

Castrating Depictions of Visual Impairment: The Literary Backdrop to Eugenics

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Abstract

Whether consciously or unconsciously, attitudes toward visual impairment are likely to be influenced by its representation in fictional literature. Critical of a supposed link between visual impairment and castration, this article examines a sample of literary works that is found to unify with eugenics--not only in geographic and historical circulation, but in ideological content.

Introduction

Underlying the “maladaptations and personality disturbances” of people with impaired vision, there is the key factor of psychoanalytic interest, the “unconscious significance of blindness as castration” (Blank, 1957, p. 1). This statement is puzzling because, referring to the loss of the penis, anxiety in respect of a penis-equivalent, demoralization in relation to the masculine role

and a loss of the capacity for erotic pleasure (Rycroft, 1972), the theoretical concept of castration has no intrinsic link with impaired vision. Yet, the two are frequently paired in the literary representation of visual impairment that has been circulated among Anglo-American readers during the past century or so. In asking why this is the case, the article will invoke the Freudian defence mechanism of reaction formation. This invocation provides basis for the hypothesis that, defensive in their nature, assertions of asexuality conceal belief in the exact opposite, hypersexuality.

It is notable that at the end of the nineteenth century, eugenics, the Anglo-American science of improving the stock (Galton, 1883), was introduced as a response to the notion that so-called "genetically inferior people were reproducing faster than superior people and would eventually displace them" (Hubbard, 1990/1997, p. 190). Indeed, in 1912, the first International Congress for Eugenics discussed how to encourage procreation of the "fit" by promoting eugenicist ideals, as well as how to prevent procreation of the "unfit" through segregation and sterilization (Kühl, 1994). In other words, the discussion covered both positive and negative eugenics, the latter of which was subsequently put into effect in the British institutional policy of sex segregation (Humphries & Gordon, 1992) and, developed by Harry Laughlin in 1922, the American sterilisation programme that targeted "the mentally retarded, insane, criminal, epileptic, inebriate, diseased, blind,

deaf, deformed, and economically dependent” (Kühl, p. 39).

The article will suggest that there is a eugenic aspect of the LITERARY REPRESENTATION OF VISUAL IMPAIRMENT that has been circulated among Anglo-American readers, for, whether through examples of asexuality or warnings against hypersexuality, people with impaired vision are frequently defined as unfit for procreation, an inappropriate choice of love object. This definition can be psychosocially castrating because of its potential influence on people with unimpaired and impaired vision alike. After all, a “reputation, whether false or true, cannot be hammered, hammered, hammered” into a person’s “head without doing something” to her or his “character” (Allport, 1954, p. 142). The literary criticism in this article will therefore be of interest to people with impaired vision, as well as to those with whom they are personally and professionally associated. Indeed, the myths of asexuality and hypersexuality can only be diffused through critical reading of the literature by which they are perpetuated.

Asexuality

Literary representation contains two inverse theses of visual-sexual deficiency. The first is articulated in the late nineteenth-century Belgian play *The Blind*, the geographical derivation of which is relevant because Belgium was represented at the 1919 meeting about a Second International Congress

for Eugenics. The Oldest Blind Man says, "You can't love someone without seeing them" (Maeterlinck, 1891/1997, p. 25), much as in the mid twentieth-century novel *Night Without Stars*, when asked if he is in love with Alix, Giles says, "I don't know, [. . .] I've never seen her" (Graham, 1950/1997, p. 172). In these terms, love, the most profound of life experiences, becomes a superficial activity to which vision is requisite. Accordingly, in the mid twentieth-century play *Under Milk Wood*, Captain Cat remembers "long ago when his eyes were blue and bright", when he knew a "herd of short and good time cows" (Thomas, 1954/1992, p. 71). There is "nay point wandering if ye cannay see fuck all", agrees the narrator of the late twentieth-century novel *How Late It Was, How Late*, and "Sammy liked looking about, watching the office lassies and the shop lassies" (Kelman, 1995, p. 126). Thus, while separated in their creation by forty years, Sammy and Captain Cat unite in endorsing the notion that sexual activity is displaced by visual impairment.

Illustrated in the late nineteenth-century short story 'The Gift of Sight', when Kusum is told "I want an ordinary woman whom I can scald, whom I can be angry with, whom I can fondle, whom I can deck with ornaments" (Tagore, 1898/1991, p. 264), the second thesis of visual-sexual deficiency does not focus on the act of desirous objectification. Rather it is the capacity to be so objectified for which sight is rendered requisite. As if desire is inherently exhibitionistic, the idea is that one cannot love someone without

being seen by them. Accordingly, in the year that France was represented at the meeting about the Second International Congress for Eugenics, the early twentieth-century French novel *La Symphonie Pastorale* informed its readership that "no one marries a blind girl" (Gide, 1919/1963, p. 48). This thesis corresponds with the first thesis in the portrayal of heterosexuality as something that is, at the very least, troublesome for people with impaired vision. Tagore's Kusum and Gide's Gertrude are unable to be caught in what Maeterlinck's *Oldest Blind Man*, Graham's Giles, Thomas's *Captain Cat* and Kelman's Sammy are unable to deliver – namely, the male gaze. The implication is that voyeurism is as necessary in male heterosexuality as is exhibitionism in the female counterpart. Thus, in so far as men are required to see, required to gaze, as women are required to see that they are being seen, to see that they are being gazed at, heterosexuality is ocularcentric in its construction, positing the visual perspective as a measure by which all others are judged.

For a secure definition of Self, impotency fantasies are projected onto the Other as frigidity and the "sexually different" may appear as "the apotheosis of beauty" (Gilman, 1985, p. 25). It is for this reason that more than being idealised, possessing beauty but not generative or sexual power, women with impaired vision are frequently infantilised in literary depiction. The resulting "blind girl" is invoked once in

Maeterlinck's *The Blind*, seven times in Gide's *La Symphonie Pastorale*, three times in the mid twentieth-century novel *The Day of the Triffids* (Wyndham, 1951/1981), three times in the late twentieth-century novel *Death Kit* (Sontag, 1967/2001), five times in the late twentieth-century novel *Snakewalk* (Wheeler, 1989), once in the late twentieth-century novel *Blindness* (Saramago, 1995), eight times in the late twentieth-century short story 'The Girl in the Corner' (Norton, 1998) and so on. The psychosocially castrating message of such infantilisation is that women with impaired vision are outside the realms of sexual attraction, that a man who desires these women effectively desires children.

The fact that five of the seven authors are male invokes a double disability that results from phallocentrism, from the dominant discourse that favours men and traditionally masculine qualities. Because in these terms women are intrinsically impaired by their lack of the phallus, the additional impairment brings about an ostensibly positive shift. Femininity and visual impairment are defined as two castrating negatives, the sum of which is positive. In terms of social-psychology, though subservient by design, the "blind girl" is a social type, belonging to society, whereas the "blind man" is a stereotype, because he does not belong (Klapp, 1962). It is therefore notable that on becoming visually impaired some men are said to suffer severe identity crises, causing them to question their

gender (Dodds, 1993). That is not to say that adapting to visual impairment is psychosocially easy for women. Of those people with impaired vision who are in counselling, it is a significant number of both women and men who "report feeling generally impotent and castrated and find themselves being treated by others as though they were asexual" (Wagner-Lampl & Oliver, 1994, p. 269). The fact is that misrepresentation has been an issue for women in general, so its effect on women with impaired vision has not been as prominent as that on their male counterparts, who, but for the myths about visual impairment, would be subjected to representational empowerment.

Based on the first thesis of visual-sexual deficiency, because not only generative power but physical strength is linked with vision and the ability to love, it follows that frailty is inherent to visual impairment. Indeed, vitality and visual acuity are correlated positively in accordance with Darwinian selection: "Any improvement in the effectiveness of an eye, no matter how subtle and no matter how deeply buried in internal tissues, can contribute to the animal's survival and reproductive success, and hence to the propagation of the genes that made the improvement" (Dawkins, 1986, p. 302). This scenario might make sense in the animal kingdom, but, as O'Farrell illustrates, does not translate into human society: "[R]esponding to what he understood as his disembodiment in

the cultural imagination as a blind man, the husband of my student understood her body to serve as evidence of his own: her swelling stomach and their child would be [. . .] sufficient and final proof to a knowing and neutering world that he had actually had sex" (1999, p. 218).

The same message of frailty can be found in the late nineteenth-century novel *The Light That Failed*, where Maisie finds Dick "down and done for - masterful no longer, but rather a little abject; neither an artist stronger than she, nor a man to be looked up to - only some blind one that sat in a chair and seemed on the point of crying" (Kipling, 1891/1988, p. 159). Moreover, it is evident in the early twentieth-century short story 'The Blind Man', where Maurice Pervin appears "strong-blooded and healthy, and, at the same time, cancelled" (Lawrence, 1920/1955, p. 357), that like eugenics this frailty and heterosexual inadequacy did not pass with the nineteenth century. Again the construct is of a castrating sighted woman, for it is the view of Maurice's wife Isabel that is being articulated, much as in the early twentieth-century novel *Invitation to the Waltz* it is in the view of the only woman with whom Timmy dances that he lacks "vitality" (Lehmann, 1932/1981, p. 247). Such representations serve the cause of both negative and positive eugenics, for, as potential partners, men with impaired vision are

disparaged and those with unimpaired vision are praised.

Literary representation often endorses a displacement of desire, the idea being that rather than the lover, it is love that visual impairment repels. In 'The Gift of Sight', for example, Kusum addresses her husband by saying, "I shall never allow you to make your home a hospital for the blind. You must marry again" (Tagore, p. 252). Instead of following this advice, Kusum's husband decides to remain in her life: "I buried my face in the pillow and wept tears of intense joy. I was blind, but he would not leave me! He would clutch me to his heart as a grieving man clings to his grief!" (p. 252). In other words, when blind, Kusum's status is reduced to that of a signifier of mourning for the love she was given when sighted. Visual impairment is represented in a way that causes her home to be displaced in favour of a hospital; her husband in favour of a nurse; and love in favour of duty. A comparable displacement can be found in *La Symphonie Pastorale*, for the pastor infantilises Gertrude by saying, "I persuaded myself I loved her as one loves an afflicted child. I tended her as one tends a sick person - and so I made a moral obligation, a duty of what was really a passionate inclination" (Gide, p. 50). Similarly, in *Invitation to the Waltz*, having expressed concerns that he has no "frothing and frisking in his life", Marigold explains why Timmy marries his nurse: "I mean loving wouldn't be enough. He wants somebody to take him for granted and make him feel ordinary and safe and practical, and she does that"

(Lehmann, pp. 289-90).

Though published almost a century on from 'The Gift of Sight', evidence of the same displacement of desire can be found in the late twentieth-century novel *The Insult*, for newly blinded Martin says, "Claudia offered to come and live with me. She'd cook, she'd clean. She'd see to my every need. Her face tilted eagerly. I tried to conceal my horror" (Thomson, 1996, p. 26). Thomson departs from Tagore in the attitude that his blind character is ascribed, for confronted with the same displacement of desire, Martin tries to "conceal" his "horror", whereas Kusum "buried" her face in a pillow and "wept tears of intense joy". This divergence can be interpreted as progress, for unlike the late-nineteenth-century blind character, her late-twentieth-century successor regards the displacement of desire with abhorrence. The interpretation is weakened if it is accepted that the role of castrated "blind man" is more unbearable than that of idealised "blind girl", but since both are stiflingly restrictive for people with impaired vision, Tagore's use of the noun "joy" is less progressive.

Hypersexuality

As well as through the use of asexualised characters, the psychosocial castration of people with impaired vision is endorsed through direct warnings against hypersexuality. Samson is "not only a figure of castration, a

castration-figure, but, a bit like all the blind, like all one-eyed men or cyclopes, a sort of phalloid image, an unveiled sex from head to toe, vaguely obscene and disturbing" (Derrida, 1990/1993, p. 106). Emblematic of the Other, a social characteristic of "the blind" is sexual "deviance", so it follows that members are either asexual or hypersexual, that they are never simply sexual. In other words, an "obverse" image appears "where loss of control is defined by the label of infertility, the Other becomes overfertile" (Gilman, p. 24).

In order that the mechanics of the psychosocial shift from asexuality to hypersexuality can be illustrated, consideration might be given to the assertion that beautiful human features are a "language, devoted to the adaptive problem of how to visually signal one's own value as a potential mate and how to assess the mate value of others through their visuals" (Etcoff, 1999, p. 70). One response to such ideology has been to argue that due to the "strong visual element" of flirtation, "holding hands or sitting close together means for blind youngsters no more than looking deep into each other's eyes does mean for the seeing" (Lowenfeld, 1959/1981, p. 107). The problem with this contention is that it ascribes intimacy a degree of sexual profundity that depends on the sight or sightlessness of the persons involved. The parallel cannot stand close scrutiny, for it requires that gradual progress from flirtation to holding hands or sitting close together is not possible for

people with impaired vision. The idea is that the second level of sexual communication for people with unimpaired vision can be thought of as the first when observed in people with impaired vision. To negate the second level of sexual communication in this way serves only to ensure that progress to the third level is emphasised, the result being an illusion of hypersexuality. Hence, it has been postulated that because the "more or less casual avenues of satisfying sex curiosity" are "almost completely closed", the adolescent with impaired vision can only "achieve equivalent satisfaction" by "direct contact with those of the opposite sex. Such contact may be gained casually by the boy who makes it a point to brush girls closely in order to feel some parts of their bodies" (Lowenfeld, p. 105). Ignored is the fact that boys with unimpaired vision "brush" against girls in the very same way.

Literary representations of people with impaired vision are hypersexual in two ways, the overtly negative and, illustrated in *The Insult* by Martin and Nina, the ostensibly positive. The "whole thing with me", says Martin, "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, p. 109). The positive aspect of this hypersexuality is ostensible because Nina is "free" to deceive Martin, "less pressured" to please than when in a relationship with a sighted person. Put simply, it is to a mythical construct of visual impairment rather

than something about Martin that Nina is attracted. Hence, at Martin's suggestion that he is irreplaceable, Nina retorts, "What are you telling me? [. . .] You're the only blind man in the city?" (Thomson, p. 126).

While Thomson makes impaired vision sexually attractive by citing the appeal of being unseen, this is usually achieved through the ascription of "seductive tactility". In the late twentieth-century short story '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!" (Carver, 1983/1993, p. 292). Seductive tactility is implied through the way in which the narrator's wife allows Robert's hands to wander from her face down to her neck, as well as through the fact that she "never forgot it" and "even tried to write a poem about it" (Carver, p. 292). Indeed, though published at the brink of the twenty-first century, an extended and explicit example can be found in the novel *The Blind Assassin*. Again, the hand of a "blind man" wanders down from a woman's face, but in this instance, since it is the knife hand, and since it passes to the woman's throat, the evocation is initially of rape rather than seduction. Consequently, seductive tactility is all the more evident when the woman "trembles", "lets the red brocade fall away" and eagerly "guides" the assassin's hand (Atwood, 2000, p. 256).

Comparable illustration can also be found in the late twentieth-century novel

Eden Close, when the touch of the eponymous protagonist is described as "cool air", causing in Andrew a "deep internal shiver" (Shreve, 1989/1994, p. 145); and in the late twentieth-century novel *Blind Fear*, when Joanna feels the "fascinating sensation of being made love to by a man whose whole existence was ruled out of necessity by his own senses. No one had ever touched her or explored her as he did" (Norman, 2000, p. 200).

Although Thomson's Martin, Carver's Robert, Shreve's Eden, Atwood's X and Norman's Jack all display sexual prowess, it derives not from the characters but from the characteristic of blindness. The psychosocial influence of such depiction can be 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 the compensatory powers of "the blind"; second, the person with impaired vision is constructed as a threat to people with unimpaired vision; and third, if in relation to the myth a person with impaired vision is disappointing, it is likely that he or she will be rendered asexual in order that the illusion of "deviance" is retained.

With a comedic, nominal example provided by Dick Helder, the protagonist of Kipling's *The Light That Failed*, there can be no doubting that compulsive masturbation is the overtly negative hypersexuality with which impaired vision is most commonly associated. As a symbolic extension of the infantile sexual theory in which the "organ" that is "so dear" to a boy "will be

taken away from him if he shows his interest in it too plainly" (Freud, 1910/1990, p. 186), there is a traditional deterrent against masturbation that specifies impaired vision as the result. Indeed, counsellors say that visual impairment is sometimes perceived by the bearer as a punishment, and the misbehaviour "in question is often some kind of sexual transgression - usually masturbation for male clients" (Wagner-Lampl & Oliver, p. 268). One implication of this causal relationship is that visual impairment represents not only the end of, but an end to, compulsive masturbation. Hence, the reader of *How Late It Was, How Late* is informed that "lying in bed", the newly-blinded Sammy thought about "having a wank; but he couldnay" (Kelman, p. 79). In these terms, since it is hypersexual people who lose their vision, but who upon doing so become asexual, the message is again that sexuality is displaced by visual impairment.

That said, as is implicit in the suggestion that "masturbation paranoia seems to have been greatest in [early-twentieth-century] institutions for the blind" (Humphries & Gordon, p. 103), it is often the case that compulsive masturbation is posited in a symptomatic relationship with impaired vision. In *The Insult*, for example, newly-blinded Martin lies awake at midnight, masturbating and fantasising about Nurse Janssen (Thomson, p. 30). The comedic explanation for this behaviour is that, unlike compulsive masturbators with unimpaired vision, those with impaired vision are

undeterred by the traditional threat. Underpinning this notion is the erroneous belief that "the blind" necessarily have no vision and, further, that when this is so the bearer is bound not to have a sexual partner. Thus, the paradoxical ascription is of an asexualising hypersexuality, a castrating libido that defines people with impaired vision as unfit for procreation.

In the early-nineteenth century homosexuality was rendered an effect of compulsive masturbation, to be perceived by the late-nineteenth century as the "manifestation" of an "inherent pattern of degeneracy" (Gilman, p. 70). Bearing in mind the commonplace - but erroneous - causal and symptomatic relationships between compulsive masturbation and visual impairment, as well as the assertion that "[p]erversion is the basic quality ascribed to the sexuality of the Other" (Gilman, p. 192), it is perhaps inevitable that constructs of overtly negative hypersexuality are often homosexual in their typology. In 'The Gift of Sight', for example, Kusum says, "I took Hemangini's hand and led her into my bedroom. I stroked her face and body, and could tell that her face was beautiful, and her age was not less than fourteen or fifteen" (Tagore, p. 259). The point to emphasise is in Hemangini's response, for although she "broke out in delicious laughter" initially, she goes on to ask, "What are you doing? [. . .] Are you trying to exorcize me or something?" (Tagore, p. 259).

Consideration should also be given to the homoerotic imagery of the

barn scene in 'The Blind Man'. Attracted by "a grinding noise", Bertie is said to have discovered Maurice in his "shirt-sleeves", "holding the handle of a turnip-pulper", "pulping sweet roots"; the reader is informed that Bertie's gaze became fixed on a "half-wild" cat that was "rubbing" at Maurice's leg, "clawing at his thigh affectionately", as well as on the "slow, stooping motion" with which it was "caressed"; and, further, Bertie is said to have been "shy and stiff" when Maurice asked, "Do you mind if I touch you?" (Lawrence, pp. 362-3). Again, the point on which to focus is the way that the advances of the blind character are received. Under the "power of the blind man, as if hypnotised", Bertie is said to have "shrank away instinctively", to have agreed to being touched "out of very philanthropy", to have "suffered" as Maurice "stretched out a strong, naked hand", to have "stood almost annihilated, unable to answer", to have "quivered with revulsion", to have "stood as if in a swoon, unconscious, imprisoned" (Lawrence, pp. 362-4).

While Lawrence's narrative is of the early-twentieth century, similar constructs of homosexuality can be found in a relatively recent publication, for Jack, the protagonist of *Blind Fear*, possesses a mysterious power that causes friends Szabo and Lamb to fall in love with him (Norman, pp. 376, 293). While the representation of homosexuality among people with impaired vision is obviously not negative in itself, it becomes so due to the ascription of "inexplicable peculiarity". In each example the author invokes special powers

that define the blind character as not sexual but hypersexual. This construction is beneficial to the cause of negative eugenics, for, like asexuality and compulsive masturbation, homosexuality among “the blind” poses no threat to the sight of the species. The implicit message is that as long as “the sighted” and “the blind” do not procreate together, the “stock” will remain “pure”.

Conclusion

A dichotomy is apparent, for people with impaired vision are depicted either as asexual or hypersexual. However, the article has shown that common to both aspects of this dichotomy is a message of castration. The opening reference to the unconscious significance of blindness as castration in people with impaired vision was perplexing, but has been found to correspond with literary themes of sexual deficiency, frailty, displaced desire and infantilisation. It must be acknowledged, therefore, that representational asexuality contains a psychosocially castrating message, defining people with impaired vision as unfit for procreation. As in the over zealous sex segregation of early-twentieth-century institutions, this regime of castration and control is indicative of a belief in negative eugenics, of a belief in the Otherness, the mysterious seductive powers, the hypersexuality and the overfertility of people with impaired

vision. The sense of a hidden warning means that representational hypersexuality can also have a psychosocially castrating influence, for it too defines people with impaired vision as an inappropriate choice of love object.

Judging by the findings of Blank, Dodds, O'Farrell, Wagner-Lampl and Oliver, some people feel castrated as a result of their impaired vision, from which it follows that unimpaired vision is a sufficient condition of sexual empowerment. Though in itself irrational, this evocation of eugenics is given currency through literary representation, a critical awareness of which is beneficial not only to people with impaired vision, but to the professionals with whom they are associated. Irrational beliefs are "especially important for a counselor and teacher to understand, because they are carried in an idiosyncratic way by each client" (Wagner-Lampl & Oliver, p. 276). Nobody whose life has been touched by both visual impairment and literature can assert wholeheartedly that her or his understanding of the latter has never influenced that of the former. Nevertheless, the aim of the article has been to demonstrate that this influence can be diffused through critical discussion, a discourse that is also informed by the work of Monbeck (1973), Kirtley (1975) and Kleege (1999).

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