

Literary Treatments of Blindness from Sophocles to Saramago

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Introduction

There is perhaps no other identity that has been so deeply transcribed into myth and metaphor as the blind man. And who can blame the writers who have contributed to this phenomenon? It can be such a rich metaphor—the blind man sees things nobody else can see. The figure of the blind person has high potential for symbolism, and it creates beautiful irony. The readers' expectations are flipped, and the person who should have the least amount of information has the most wisdom. Or perhaps the corollary is even more important, which is that the people with the most amount of information understand the least. The subject of blindness and insight also provide opportunities for wordplay, since language often crystallizes abstract thoughts by relating them to sight. And does it not make a story interesting to imagine the world through blind eyes, using only the four remaining senses?

Perhaps for these reasons, and perhaps for others, blindness plays a prominent role in literature and is frequently turned into a metaphor associated with wisdom or divinity. There are certainly other ways to interpret blindness, but literature consistently links blindness and insight in one way or another. In this project I hope to trace blindness through several important works of literature spanning various time periods and genres, observing how the literary understanding of blindness has developed. Early works establish the connection between blindness and wisdom primarily through the blind prophet figure. The short stories of the twentieth century never completely abandon the metaphor of blindness as wisdom, but the symbolism becomes more sophisticated, and the depictions of blindness become more realistic. Each of the short stories expands the theme of blindness by complicating the blind prophet figure and posing questions that anticipate the work of the of disability studies. Finally, José Saramago's novel *Blindness*

deconstructs the glorification of blindness and explores the blind identity and its interaction with competing identities.

Part One

Canonical Literature

Early writers create a powerful relationship between blindness and wisdom. In *Oedipus the King*, Sophocles establishes the blind prophet figure, whose qualities are projected in varying degrees onto blind characters in other works. The events surrounding Shakespeare's blind man in *King Lear* are modeled after Sophocles' play, but Shakespeare expands his depiction of blindness to include physical consequences of the condition. Flaubert incorporates the blind prophet figure in *Madame Bovary*, which belongs to a genre quite removed from the dramatic tragedies. Finally, in "Sonnet XIX" and *Paradise Lost*, Milton provides first-person accounts of blindness that overlap with previous depictions of prophetic eyes and also contribute the consolation of the invisible community of the blind. These canonical writers establish a lasting tradition of granting blind characters compensatory abilities.

Sophocles

Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* fuses blindness and divine wisdom, making it a suitable origin for a literary arc that progresses from abstract glorification to more complicated depictions of blindness. The play's structure relies on the ironic combination of blindness and insight, namely in the characters Teiresias and Oedipus. Teiresias epitomizes the portrayal of the ennobled blind man; he is stoic, prophetic, and seemingly unhindered by his affliction. According to many traditions, though not explicitly stated in *Oedipus the King*, Teiresias received his divine wisdom from Zeus in compensation for losing his sight.¹ Oedipus, however, is sighted throughout much of the play, and he gouges out his eyes after he learns that he killed

¹ notably in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

his father and married his mother. Blindness gives shape to Oedipus's dynamic character—when he is ignorant, he sees; when he understands Teiresias's divine wisdom, he is blind. Both Teiresias and Oedipus embody the metaphorical connection between blindness and insight.

In the beginning of *Oedipus the King*, the Chorus describes Teiresias as a prophet and alludes to his blindness. The city of Thebes suffers from a terrible plague, and the Chorus, unaware that Oedipus has already summoned the prophet for counsel, urges the king to seek the wisdom of Teiresias. The Chorus says, "I know that what the Lord Teiresias/ sees is most often what the lord Apollo/ sees. If you should inquire of this from him/ you might find out most clearly" (Sophocles, 284-287). Sophocles's introduction of Teirisias focuses not on his blindness, but rather on the divine sight he possesses. The first word that follows his name is "sees," which draws attention to the irony of Teiresias's set of traits. The same word "sees" is also the first word in the following line. This symmetry draws attention to the relationship between the way "Teiresias/ sees" and the way "Apollo/ sees". According to the Chorus, his vision is like that of the gods. Teiresias sees the world outside of time, as if from the sweeping perspective of Mount Olympus. His inability to see the physical world has allowed him to see past it. As demonstrated by their verses, the Chorus primarily identifies Teiresias as a prophet. The Chorus only alludes to his blindness when they say, "Led by these men the godly prophet comes" (298), but Oedipus makes Teiresias's condition more explicit when he says, "You have no eyes" (302). While we would expect a man with defective eyes to be incapable of seeing, Teiresias sees, and herein lies the irony.

Blindness and insight are only two opposing traits contained within Teiresias. Actually, he occupies the borderlands of several dichotomies. He is both blind and sighted, and he has both

human and godlike knowledge. But he has also spent seven years of his life as a woman,² which means that his knowledge transcends gender differentiation. And perhaps this ambiguity is his defining characteristic; he is able to oscillate freely between several such dichotomies.

Teiresias's ambiguity allows him to exist rather abstractly in the beginning of the text. At first, nobody asks him technical questions about his powers; instead, they embrace the magic. Once Oedipus becomes suspicious of Teiresias's intentions, however, the king's description of the prophet becomes more physical in order to challenge Teiresias's claims. During the course of their conversation, Teiresias accuses Oedipus of murdering Laius, the former king of Thebes. Oedipus, who is ignorant of the crime he committed, defends himself by discrediting the authority of Teiresias. In his anger he says, "This wily beggar who has only eyes/ for his own gains, but blindness in his skill./ For, tell me, where have you seen clear, Teiresias,/ with your prophetic [eyes³]? When the dark singer/ the sphinx, was in your country, did you speak/ word of deliverance to its citizens?" (389-392). After being accused of murder, Oedipus is concerned with rescinding all that he previously said about the prophet. In contrast to his abstract praises of Teiresias' hidden sight, Oedipus shifts his focus to the physical aspects of vision, thereby suggesting the absurdity of the notion of prophecy. "If he has prophetic sight, then let's talk about his prophetic eyes," Oedipus seems to mock. The prophetic eyes of the blind, which are a defining characteristic of the blind prophet, seem to originate here in the context of mockery. It is a ludicrous image created by the king in an attempt to challenge the legitimacy of Teiresias' prophetic accusation. But it is an image that is rescued from absurdity when the prophecy is

² a detail not explicitly stated in *Oedipus the King*, but true in other works

³ David Grene worked on two translations of *Oedipus the King*. In one translation, he writes "prophetic mind," but in another translation, he writes "prophetic mind." Sophocles. *Oedipus the King*. Trans. David Grene.

realized. Once it becomes evident that Teiresias was correct in his allegations, his legitimacy to the reader, if it was ever lost, is restored. But by this time the discussion of the prophetic eyes has already taken place, so to reclaim Teiresias as a seer is to accept the reality of his prophetic eyes. Although Teiresias's authenticity is temporarily on trial, the text ultimately validates everything that the prophet says. Sophocles confirms his character; Teiresias is a prophet, and his prophetic eyes exist in place of physical eyes.

At the end of the play, the focus of blindness and wisdom shifts to Oedipus. As the king continues to learn information about his past, Oedipus becomes increasingly aware that he has murdered his father and married his mother. Following his final realization, the king discovers Jocasta, his wife and mother, hanging from a noose. The Second Messenger narrates, "[Oedipus] tore the brooches—/ the gold chased brooches fastening her robe—/ away from her and lifting them high/ dashed them into his own eyeballs, shrieking out/ such things as: they will never see the crime/ I have committed or had done upon me!" (1267-1273). The final image that the king sees, presumably, is the naked body of his mother, whom he exposed by removing the pins of her robe. Oedipus blinds himself in order to avoid further visual confrontation of his mistakes. However, he cannot escape the divine understanding that originated with Teiresias. Although he can no longer see the physical manifestations of his incest, namely his children, he understands that he killed his father and married his mother. At the beginning of the play, Oedipus is a sighted man who was ignorant of reality, and as the play concludes, he is a blind man who sees the true and tragic story of his life. The king says, "Darkness!/ Horror of darkness enfolding, resistless unspeakable visitant sped by an ill wind in haste!/ madness and stabbing pain and memory/ of evil deeds I have done!" (1503-1506). His language recalls the earlier descriptions of Teiresias. Sophocles places "darkness," which is synonymous in this case with blindness,

alongside “memory,” or knowledge, “of evil deeds I have done.” Oedipus is only knows the truth once he is blind, and he becomes the second character in which blindness and wisdom are fused.

It may be futile to attempt to identify the very origins of the mythical blind seer, but for the sake of this project, *Oedipus the King* functions as one of the earliest and most influential literary works that promotes the metaphor of blindness as a portal to profound wisdom. My argument is not that *Oedipus the King* is a fundamentally flawed literary work or that blindness as means to deeper knowledge is a poor metaphor. *Oedipus the King* is a powerfully moving tragedy that employs effective metaphors that were, at best, original, and at worst, thoughtfully borrowed and expanded. Both blind characters are compelling. Teiresias is an ambiguous figure that blurs the lines between accepted dichotomies, making him a useful and provocative character. And Oedipus is a tragic hero guilty of the poetic “hamartia” whose blindness serves as a powerful metaphor that provides additional form to the king’s transformation. My argument is that this abstract and poetic understanding of blindness is only one way to write about blindness, and that other interpretations of blindness have been underexplored due to literature’s gravitation to the blind seer.

William Shakespeare

King Lear, written over two thousand years after the life of Sophocles, depicts blindness in accordance with the model established by *Oedipus the King*. Eyes and blindness function as metaphors for wisdom, and the blind character, the Earl of Gloucester, only understands an important truth about his sons once he loses his sight. Both Oedipus and Gloucester are ignorant of their mistakes prior to becoming blind, and both are lonely and helpless once they lose their sight. But Shakespeare gives greater attention to the physical consequences of blindness, and in this way, he separates himself from Sophocles. Gloucester cannot recognize his own son, and he

falls into despair. Gloucester is a tragic character like Oedipus, but unlike *Oedipus the King*, *King Lear* does not have a blind prophet like Teiresias, who is regal and largely independent. In spite of the absence of a blind prophet in Shakespeare's play, blindness functions comparably in *Oedipus the King* and *King Lear*, because both texts use blindness as an ironic metaphor for gaining wisdom—a metaphor that becomes increasingly engrained in the language of *King Lear*. In his *Literary Theory, A Very Short Introduction*, Jonathan Culler writes, "Some theorists have even embraced the paradoxical conclusion that language is fundamentally figurative and that what we call literal language consists of figures whose figurative nature has been forgotten" (Culler, 71). Using this model, I argue that in many instances, the figurative nature of language related to sight has been forgotten. The metaphor loses its figurative nature since characters can seamlessly shift from the corporeal to the symbolic. The figure of speech is all too familiar, and it is this familiarity which allows for the crossover. We expect the sighted to see the world accurately, and this expectation forms the paradox: the blind man sees.

Gloucester's revelation is patterned after the blinding of Oedipus. Gloucester is a sympathetic character who does not initially understand that his evil son, Edmund, has betrayed him. In the climactic Scene Seven of Act Three, the Duke of Cornwall gouges out Gloucester's eyes and says, "Out, vile jelly!/ Where is thy luster now?" (Shakespeare, 3.7.82-83), and Gloucester responds, "All dark and comfortless. Where's my son Edmund?/ Edmund, enkindle all the sparks of nature/ To quit this horrid act" (3.7.84-86). Gloucester uses the word "dark" to describe the sensation of blindness, which contains several meanings. On the literal plane, Gloucester cannot perceive light, but the word also describes the isolation he experiences. He pairs the word "dark" with "comfortless," which suggests that there is no one there to alleviate his pain. He is lonely, which is why his next line is a request for Edmund. Gloucester asks him to

“enkindle all the sparks of nature,” which evokes an image of a light-producing flame. Though he does not mean it literally, Gloucester is begging his son to restore the light in his life. Regan, Cornwall’s wife, reveals to Gloucester the truth about his two sons. Gloucester immediately understands the error of his ways, and he says, “O my follies! Then Edgar was abus’d./ Kind gods, forgive me that, and prosper him!” (3.7.90-91). Gloucester realizes that he has been tricked by his illegitimate son, Edmund, and has wronged the true son who loves him, Edgar. The revelation takes place immediately after his eyes are mutilated by Cornwall. This is reminiscent of *Oedipus the King* in the way that the characters only know the truth once blinded, and thus, the same paradox is formed in both plays. The sighted man is only able to see the truth once he becomes blind.

In *King Lear*, the association of seeing and understanding is foundational to the language of the characters’ conversation. The language in the play is saturated with references to eyes, sight, and blindness. A simple concordance search for “eye” displays 52 instances in the play, and although they are occasionally nothing more than organs behaving as expected, eyes often symbolize understanding. In one such case, Goneril requires her father, Lear, to dismiss half of his one hundred knights who attend him. Unwilling to comply, Lear leaves, and Goneril argues with her husband, Albany, about her poor treatment of Lear. Albany finds her too harsh, but she says that they should fear her father more than they trust him. Albany says, “How far your eyes may pierce I cannot tell;/ Striving to better, oft we mar what’s well” (1.4.332-332). He means that Goneril should be careful about how she opposes her father. She has the throne as it is, and she greedily seeks more power by robbing her father of what remains of his. Albany speaks of eyes figuratively in this passage. For him, eyes represent an ability to see or understand the

future and plan accordingly. He is worried that Goneril's eyes do not pierce very far into the unknown but only see the immediate future.

In another passage, Gloucester uses the sight metaphor to express his hopelessness. Gloucester has just been blinded, and he is being led by an old man. He tells the old man to leave him alone, but the old man protests. He says "You cannot see your way" (4.1.18), to which Gloucester responds, "I have no way, and therefore want no eyes;/ I stumbled when I saw" (4.1.19-20). The old man speaks to Gloucester in a practical manner, but Gloucester responds with lofty words. When he says that he stumbled when I saw, he is describing the time he had eyes and still believed the lies of Edmund. His eyes did not allow him to accurately perceive what was before him. He is ashamed of his mistakes and decides to wander aimlessly. This exchange between the old man and Gloucester exemplifies the larger phenomenon in which sight and wisdom become linguistically interchangeable.

Although Shakespeare's version of blindness is comparable to Sophocles's metaphoric depiction, *King Lear* does not include the stoicism as embodied in Teiresias. Instead, Shakespeare's blind man is truly helpless. Gloucester is unable to recognize his good son, Edgar, once he is blind. Edgar pretends to be a madman and leads his devastated father through a heath. In hopes of rekindling his father's spirits, Edgar tempts Gloucester to jump off a precipice that does not exist. Edgar says, "You are now within a foot/ Of th'extreme verge. For all beneath the moon/ Would I not leap upright" (4.6.26-28). Gloucester jumps and falls, and Edgar pretends to be a gentleman at the bottom of the cliff. Edgar says, "Ten masts at each make not the altitude/ Which thou hast perpendicularly fell./ Thy life's a miracle. Speak yet again" (Shakespeare, 4.6.55-57). Edgar successfully tricks his father into believing that he survived an enormous fall. Gloucester responds as Edgar hopes he would. He says, "Henceforth I'll bear/ Affliction till it do

cry out itself/ 'Enough, enough,' and die" (4.6.77-79). Gloucester believes that his survival is the miraculous will of the gods, just as Edgar says, and he vows to bear his affliction with dignity. Shakespeare's blind man is more helpless than either Teiresias or Oedipus. Gloucester requires an escort just as they do, but he perceives much less than they. He has difficulty recognizing familiar people, and his son is able to trick him easily.

Ultimately, Shakespeare uses blindness as a metaphor for wisdom in the same way that Sophocles does. The ironic pairing of blindness and wisdom provides poetic shape to the dynamic characters in both texts. But Shakespeare does not include a blind prophet like Teiresias who transcends the physical difficulties of blindness. In contrast, Gloucester experiences the physical consequences of losing his sight. Shakespeare's interpretation of blindness is still highly metaphoric, but he includes physical realities that Sophocles omits.

Gustave Flaubert

Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is characterized by realism, but the blind beggar in the novel is notably insightful (if not prophetic), operating within the ironic patterns explored by writers like Sophocles and Shakespeare. Jonathan Culler writes, "The irony of the Blind Man's appearance at three crucial moments in Emma's life and the implicit commentary provided by his songs and actions gives a metaphorical neatness to her fate. But generally such gross dramatic ironies play only a minor role in Flaubert's novels" (Flaubert, 480). Culler observes that the poetic manner in which the blind man functions is in opposition to the very nature of Flaubert's work. The blind seer figure is so appealing that it appears even in *Madame Bovary*, which otherwise contains highly realistic characters and events.

Flaubert's prose is exacting, and he does not structure his plot predictably or symmetrically. Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, a contemporary of Flaubert, writes, "In the case

of the author of *Madame Bovary*, we come upon an altogether different manner, another kind of inspiration and, in truth, upon a different generation. The ideal is gone, the lyrical has died out; it can no longer hold us. Stern and implacable truth has entered art as the last word of experience” (Flaubert, 392). According to Saint-Beuve, *Madame Bovary* has offered readers something more captivating than lyrical language. Later in his critical response, he writes more on Flaubert’s style: “In many places and under many different forms, I detect symptoms of a new literary manner: scientific, experimental, adult, powerful, a little harsh. Such are the outstanding characteristics of the leaders of the new generation [...] Flaubert handles the pen like others the scalpel” (Flaubert, 403). Saint-Beuve posits that *Madame Bovary* is pioneering a literary style that is congruent with the rational, scientific culture in which it was written.

One scene that is typical of Flaubert’s writing style happens after the operation by Charles Bovary on Hippolyte, who has clubfoot. Five days after the doctor’s primitive procedure, Charles is called back to his patient, who is suffering the aftermath. Charles removes the box that was designed to promote healing, “and an awful spectacle came into view. The outlines of the foot disappeared in such a swelling that the entire skin seemed about to burst; moreover, the leg was covered with bruises caused by the famous machine” (Flaubert, 145), and three days later, “a livid tumescence spread over the entire leg, and a black liquid oozed from several blisters” (145). Flaubert writes meticulously about the harsh realities of medical failure instead of formulating abstract metaphors that vaguely depict a corporeal horror.

The prophetic aura of the blind man stands out as a deviation from the rest of the otherwise realistic *Madame Bovary*. His physical description is consistent with the narrative style when Flaubert writes, “There was a wretched creature [...] he revealed two gaping bloody orbits in the place of eyelids. The flesh hung I red strips; and from them flowed a liquid which

congealed into green scales reaching down to his nose with its black nostrils, which kept sniffing convulsively” (210), but the song he sings functions to provide ironic shape to a story that resists shape. During his first appearance, his song appears to be little more than a lyrical poem that relates to Emma, but only because he does not sing, or the reader is not permitted to hear, the song in its entirety. The blind man says, “Often the warmth of a summer day/ Makes a young girl dream her heart away” (210). Flaubert hints at the prophetic eyes of the blind man in this first scene, but since it has not yet abandoned the world of realism, his lines can be read as coincidental, like an inexact fortune teller. Such lines are too vague to be tied directly to Emma, but they do create suspicion that the blind man knows more than he naturally would.

However, the blind man appears for the third time just before Emma’s death, at which point he completes his song. He says,

Often the warmth of a summer day
 Makes a young girl dream her heart away
 To gather up all the new-cut stalks
 Of wheat left by the scythe’s cold swing.
 Nanette bends over as she walks
 Toward the furrows from where they spring.
 The wind blew very hard that day
 It blew her petticoat away. (257-258)

The song’s resulting vulgar image is suggestive of Emma’s promiscuity. Just as Nanette is exposed to the world around her, so Emma allowed herself to be exposed to men who were not her husband. The blind beggar does not give the reader reason to believe that he is aware of his prophetic voice, but this does not make him less of a seer. He may be ignorant of the significance

of his words, but he is Flaubert's vessel of insight, intentionally placed by the author in this climactic scene, echoing the powers of the blind seers that precede him in literature. Blindness as wisdom is such an enticing metaphor that Flaubert chooses to incorporate it in spite of its metaphysical connotations.

Flaubert's writing style deviates from the dramatic structures of Sophocles and Shakespeare, but his expression of blindness is strikingly similar. Flaubert's blind man is isolated from society like Oedipus and Gloucester, and he is a prophet like Teiresias. Like all three previous blind men, Flaubert's blind beggar knows more than sighted characters. However, unlike Teiresias, the blind beggar in *Madame Bovary* may not be aware that he is prophesying. If the blind beggar's prophecy is merely coincidental, the blind beggar is not necessarily an abstract, impossible character. But Flaubert's placement of the blind beggar in the novel makes him decidedly dramatic and intentional since he gives, according to Culler, a "metaphorical neatness to [Emma's] fate," and in this way he adheres to the literary tradition of blindness as a metaphor for wisdom.

John Milton

John Milton is a particularly interesting writer of blindness in literature, as he himself went blind prior to crafting his most famous works. There is very little distance between John Milton and the speakers of both "Sonnet XIX" and *Paradise Lost*. The speakers are blind and ascribe to the Christian worldview, and the poems are written in the first person point of view, which distinguishes Milton's poems from other works of literature. Milton's blind man (which could be read as Milton himself) is still a helpless blind man who receives prophetic abilities in compensation for his blindness. "Sonnet XIX" and *Paradise Lost* suggest that Sophocles',

Shakespeare's, and Flaubert's depictions of blindness are not incongruent with Milton's own experiences with real blindness.

In order to better understand Milton's relationship to his own blindness in his epic poem, it may be useful to first spend some time analyzing his "Sonnet XIX," in which the speaker expresses his attitudes and consolations surrounding his blindness. Below is Milton's "Sonnet XIX," often referred to as "On His Blindness."

When I consider how my light is spent
 Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
 And that one talent which is death to hide
 Lodg'd with me useless, though my soul more bent
 To serve therewith my Maker, and present
 My true account, lest he returning chide,
 "Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"
 I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent
 That murmur, soon replies: "God doth not need
 Either man's work or his own gifts: who best
 Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
 Is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed
 And post o'er land and ocean without rest:
 They also serve who only stand and wait." (Greenblatt, 1942)

The first stark opposition is the "light/dark" dichotomy presented in the first two lines. What is does the light reveal about the dark, and vice versa? If the reader is willing to accept that the poem is actually about the speaker's reflection on his loss of vision, then light is a metaphor for

sight and dark is a metaphor for blindness. These opposing terms are dependent on one another for meaning. Blindness is meaningless without reference to sight, since blindness is merely the absence of vision. The “light” explains the “dark” in the poem. Situated between the words “light” and “dark” is the phrase “half my days,” which draws a distinct line between the sighted and blinded portions of the speaker’s life. The sequence is important. First there is light, then there is the near-mid-life point of the speaker, and then there is dark. This opposition in sequence, which reflects the deteriorating vision of the speaker, is the situation to which the remainder of the poem reacts.

The speaker references the biblical Parable of the Talents,⁴ which teaches that Christians should be productive according to that which they have been given. In the midst of his blindness, the speaker in “Sonnet XIX” believes that he is useless and considers, “Doth God exact day-labour, light deny’d.” The speaker brings attention to the opposing beliefs he is trying to reconcile—God expects him to labor as my his daylight (or circumstantial ability) allows, but God has given him no daylight. “Day-labour” and “light deny’d” are placed next to each other, highlighting the contrast between the duty to labor and reality of disability. The speaker is unable to fulfill his role as a laborer. He does not take responsibility for his disability, and he questions whether or not God will hold him accountable.

The three concluding lines juxtapose the “thousands at his bidding speed” and those “who only stand and wait.” God has given the first set of Christians the ability to perform work, and they serve God actively as they are capable. The second group is paralyzed by powers outside themselves, and they serve God passively through their submissive posture. The speaker is drawing a connection between two seemingly different groups of Christians. By noting that “God doth not need / Either man’s work or his gifts,” the poem suggests that it is quite possible

⁴ Matthew 25:14-30

for both the eager and the disabled to serve God. The speaker finds his place in God's kingdom by gracefully bearing his blindness. The poet's conclusion is that God deems both groups equally able to perform their appointed tasks. While the poet is not entirely content with his role in the world, he finds peace through justification of his inability to labor.

In his most famous work, *Paradise Lost*, Milton writes an invocation to his Muse requesting divine inspiration. By doing so, he admits himself into the tradition of epic poets; one of the earliest is Homer, who is traditionally considered to have been blind. However, Milton appears to invoke the Holy Spirit rather than one of the nine Muses of ancient Greece. While the "heav'nly Muse" he addresses could refer to one of the nine Greek Muses, Milton's devout Christian beliefs, expressed through his writing, suggest that he would find it far too blasphemous to address gods outside of Christianity, and thus it is fair to assume he appeals to the Holy Spirit. In Book III, the poetic voice claims that he was "taught by the heav'nly Muse to venture down/ The dark descent" (Milton, 3.19-20).

His invocation to the Holy Spirit uses language that relies on light as a primary image. Milton cautiously addresses the Christian God, and he quotes the Bible to avoid describing God falsely. He writes, "May I express thee unblam'd?/ since God is light" (3.3). The passage he quotes from the Bible is found in 1 John, which says, "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all [...] But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:5-7). This biblical passage uses the light image to describe God's complete separation from sin. While there may be elements of physical light, the writer of 1 John is clearly more interested in aspects of God that deal with his character, such as holiness, righteousness, and purity.

Milton, however, responds to the writer of 1 John in a way that does not neglect the physical implications of the light metaphor. Milton writes, “Thee I revisit safe,/ And feel thy sovran vital Lamp; but thou/ Revisit’st not these eyes, that rowle in vain/ To find thy piercing ray, and find no dawn;/ So thick a drop serene hath quench thir orbs,/ Or dim suffusion veild” (Milton, 3.21-26). In these lines, Milton refers to the “vital Lamp,” which is the source of God’s light. Until these lines, God’s light has remained spiritual, as it was in the case of the referenced biblical passage, but Milton goes on to say that the light from the lamp does not “revisit his eyes,” which are physical. He also says that his eyes cannot “find thy piercing ray,” suggesting further physicality. This oscillation between spiritual and reality is seemingly problematic, but Milton’s complications are intentional.

His blindness appears to keep him from seeing God’s light, which Milton momentarily suggests is physical, but later in the invocation, he writes, “So much the rather thou Celestial light/ Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers/ Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence/ Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell/ Of things invisible to mortal sight” (3.51-55). In this passage, Milton asks God to grant him a spiritual set of eyes to see God’s spiritual light. While he cannot see “the Book of Knowledge fair” (3.47), that is, creation which reveals God’s character, he claims that he will be able to see invisible things with his new set of eyes. These eyes echo the tradition of Teiresias’s “prophetic eyes” (Sophocles, 391), which allow him to see the invisible future. Just as in the cases of Teiresias, Oedipus, Gloucester, and the blind beggar, Milton’s speaker is able to profoundly understand the world only in conjunction with his blindness.

Milton furthers the connection between his poem and Sophocles’ play by actually including Teiresias’s name in the text. Milton writes, “Those other two equal’d with me in Fate,/

So were I equal'd with them in renown,/ Blind Thamyris and blind Maeonides,/ And Teiresias and Phineus Prophets old" (3.33-36). By comparing himself to these blind prophets, and specifically Teiresias, Milton identifies his narrator as a recreation of the blind prophet. Milton embraces the same literary paradox written by literary masters before him.

Milton is unique among the writers because his blind speaker does not experience the profound isolation that the other characters endure. Milton's speaker believes that God has afflicted him according to his own purposes, and he views himself as a part of a larger group of people "who only stand and wait" as a way to serve God. He still belongs to the group of writers who interpret blindness primarily as a metaphor for wisdom, but he contributes the consolation of an implied community.

Part Two

Short Stories of the Twentieth Century

The canonical depictions of blindness influence contemporary writers such as D. H. Lawrence, H. G. Wells, and Raymond Carver, specifically in their short stories "The Blind Man," "The Country of the Blind," and "Cathedral," respectively. Each written in the twentieth century, these stories reflect earlier depictions of the blind by investing in the compensatory abilities of the blind. Lawrence's blind man is a romanticized and rooted character with depth and immediacy, Wells writes about a peaceful and thriving society that has adapted to blindness, and Carver writes a demystified version of Lawrence's story in which the blind man still possesses an exceptional ability to establish intimacy through physical touch. Although these depictions of blindness resemble the works of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Flaubert, and Milton, they are not mere recreations. The short stories of the twentieth century complicate the blind identity in ways that anticipate Saramago's detachment from canonical traditions. Lawrence,

Wells, and Carver complicate the literary understanding of blindness by exploring the cultural nature of disability and recognizing the harmful consequences of stereotyping the blind. These short stories serve as a midpoint between the glorification of blindness found in canonical works and Saramago's inversion of the association between blindness and insight.

D. H. Lawrence

Lawrence largely glorifies blindness with the compensatory qualities of earlier works. His blind man, Maurice, becomes more in touch with his own humanity after losing his sight in Flanders. He and his wife experience a closeness they had not previously known, and according to Lawrence, Maurice "did not even regret the loss of his sight in these times of dark, palpable joy" (Lawrence, 55). He believes that blindness has enriched his life more than it has limited him, and his marriage thrives. Lawrence writes, "They talked and sang and read together in a wonderful and unspeakable intimacy" (55). Blindness, in spite of its intuitive drawbacks, plants in Maurice a nearly supernatural joy.

Lawrence also grants Maurice a sort of earthiness in compensation for his blindness. He writes that Maurice "moved about almost unconsciously in his familiar surroundings, dark though everything was. He seemed to know the presence of objects before he touched them" (64). Blindness, for Lawrence, is a return to an immediacy from which vision detracts. Maurice embraces the idea of interacting with the world through touch rather than sight: "He did not try to remember, to visualize. He did not want to. The new way of consciousness substituted itself in him" (64). Lawrence reiterates that Maurice prefers blindness to vision because of the depth it affords.

Maurice's mysterious immediacy is further displayed when his wife, Isabel looks for him in the stable. It is a rainy night; she cannot see anything in the stable, and her hearing has less

utility since the rain presumably acts as an auditory camouflage. She is not adapted to the environment, and she searches for stability. Lawrence writes, “She entered the stable, and drew the lower half of the door shut, holding the upper part close” (61). By keeping the upper part of the door close to her, she maintains physical stability in an otherwise disorienting environment. She also finds that the “horses were so terrifyingly near to her, in the invisible” (62). The text offers no reason to believe that Isabel is normally afraid of the horses. Instead, the darkness is the agent of terror for Isabel. Once she finds Maurice, she even projects her fear of the darkness onto him. Lawrence writes, “Whilst he was so utterly invisible she was afraid of him” (62). The darkness continues to instill in Isabel fears that would otherwise be irrational. Her fear of her husband subsides, though, as she looks for stability. She asks her husband for his arm, and “she could feel the clever, careful, strong contact of his feet with the earth, as she balanced against him. For a moment he was a tower of darkness to her, as if he rose out of the earth” (63). Her experience in the dark stable has been frightening and destabilizing, and she turns to her blind husband for comfort and security. The text describes him as rising out of the earth as though he were an extension of the ground, which supports the claim that Maurice gains immediacy with the earth in compensation for his blindness.

Maurice experiences the same scene very differently, since nothing is out of the ordinary for him. He has learned to navigate in spite of his blindness, and he functions in this environment just as well as in any other. The darkness is certainly irrelevant to him. As for the rain, the sound could actually serve him advantageously. According to blind writer and theologian John Hull, the “rain brings out the contours of what’s around you in that it introduces a continuous blanket of differentiated and specialized sound—uninterrupted—which fills the whole of the audible environment” (Middleton). In contrast to Isabel, who is essentially disabled in the stable and

requires physical guidance, Maurice is quite capable of functioning independently. In fact, he is so well adapted to the environment that he can lead another person. In this passage, Lawrence not only dialogues with the past by glorifying Maurice's blindness, but he also anticipates a literary interest in the blind identity and normalcy by suggesting that the blind character can have a functional advantage to a sighted character in a given situation.

In addition to the physical consequences—good and bad—of Maurice's blindness, Lawrence explores the social consequences of blindness and demonstrates that they, too, are contextual. Maurice loses his sight in the military prior to the beginning of the short story, and the couple adapts their behavior to promote intimacy, allowing them to be “newly and remotely happy” (55). The couple is able to find new joy alongside one another, but they soon have a season of relapse. Lawrence writes, “A sense of burden overcame Isabel, a weariness [...]—a black misery” (55-56). The couple is able to maintain their love for each other, but their relationship looks much different than it did prior to his blindness. While the text provides virtually no origin for their marriage, no descriptions of their earlier lives, it does describe the direction they are going. Their marriage has become less symmetrical and more interdependent. It has become deeper and less social. They have become adapted to one another's needs, and consequentially, they have lost some of their ability to socialize with the normalized society. Lawrence writes, “She invited friends, she tried to give him some further connexion with the outer world. But it was no good. After all their joy and suffering, after their dark, great year of blindness and solitude and unspeakable nearness, other people seemed to them both shallow, prattling, rather impertinent” (56). Maurice and his wife intimately connect with each other, so much so that their other relationships have become shallow in comparison to their marriage. The small community of two has successfully adapted in order to include the sighted and the blind

equally. Although there are elements of dysfunction in the marriage, which is typical of any relationship, the marriage largely prospers as an isolated unit.

When the adapted couple comes into contact with the normalized world, their social functionality breaks down. Bertie, Isabel's cousin, joins them for dinner. The meal is awkward, and Maurice contributes very little to the conversation. Lawrence writes, "[Maurice] could not bear to be helped. Both Isabel and Bertie suffered: Isabel wondered why. She did not suffer when she was alone with Maurice. Bertie made her conscious of a strangeness" (68). The context of the couple's relationship has changed. For most of the previous year, they have lived in a social space—their home—that has adapted to their specific needs, but when Bertie arrives, his presence reminds Isabel that the social norms of her marriage are abnormal in the world outside her home.

Bertie does not know how to include Maurice in the dinner conversation. Bertie's attention gravitates toward the interesting oddities of Maurice, and then he unsuccessfully tries to find common ground with his blind host by discussing the smell of violets. Lawrence writes, "Bertie watched the static figure of the blind man, the delicate tactile discernment of the large, ruddy hands, and the curious mindless silence of the brow, above the scar. With difficulty he looked away, and without knowing what he did, picked up a little crystal bowl of violets from the table, and held them to his nose" (67). Bertie actively resists the urge to focus on what is strange and interesting to him since he knows that Maurice's blindness is not an appropriate topic of conversation. Instead, he frantically reaches for something that connects the three people at the table—the smell of violets. Isabel latches onto the topic of violets, and she enthusiastically encourages her husband to smell them. This is a well-intended but largely condescending gesture that further isolates Maurice from the conversation.

Lawrence further specifies the problem as communicative in the conclusion of the story. Paralleling the earlier stable scene with Maurice and Isabel, Bertie searches for Maurice in the barns. He finds him, and after some discussion regarding Isabel's well-being, Maurice says, "Touch my eyes, will you? – touch my scar" (73). Maurice's request is an invitation for Bertie to know the vulnerable areas of his life. It is an invitation for intimacy, and Bertie is cornered into compliance. Maurice says, "We shall know each other now, shan't we? We shall know each other now" (74). Maurice and Bertie both believe that they have bonded intimately, but their responses are quite different. While Maurice "was actually filled with hot, poignant love, the passion of friendship" (74), Bertie has the desire "to escape from this intimacy, this friendship, which had been thrust upon him" (75). Although their satisfaction with it differs, the intimacy certainly exists, at least for a moment.

Lawrence suggests that the social barriers between normalized culture and the disabled are rooted in their failure to speak a common language. In "The Blind Man," the sense of touch becomes the common language for Maurice and Bertie. Through touch, Maurice communicates to Bertie something important, though unspecified by the text. By finding a common language, the two men are able to experience a deep connection to one another. For Lawrence, the isolation of the blind is dissolved when characters ignore social norms and explore new ways of communication.

H. G. Wells

"The Country of the Blind" suggests that defining disability is relatively arbitrary. Wells' story is unique because the sighted man, not the blind man, is the outsider. The sighted man must learn to adapt to a culture which has been constructed by a blind community. Nunez, the sighted protagonist, joins the Country of the Blind expecting to be a higher functioning member of

society, and perhaps one day rule the society. However, the blind characters are better adapted to function in their society than the sighted man is. His extra sense is treated as an illness, much like many cultures would treat insanity. Nunez is even pretends to prophesy as blind characters prophesy in other literary works. “The Country of the Blind” illuminates one possible reason for literature so often treating blind men as prophetic—that the deviant character (which is often the blind, but as Wells demonstrates, need not be) interacts with the objective world differently than the normal characters, allowing that character to be at once disabled in society and also surprisingly insightful.

The blind are isolated in “The Country of the Blind,” and in this way Wells continues the traditional connection between blindness and isolation. The inhabitants of the Country of the Blind live harmoniously with each other, but the community is isolated from the rest of the world. In the opening lines of the story, Wells writes, “Three hundred miles and more from the Chimborazo, one hundred from the snows of Cotopaxi, in the wildest wastes of Ecuador’s Andes, there lies that mysterious mountain valley, cut off from all the world of men, the Country of the Blind” (Wells, 322). Wells describes the Country of the Blind as a society that is geographically separated from real cities in South America. Instead of the blind members being isolated from everyone, as in the cases of *Oedipus the King*, *King Lear*, and *Madame Bovary*, Wells’ blind characters are only isolated from the sighted world. Like the speaker of Milton’s “Sonnet XIX,” the blind characters in the Country of the Blind find acceptance from other blind characters. But unlike “Sonnet XIX,” the Country of the Blind is not doomed to “only stand and wait.” They are self-sufficient individuals who function socially and economically. Wells writes, “They scarcely noted their loss [...] and when at last sight died out among them the race lived on. They had even time to adapt themselves to the blind control of fire [...] and the little

community grew in numbers and in understanding, and met and settled social and economic problems that arose” (Wells, 324). Granted, the story is allegorical, and Wells is a science fiction writer, but the setting still exhibits a feasible situation in which blindness is not a disabling characteristic. (José Saramago’s *Blindness* takes place in similar circumstances, but blindness is much more disruptive.)

When Nunez, a lost traveler from the sighted world, discovers the Country of the Blind, he expects to be superior to the blind people. When he is still a good distance away from the blind men, he waves at them to help them locate him. They do not see him, and Nunez says, “The fools must be blind” (328). His first reaction is to associate them with fools purely based on their blindness. To Nunez, blindness is necessarily a disability, and disability is necessarily foolish. He believes that he is functionally superior to the blind people, and he repeats to himself the mantra, “In the Country of the Blind the One-eyed Man is King” (329). Since Nunez views the blind people as inferior to himself, he entertains the notion of becoming their king. In fact, he refers to himself as “their heaven-sent king and master” (333).

The people in the Country of the Blind, however, perceive Nunez as the outsider. When they first encounter one another, Pedro asks Nunez, “And you have come out into the world?” to which Nunez says, “*Out* of the world. [...] Out of the great big world that goes down, twelve day’s journey to the sea” (330). The two men have different perceptions of what the normal world is. Nunez has been a member of the larger, sighted world, and that world is his normal world while the Country of the Blind is a backward society. Pedro believes the opposite—that Nunez has emerged from a strange realm into the normal world. Nunez and Pedro mirror each other, and normal becomes absolutely relative.

In spite of his expectations, Nunez does not become a king. He is not the fittest individual in society; he is treated as pathologically disabled. One of the first examples of Nunez's functional inferiority is his inability to adapt to the nocturnal culture. The eldest of the blind men explains "life and philosophy and religion" (332) to Nunez. Wells writes, "He went on to tell Nunez how this time had been divided into the warm and the cold, which are the blind equivalents of day and night, and how it was good to sleep in the warm and work during the cold" (332-333). Instead of working during the day when there is light, the people of the Country of the Blind are nocturnal because they function better by working during the cold and sleeping in the warmth. Light does not play a part in the preference since their culture has been shaped by blindness. Living nocturnally is best for the blind people, but it limits the advantage the sighted man would otherwise have. In this society, Nunez is forced to live most of his waking hours in the dark, for which he is not adapted. Wells writes, "Four days passed, and the fifth found the King of the Blind still incognito, as a clumsy and useless stranger among his subjects" (334). According to Wells, the environment of the Country of the Blind actually renders the sighted man disabled. Wells suggests that disability is contextual and that blindness is only a negative trait in societies that are shaped by the sighted population.

At this point, it is useful to incorporate into this argument the work of disability studies, which Wells anticipates. Lennard Davis is a leader in the field, and he describes the "hegemony of normalcy" in his book, *Enforcing Normalcy*. In the conclusion of his second chapter, titled "Constructing Normalcy," he writes, "The very term that permeates our contemporary life – the normal – is a configuration that arises in a particular historical moment" (Davis, 49). Davis posits that normalcy is dependent on its particular temporality. Disability exists only in the context of something else that is deemed normal. Earlier in the chapter, he writes, "The

‘problem’ is not the person with the disabilities, the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the ‘problem’ of the disabled person” (Davis, 24). There is incongruence between normal society and someone who is disabled, and according to Davis, the problem is the very construction of normalcy, not the deviation from it.

Davis’ argument harmonizes with Wells’ story; both the Country of the Blind and the outside world are problematic in their exclusions of the sighted and the blind, respectively. In Davis’ framework, blindness is not inherently a disability. Instead, blindness is perceived as a disability because it is a deviation. Davis writes, “When we think of bodies, in a society where the concept of the norm is operative, then people with disabilities will be thought of as deviants” (29). Therefore, in the Country of the Blind, because Nunez is sighted and therefore a deviant to normalcy, he is considered disabled. That is why, when Nunez is about to undergo an operation to remove his eyes, the blind doctor says, “I think very probably he might be cured” (342). The doctor uses the word “cured” because the society considers Nunez’s sight a pathological illness. Even though his sight might be advantageous in certain environments, it makes him a deviant—disabled—in the Country of the Blind. Wells’ short story underscores the contextual nature of disability and points to the work that would be done in disability studies over a century after the story was published. “The Country of the Blind” begins the theoretical work of disability studies nearly a century before theorists gave significant attention to the discipline.

Recalling the blind prophet figure that often reappears in literary works, Wells briefly describes Nunez as a prophet figure. Attempting to prove the existence and benefits of sight, Nunez decides to make a prediction that he could only know if he were actually able to see. Wells writes, “One morning he saw Pedro in the path called Seventeen and coming towards the central houses, but still too far off for hearing or scent, and he told them as much. ‘In a little

while,' he prophesied, 'Pedro will be here'" (336). Although he makes a reasonable prediction, Pedro turns around, and Nunez appears to be foolish to the other men. As the only sighted person in the community, Nunez is in a position that allows him pretend to be prophetic, as Wells writes. The prophetic qualities are projected not onto the blind people, as they are in other works. Instead, the sighted man assumes the role of the prophet, and thus the prophetic qualities remain with the deviant character. By flipping the roles of the sighted and the blind, Wells offers an interesting depiction of blindness that interacts with canonical texts without replicating them.

Raymond Carver

In 1983, Raymond Carver published a short story titled "Cathedral" which can be read as a retelling of Lawrence's "The Blind Man," published in 1922. "Cathedral" reiterates many of the disability issues that "The Blind Man" explores, but Carver's story intensifies the same plotline with greater specificity. When Lawrence's Maurice asks Bertie to "touch my eyes," and the men experience "love," "passion," and "intimacy," the text remains at a distance from what it is they actually experience. Lawrence does not try to explain what bonds them. In the same vague manner, Maurice's wife says to Bertie, "There is something else, something *there*, which you never knew was there, and which you can't express. [...] I don't know – it's awfully hard to define it – but something strong and immediate. There's something strange in Maurice's presence – indefinable – but I couldn't do without it" (Lawrence, 70). Carver does not exactly land on the opposite side of the spectrum, but he does explain in more detail the communicative experiences between the blind character, Robert, and the sighted characters. His short story also highlights the prejudices rooted in the subconscious connection between physical and social deviancy. Furthermore, the text offers specific avenues of communication for relationships that deviate from normalcy.

The unnamed narrator in “Cathedral” fails to communicate with Robert because his prejudices about blindness hinder him from creating meaningful conversation. Robert is an old friend of the narrator’s wife, and he decides to visit her. Before Robert arrives, the narrator admits, “And his being blind bothered me. My idea of blindness came from the movies. In the movies, the blind moved slowly and never laughed. Sometimes they were led by seeing-eye dogs. A blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to” (Carver, 2009). The narrator has never met Robert, but he already has negative feelings toward him based solely on his blindness. Based on fictional accounts of blindness, he expects Robert to need extra care and attention, and he assumes that Robert will be boring company, never laughing or keeping up with the conversation. In short, the narrator believes that Robert is socially inferior based on his physical disability.

Similar to the Bertie’s move in “The Blind Man,” the narrator in “Cathedral” tries to include the blind man in the conversation by asking a relatively meaningless question. Upon Robert’s arrival, the narrator asks, “Did you have a good train ride? [...] Which side of the train did you sit on, by the way?” (215). As if he were asking a child what his favorite color was, the narrator asks a question that is easy to answer. There does not seem to be additional meaning to the question, because he wife says, “What a question, which side! [...] What’s it matter which side?” (215). Robert answers the question gracefully and elaborately, with more social awareness than either of his hosts. Carver writes, “‘Right side,’ the blind man said. ‘I hadn’t been on a train in nearly forty years. Not since I was a kid. With my folks. That’s been a long time. I’d nearly forgotten the sensation. I have winter in my beard now,’ he said. ‘So I’ve been told, anyway. Do I look distinguished, my dear?’ the blind man said to my wife” (215). Robert responds in a sophisticated manner. He could have responded to a plain question with a plain response, which

would be justified but would leave the conversation at a dead-end. Instead, Robert answers the question politely and then moves the conversation forward. He includes interesting details about his experience on the train, and then he seamlessly connects the train to his age, and finishes his response with a self-deprecating question. Robert answers the question, makes the conversation more interesting at his own expense, and passes the conversation back to his hosts.

Robert is blind, and he is a good conversationalist. He deviates from physical normalcy because of his blindness, but he is not socially inferior. Had the narrator been aware of and dismantled his subconscious connection between physical and social deviancy, perhaps he would have begun his conversation with Robert with a more relevant question that would foster better conversation. The text subverts the narrator's expectations by presenting Robert as a socially sophisticated individual, thereby exposing a prejudice.

The narrator, not Robert, turns out to have the most difficulty with communicating his ideas. After dinner, the three characters watch television in the living room, and the narrator's wife falls asleep. The television program is about the Middle Ages, which leads the narrator to say, "Something has occurred to me. Do you have any idea what a cathedral is? What they look like, that is? Do you follow me? If somebody says cathedral to you, do you have any notion of what they're talking about?" (223-224). Robert responds with a few basic facts, and then says, "If you want the truth, bub, that's about all I know. What I just said. What I heard him say. But maybe you could describe one to me? I wish you'd do it. I'd like that. If you want to know, I really don't have a good idea" (224). The narrator responds with difficulty. He asks himself, "How could I even begin to describe it? But say my life depended on it. Say my life was being threatened by an insane guy who said I had to do it or else" (224). The task is daunting to the narrator, who feels the need to give himself an absurd and extreme pep-talk. When he describes

cathedrals, he says things like, “They’re very tall,” and “They remind me of viaducts, for some reason. But maybe you don’t know viaducts either?” (224). The narrator fails to articulate his ideas properly, and he apologizes to Robert. He says, “You’ll have to forgive me. But I can’t tell you what a cathedral looks like. It just isn’t in me to do it. I can’t do any more than I’ve done” (225). The narrator does not know how to turn his ideas about a cathedral into a message that the blind man can interpret. “Cathedral” is a word that the narrator cannot simply describe using a series of qualified synonyms; Robert has to experience the word “cathedral” in an entirely different way in order to understand it. Frustrated with himself, the narrator gives up.

The problem in “Cathedral” is not unique to Carver’s work. The blind character is disconnected from society, and communication is a primary barrier. Gloucester cannot communicate effectively because he is unable to recognize the person he addresses. Nunez fails to describe sight effectively to the Country of the Blind and he is ostracized. Maurice does not participate in the dinner conversation due to the strangeness that emerges in his marriage when Bertie arrives. All of the literary works up to this point deal with social barriers of the blind, but Carver’s work offers the closest thing to a solution to the problem. “Cathedral” describes several distinct ways that Robert communicates effectively with the narrator and his wife.

After working as his assistant for a summer, the narrator’s wife exchanges audio tapes with Robert, allowing them to stay connected to one another. She tells him vulnerable information about her life—the conflicts in her first marriage, her suicide attempt, and her dating relationship with the narrator. Robert, in turn, sends her a series of tapes that tell the story of his marriage and the slow death of his wife. They are close friends throughout their three collective marriages, and this is possible because they find a way to communicate effectively.

Robert and the narrator experiences a moment of intimacy when they discover a new way to communicate a visual image too difficult to describe in words. Robert suggests that the narrator draw a cathedral instead of trying to explain it. Robert holds the narrator's hand, which holds the pen. Together, they draw a cathedral, and the narrator says, "It was like nothing in my life up to now" (228). The transcendent experience imitates the concluding scene of "The Blind Man," in which Bertie feels hypnotized by Maurice. Just as Lawrence compensates Maurice for his blindness, Carver grants Robert the ability to share a mysterious closeness with other characters through physical touch.

The story concludes when Robert asks what the narrator thinks of the picture, and he responds, "It's really something" (228). For the narrator, the act of communicating with the blind man in such an effective way was the important experience. He has already told Robert, "The truth is, cathedrals don't mean anything special to me. Nothing. Cathedrals. They're something to look at on late-night TV. That's all they are" (226). These lines suggest that content of the message is unimportant. The narrator does have a strong connection to Robert simply because they both know what a cathedral looks like. Instead, they experience intimacy through the very act of communication, which requires them to find a common language that exists outside of normal interaction.

Carver's story suggests that isolation is not an inherent trait of the blind as often depicted in canonical literature. In a society defined by norms, according to Lennerd Davis, a blind man deviates from the ideal, and therefore the languages he speaks are not part of the cultural set of norms. In order for Robert to connect with the narrator and his wife, the characters must communicate in ways that are not necessarily inefficient, but in ways that are foreign to the normative culture.

Part Three

Saramago's *Blindness*

Blindness responds to previous works by deconstructing the glorification of blindness. Unlike the works discussed up to this point, Saramago does not romanticize blindness. Blind characters do not have divine powers, and they do not have a deeper understanding of the world than sighted characters. Conversely, blindness functions in the novel to expose the selfishness of humanity. The novel begins with the onset of a contagious blindness epidemic, and the condition spreads to all of humanity with the exception of the doctor's wife. The plot follows an unrelenting, logical trajectory of societal chaos and moral decay. *Blindness* is a pessimistic story that enriches literary blindness by responding skeptically to the glorification of blind characters.

However, the text does not ignore the long-standing traditions of blindness in literature. After the doctor goes blind at the beginning of the story, he recalls the words of Homer. Saramago writes, "Even in [...] a situation like this [...] he was capable of remembering what Homer wrote in the *Iliad* [...] A doctor is worth several men" (Saramago, 28). By including Homer early in the novel, Saramago establishes a dialogue between *Blindness* and the tradition of blindness in literature. According to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Homer was blind. Milton writes in *Paradise Lost*, "Those other two equal'd with me in Fate,/ So were I equal'd with them in renown,/ Blind Thamyras and blind Maeonides,⁵/ And Tiresias and Phineus Prophets old" (Milton, 3.33-35). In fact, even Homer's name is suggestive of blindness in Greek. *Homeros* means "hostage" and "blind" (or "going with a companion") according to the *Online Etymology Dictionary*. With the mention of Homer early in the novel, *Blindness* introduces a series of references to traditional blindness.

⁵ Archaic form of Homer according to Dartmouth Milton Reading Room

Many of these references manifest in the form of the characters' beliefs about blindness. The characters often fall into the trap of glorifying blindness as somehow supernatural. The doctor's wife, the thief, and the contaminated internees all understand blindness according to canonical works of literature. They have dramatic notions of blindness and spirituality, and these beliefs are consistent with the literary depictions of blindness even as they are proven inadequate by the events of the novel.

The doctor's wife believes that the blind have a sort of supernatural ability to see beyond the material world. For an unknown reason, she is unaffected by the blindness contagion. Early in her time in the abandoned mental hospital, the quarantine location, she admits that she wants to be blind in order to see past the physical surfaces and into the deeper meaning of things: "She serenely wished that she, too, could turn blind, penetrate the visible skin of things and pass to their inner side, to their dazzling and irremediable blindness" (58). The doctor's wife believes that becoming blind allows an individual to perceive that which the sighted population cannot. And in her case, as the only sighted person in her community, she believes she is the only one without the ability to see beyond the material world. The doctor's wife ironically desires to become blind based on the assumption of supernatural qualities of blindness. But where do such assumptions originate? The text does not include any situations in which blind people actually perform or experience the supernatural, so her ideas cannot stem from experiential knowledge. Instead, the text implies that her beliefs are a product of cultural shaping.

In particular, Milton's *Paradise Lost* exemplifies the type of work that promulgates this idea. Milton writes in Book Three, "So much the rather thou Celestial light/ Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers/ Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence/ Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell/ Of things invisible to mortal sight" (Milton, 3.51-55). In his

invocation, the poetic speaker requests that the Heavenly Muse would grant him a new set of eyes in order to see the things that are invisible to those with mortal sight. For Milton, the blind have a unique opportunity to obtain divine sight. This sort of language shapes the cultural understanding of blindness, which in turn shapes individuals like the doctor's wife.

The wife is not the only character who operates according to the traditional literary depictions of blindness. The thief also assumes things about blind people that are unsupported by the events in the text. He believes that blindness endows a person with holiness. The thief, who earns his nominal name by stealing the first blind man's car, sexually harasses a young woman who becomes known as the girl with dark glasses. She retaliates, injuring his leg. Days later, the thief reflects on his afflictions.

Suddenly, taking him by surprise, his conscience awoke and censured him bitterly for having allowed himself to steal a car from an unfortunate blind man. The fact that I'm in this situation right now, he reasoned, isn't because I stole his car, it's because I accompanied him home, that was my big mistake. His conscience was in no mood for casuistic discussions, his reasons were simple and clear. A blind man is sacred, you don't steal from a blind man. (Saramago, 73)

The thief converses back and forth with his conscience. He assures himself that the reason he is blind and injured is merely due to the fact that he was exposed to the first blind man, but his conscience asserts that he is being repaid for stealing the blind man's car. He does not regret stealing; he regrets stealing from a blind man. His moral convictions are informed by the cultural belief that a blind man is sacred.

Additionally, the thief expects a reduction in sexuality once he goes blind. The thief imagines a scenario in which the doctor's wife would assist him in urinating. His thought did not

originate from sexual desire but from analyzing the doctor's suggestion that everyone go to the toilet at the same time. However, his thoughts become sexual, and Saramago writes, "The implication behind that thought gave him a small erection that surprised him, as if the fact of being blind should have as a consequence, the loss or diminution of sexual desire" (49). The thief assumes that he would experience a loss of sexuality as a blind man, but as it turns out, he does not. In spite of his blindness, he retains his sexuality. Why would he think that his sexuality would be diminished? Perhaps he reasons that a loss of sight would decrease visual stimuli, but I find it more believable that the sacred nature of the blind is a simpler explanation. If he expects to inherit some of the sacredness, or purity, in compensation for his blindness, he would assume that he would experience a reduction in sexuality.

The thief's interpretation of blindness is in dialogue with *Oedipus the King*, specifically with the character Tiresias. The blind prophet of Thebes has the divine ability to see as the Olympian gods see. The Chorus Leader reverently calls Tiresias "the godly prophet" (Sophocles, 298), thereby marking him as sacred. Not only do the characters believe that Tiresias is prophetic, he *is* prophetic according to the text. He predicts that Oedipus will "go journeying to a foreign country/ tapping his way before him with a stick" (456-457), which he could not know without supernatural foresight. In *Oedipus the King*, Tiresias is sacred because his blindness allows him to prophesy with his prophetic eyes. Such an interpretation, along with the various retellings of the blind prophet, shapes the cultural understanding of blindness. While I concede that the thief in *Blindness* could believe that "a blind man is sacred" for other reasons, there is a logical pathway from literary depictions of the sacred blind prophet to the cultural understanding of blindness, and from the cultural understanding to the beliefs of the thief.

One final example of characters in *Blindness* believing in the supernatural qualities of blindness is in the case of the contaminated internees. The hospital is divided into two wings; the blind internees live in one, and the contaminated internees live in the other. The contaminated internees still have their sight but are suspected of being contaminated. Hoping to avoid infection, these internees avoid the other wing entirely. In one scene, the contaminated internees are afraid to retrieve food rations from the area that divides the two wings out of fear of high exposure to the contagious blindness. Several dead blind men are lying near the food, and they discuss among themselves the associated risks.

It was true that these blind internees were dead, that they could not move, see, could neither stir nor breathe, but who can say that this white blindness is not some spiritual malaise, and if we assume this to be the case, then the spirits of those blind casualties have never been as free as they are now, released from their bodies, and therefore free to do whatever they like. (Saramago, 85)

The starving internees hesitate to retrieve the food, in part because there could be a spiritual cause of the white blindness. They wait too long, and the blind internees arrive and take the food first. Their convictions regarding the supernatural qualities of blindness result in their continued starvation.

The characters in *Blindness* understand blindness in ways that are consistent with canonical representations of blindness in literature. They allude to traditional, often supernatural beliefs about blind men. Saramago includes these traditional ideas about blindness not to promote the glorification of blindness as the older texts do, but to display them for the purposes of observation and criticism. The text itself largely refuses to conform to such ideas. For Saramago, blindness does not provide supernatural or dramatic qualities but instead exposes

humanity's deepest flaws. The text suggests that blindness does not destroy an existing morality, but it exposes evil tendencies which are already present but hidden beneath social structures.

In *Blindness*, a prominent manifestation of this belief is the frequent attribution of animalistic qualities to blind characters, suggesting that the only thing separating humans and animals is an effective, systematic society based on sight. Without their sight, the blind characters cannot function in an effective social civilization. Saramago writes, "We are so used to the convenience of piped water brought into our homes, and forget that for this to happen there have to be people to open and close distribution valves, water towers and pumps [...] computers to regulate [...] and all these operations require the use of one's eyes" (234). The caravan of blind characters no longer has piped water, and, according to Saramago, this is because the necessary operations require eyesight. In the absence of sight, civilization collapses. Then the author suggests that people descend into an animalistic state in the absence of social structures, as when he writes in the voice of the subjective omniscient narrator, "When we are in great distress and plagued by pain and anguish that is when the animal side of our nature becomes most apparent" (253). The narrator says that hardships, like those brought on by the blindness epidemic, bring out the most animalistic parts of human nature. The narrator does not say, however, that the hardships create the animal side. By saying "becomes most apparent," the narrator implies that the animal side has always been present, though perhaps dormant or masked. Blindness becomes an agent for exposing the animalistic qualities of humanity that already exist.

Connecting blind characters and animals in a more literal manner, the narrator frequently describes the blind characters using animal traits. For example, Saramago writes, "To find [the

containers] they had to go down on all fours, sweeping the floor ahead with one arm outstretched, while the other served as a third paw” (65). The blind internees resemble animals by crawling on all fours, and there is a functional reason for their crawling. Without the word “paw,” the linkage of the blind internees and animals is rather loose. However, by taking the opportunity to call an arm a paw, the narrator directly underscores the association. Two pages later, the narrator compares them to animals again when Saramago writes, “Now a confusion of sounds was coming from the hallway, these were the blind, driven like sheep, bumping into each other, crammed together in the doorways” (67). The narrator compares the internees directly to sheep, and while a single instance of animal comparison might not draw attention, the simile is one of many. Later he writes, “With one arm held out in front and several fingers moving like the antennae of insects, they can find their way everywhere, it is even probable that in the more gifted of the blind there soon develops what is what is referred to as frontal vision” (81). In this comparison, the blind internees have been demoted to insects, and the narrator adopts a condescending tone that a scientist might use to observe an inferior creature.

The association of blind characters and animals is not only reflected in the descriptive language of the narrator, but also in the words of the characters themselves. As the blind internees are separated from the social structures of their old lives, they are forced to confront primitive problems and consequently lose their sense of humanity. The doctor reflects on his loss of dignity after a lavatory visit leaves him filthy with human excrement.

He had the impression of having stepped on some soft pulp, the excrement of someone who had missed the hole of the latrine or who had decided to relieve himself without any consideration for others [...] the doctor had pulled up his trousers. Then he lowered them, when he thought he was alone, but not in time, he knew he was dirty, dirtier than he

could ever remember having been in his life. There are many ways of becoming an animal, he thought, this is just the first of them. (92-93)

The doctor believes that his contact with excrement makes him more like an animal than he was before, and by saying that it is only “the first of them,” he suggests that his trajectory will lead him further and further toward an animalistic state. According to the doctor, blindness does not elevate him like it elevates Maurice in “The Blind Man” or Tiresias in *Oedipus the King*, but instead, blindness has stripped him of his humanity.

By interpreting blindness as an exposing agent that reveals existing animalistic traits, *Blindness* sets itself apart from Lawrence’s “The Blind Man,” in which Maurice has compensatory power. In “The Blind Man,” Maurice tells Bertie to touch his eyes, and Bertie “quivered with revulsion. Yet he was under the power of the blind man, as if hypnotized. He lifted his hand, and laid the fingers on the scar, on the scarred eyes” (Lawrence, 73). Maurice has some undefined power derived from his blindness, much like Tiresias has the power of prophecy as compensation for his blindness. Maurice is not quite divine, but the text romanticizes him as a character who becomes more rooted in his humanity once blinded. Lawrence writes about blindness with a tone of reverence that is noticeably absent in *Blindness*.

If blindness functions in *Blindness* to expose a more accurate depiction of human nature, then what is left when the veneer is removed? Saramago asserts that it is violence. Blindness exposes a violent nature in the doctor’s wife when she murders one of the blind internees. Admittedly, she is not blind, but she is directly affected by the blindness that surrounds her. A band of thugs forces the women in the ward to prostitute themselves for food rations, and the women cooperate at first. Eventually, the doctor’s wife returns to the thugs’ room and stabs one of them to death. In sighted society, it is unlikely that either crime would have happened, but in

the disorder caused by the blindness epidemic, it becomes clear that people are capable of greater moral transgressions than they want to believe about themselves. When she speaks to the girl with dark glasses, the doctor's wife says, "Now, certainly, what is emerging are the real feelings of the blind, and we're still only at the beginning [...] you don't need eyes to know what life has become today, if anyone were to tell me that one day I should kill, I'd take it as an insult, and yet I've killed" (252). The doctor's wife believes that the feelings of the blind are worse than the feelings of the sighted and that they are just beginning to experience the new feelings of their new selves. What the doctor's wife avoids admitting, and what the text implies elsewhere, is that the "real feelings of the blind" existed all along, and the blindness epidemic only exposes the true nature of her character.

This depiction of a blind society diverges sharply from Wells' portrayal of an idealistic society of the blind. In his short story, Wells describes the Country of the Blind as a harmonious community that adapted to its blindness. He writes that "for fourteen generations these people had been blind and cut off from the seeing world," (Wells, 332) and the text gives no indication that there was ever violence or cruelty. For several hundred years the Country of the Blind lived peacefully within its mountainous refuge. Wells provides a succinct history of the nation:

In all things save sight they were strong and able; and presently the chance of birth and heredity sent one who had an original mind and who could talk and persuade among them, and then afterwards another. The two passed, leaving their effects, and the little community grew in numbers and in understanding, and met and settled social and economic problems that arose. Generation followed generation. (324)

According to the text, the Country of the Blind has experienced steady growth with no notable setbacks. Though some social and economic problems arose, they were neatly solved by capable leaders. The Country of the Blind is a sort of isolated utopia that does not suffer from its lack of vision. In *Blindness*, the blind internees live under comparable conditions: they are isolated and blind. But unlike the Country of the Blind, the blind internees in *Blindness* do not adapt to their new world and establish order. They resort to violence and intimidation which results in a tyrannical government of thugs.

Then the doctor's wife, terrified, saw one of the blind hoodlums take a gun from his pocket [...] The blast caused a large piece of stucco to come crashing down [...] The fellow with the gun continued, Let it be known and there is no turning back, that from today onwards we shall take charge of the food [...] we shall put guards at the entrance, and anyone who tries to go against these orders will suffer the consequences. (138-139)

The chaos that results from the community's blindness provides an opportunity for a new type of government to arise. Saramago uses blindness to reawaken violent tendencies in his characters. The thugs take advantage of the disordered internees through intimidation, hoarding food and sexually abusing the women until the doctor's wife murders her perpetrator. By giving attention to the real consequences of being blind, he avoids imitating the stories that glorify blindness. He does not, however, refrain from turning blindness into a metaphor. His use of blindness is not a departure from previous representations but rather an inversion. By treating blindness as a metaphor for chaos and ignorance, Saramago inverts the literary tradition of blindness' marriage to wisdom.

In an interview with Donzelina Barroso, Saramago was asked if he was ultimately an optimist. He responded with the following:

I am a pessimist, but not so much so that I would shoot myself in the head. The cruelty to which you refer is the everyday cruelty that occurs in all parts of the world, not just in the novel. And we at this very moment are enveloped in an epidemic of white blindness. *Blindness* is a metaphor for the blindness of human reason. This is a blindness that permits us, without any conflict, to send a craft to Mars to examine rock formations on that planet while at the same time allowing millions of human beings to starve on this planet. Either we are blind, or we are mad. (*Paris Review*)

The author provides a straightforward answer about his depiction of blindness. According to Saramago, blindness is still a metaphor, but unlike other works, it is a metaphor for the lack of human reason. At the end of the novel, the doctor and his wife converse with each another. She begins, “Do you want me to tell you what I think, Yes, do, I don’t think we did go blind, I think we are blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see” (Saramago, 326). The doctor suggests that people are “blind but seeing,” but his wife counters by saying “blind people who can see, but do not see.” The doctor’s wife is Saramago’s mouthpiece; her words align with the author’s beliefs about humanity. The doctor’s wife uses blindness as a metaphor for the lack of human reason.

In addition to reacting to past depictions of blindness, Saramago begins a new dialogue by addressing the competition of the blind identity with conflicting identities. He asserts that blindness is a dominant trait, as illustrated by the doctor’s changing identity. When blindness clashes with other attributes, the recessive identities fade into

the background. As characters become infected, their previous identities give way to the “blind man” or the “blind woman.” Although the doctor is still referred to as “the doctor,” the meaning of his designation becomes purely nominal. The doctor reflects on his practical role after the thief seeks his help for his leg wound.

The doctor did not say that if they were in need of a doctor he was there at their disposal. He would never say that again. His hands alone were not enough for a doctor [...] He did not even have the sight of his eyes to notice any sickly pallor, to observe any reddening of the peripheric circulation, how often, without any need for closer examination, these external signs proved to be as useful as an entire clinical history. (Saramago, 68)

The doctor is no longer capable of performing his role as a physician. When the identities of doctor and blind man oppose one another, blindness dominates. He is no longer a functioning physician, but only a blind man.

Earlier in his time at the wards, the doctor tries to reason with the guards, saying that a man with a wounded leg is in need of attention. After a brief conversation, the guard dismisses the doctor and says, “Look here, blind man, let me tell you something, either the two of you get back to where you came from, or you’ll be shot” (63). As a licensed physician, the doctor has authority to make health decisions, but once he is deemed a blind man, he loses that authority. His identity has become that of a faceless member of the blind regiment.

By dealing with conflicting identities, Saramago joins a larger conversation that transcends literature. One example of the humanities engaging in the topic of conflicting identities is playwright and actor Lynn Manning’s *Weights*.

Manning tells the story of his sudden transformation from what he calls his life as a “black man” to his new life as a “blind man” after surviving a gunshot wound [...] his life as an impoverished black man—its endless encounters with unjust authorities, obstructive bureaucracies, and omnipresent surveillance—trained him to cope with life as a blind man. (Sandahl, 581)

Just as the doctor experiences a shift in identity once he goes blind, actor Lynn Manning expresses that his primary identity has become that of the blind man. For both Manning and Saramago, blindness transcends race and class.

Saramago’s investment in conflicting identities is a part of his larger project of dismantling categories, which he does in several passages in *Blindness*. Although it frequently labels characters with “blind,” the novel becomes self-aware of its oversimplified categorization of characters during the introduction of the girl with dark glasses. In this case, the identity being complicated is the prostitute instead of the blind man. Saramago writes,

To put it simply, this woman could be classified as a prostitute [...] Without any doubt, this woman goes to bed with men in exchange for money, a fact that might allow us to classify her without further consideration as a prostitute, but, since it is also true that she goes with a man only when she feels like it and with whom she wants to, we cannot dismiss the possibility that such a factual difference, must as a precaution determine her exclusion from the club as a whole. [...] Were we not trying to reduce her to some primary definition, we should finally say of her, in a broad sense, that she lives as she pleases and moreover gets all the pleasure she can from life. (23)

The text recognizes that social constructs are open to complication. There are aspects about the girl in the dark glasses that align with the prostitute figure, such as her exchange of sex for money, but there are also deviations. She only sleeps with certain men when she feels like it, which the novel claims is a factual difference between a prostitute and the girl in dark glasses. This awareness of identity simplification, which is present elsewhere in the novel as it relates to blindness, is most directly discussed in the context of prostitution.

The blind identity, which at once seems to be unmistakably identifiable, is also undermined as the doctor suspects that a different type of blind man has entered into the wards. During a trip to another ward to trade money for stolen food, the doctor suspects that there is a “normal blind man” among them.

So there was a normal blind person amongst these blind delinquents, a blind person just like all those people who were once referred to as being blind, the poor fellow had obviously been roped in with all the rest, but this was not the moment to pry and start asking, are you one of the recent blind men or have you been blind for some years, tell us how you came to lose your sight. (146)

The doctor asks new questions that segregate the blind. In this case, the options exist only in the fictional world where contagious blindness is a reality. However, the doctor's observation points to fundamental questions that can be asked of the blind at large. What caused this case of blindness? Did the individual have agency in the onset of blindness? How does that differentiate them from other groups of people who can no longer see? These are questions that are brought up by the passage, and the singular identity of blindness breaks down.

Blindness touches on issues such as the conflicting identities of the blind and the oversimplification of identities. Literature will continue to explore these themes as the field of disability studies gains traction. As identities like gender, race, and class currently occupy much of the conversations surrounding literature, so will disability be discussed, hopefully in increasing depth. Literature will continue to blur the lines of normalcy and disability. Once blindness, which has been so established in literary traditions, is more thoroughly explored in the context of normalcy and disability, the careful partitioning of myth and truth will be especially nuanced and exciting.

Conclusion

In the canonical texts *Oedipus the King*, *King Lear*, *Madame Bovary*, and *Paradise Lost*, blindness is glorified and often deified. Sophocles directly connects blindness and insight in *Oedipus the King* through the characters Tiresias and Oedipus. Shakespeare's *King Lear* perpetuates the same metaphor but includes physical and social consequences of actual blindness. The blind beggar in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is a realistic character who prophesies without knowing he does so. And finally, Milton revives the idea of prophetic eyes from Sophocles, but he deviates from the previous writers by contributing the consolation of God's acceptance and an implied community. The twentieth-century short stories "The Blind Man," "The Country of the Blind," and "Cathedral" act as a midpoint between the canonical texts and *Blindness*. Each story romanticizes blindness, some more than others, but each of them contributes some new element to the discussion of blindness in literature. Lawrence treats blindness with reverence as Sophocles and Milton do, and his short story displays that disability depends on environmental factors. Wells romanticizes blindness indirectly by creating a pseudo utopia out of a society of the blind, and his allegorical story demonstrates the seeming

arbitrariness of what is normal and what is disability. Carver's blind man occupies the role of a teacher imparting his wisdom to the narrator, and his short story deconstructs the association of physical and social disabilities. "Cathedral" underscores the importance of effective communication in intimacy and demonstrates that blindness is not an impenetrable barrier to such communication. In response to many literary works such as the seven discussed in this paper up to this point, Saramago deconstructs the glorification of blindness. In his novel, rather than imparting divinity or wisdom, blindness exposes humanity's animalistic cruelty. *Blindness* begins to explore the interaction of the blind identity with competing identities and suggests that blindness is perhaps a dominant identity.

Blindness in literature has a very established tradition of glorification which is just beginning to be subverted. The blind prophet figure spans from Sophocles to the twentieth century and will likely continue to influence future stories. However, more thoughtful writers will refrain from stereotyping or marginalizing the blind identity, and they will not ignore the rich opportunities blindness offers literature, especially in the growing field of disability studies.

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