is precipitated by neither the loss nor restoration of vision, but the ideology that underpins binary constructs of "the blind" and "the sighted", by the erroneous notion that a fundamental difference exists between people with impaired vision and people with unimpaired vision.

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