

Looking Back at Literature: A Critical Reading of the Unseen Stare in Depictions of People with Impaired Vision

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Abstract

Considering the Unseen Starer and Unseeing Victim in a sample of Anglophone literature, the paper focuses on the privileging of a perspective that is dominated by vision, the ocularcentrism that defines people with impaired vision as epistemologically and even ontologically inferior to people with unimpaired vision. The underpinning assumption of authority is explained in terms of panopticism, whereby the presence or even the notion of an Unseen Starer effects control over the Unseeing Victim. This scenario is problematical owing to the hegemonic capacity of literary representation, because, if not considered critically, literature itself becomes something of a Panopticon, influencing attitudes both of and towards people with impaired vision.

Introduction

In identifying members of a social out-group, it is often the case that

prejudiced persons are far more accurate than are their non-prejudiced counterparts. This discrepancy can be explained as a result of visual violation, the stare in which victims of prejudice are fixed and through which prejudiced persons learn the 'cues' that identify their 'enemy' (Allport, 1954, p. 133). Any difference is potentially stigmatizable (Coleman, 1986/1997) and through the sense of sight 'the stigma of others most frequently becomes evident' (Goffman, 1968, p. 65). This state of affairs substantiates the first and second of three combinable ways in which science interprets the gaze, namely, information and possession, but it is on the significance of the third, relation, that the paper will focus (Barthes, 1986). The contention is that because gazes are exchanged in a manner that can be scientifically defined as linguistic (ibid.), if only one party has sufficient vision, then only one party has access to the language. The other is rendered unable to refute or confirm any accusation whatsoever. The Unseen Starer assumes a position of invulnerability while inflicting the very opposite onto the Unseeing Victim. This problem is worsened because a state of uncertainty about the duration of the vulnerability is also induced. Put briefly, invoking the concept of Panopticism, the withdrawal of the Unseen Stare reaches the Unseeing Victim no more clearly than does the stare itself.

Essentially a machine for 'dissociating the see/being seen dyad' (Foucault, 1975/1977, p. 202), the conceptual aim of the Panopticon was

to challenge the late eighteenth-century conventions of institutionalism by suggesting that rather than being kept out of sight, in dungeons and darkness, prisoners might occupy a ring of illuminated cells that could be viewed from a central inspection tower. The key point is that the prisoners would never know when the inspection tower is occupied, the psychologically controlling effect of which is portrayed most famously in the mid twentieth-century novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: 'You had to live - did live, from habit that became instinct - in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinised' (Orwell, 1948/2000, p. 5). The paper will contend that the same invisible omnipresence informs many literary representations of people with impaired vision, as is illustrated in the mid nineteenth-century novel *Jane Eyre*, when the eponymous protagonist says, 'I stayed my step, almost my breath, and stood to watch him [Rochester] - to examine him, myself unseen, and alas! to him invisible' (Brontë, 1847/1994, p. 426).

Though essentially a work of literary criticism, the paper is relevant to disability studies because its sample of primary material spans more than a century, thereby illustrating a notable lack of progress in the representation of people with impaired vision. In terms of the social model of disability, this regression is relevant because it represents something of the society by which people with impairments are disabled.

As well as being a 'utilitarian tool of transformation', literature is a 'medium for further stigmatizing disability in the imaginations of its audience' (Mitchell & Sneyder, 1997/2000, p. 13). Indeed, on the premise that representation 'shapes the reality that it supposedly reflects' (Thomson, 1997b, p. 304), the paper will provide insights into the hegemonic capacity of fiction, suggesting that the Unseen Starer in literature can affect not only characters but people. After all, regarded as a legitimate tactic (Shakespeare, 1994/1997), the stare is a 'specific form of social oppression' for disabled people (Thomson, 1997b, p. 300). That is not to make the deterministic claim that the reality of the Unseen Stare is a direct result of representation, but to argue that the latter can shape the former by defining it as a legitimate tactic. Nevertheless, the argument is complicated because this legitimation invokes an omnipresent gazer that can theoretically shape the reality of the victim irrespective of influence over potential perpetrators. In other words, the paper will suggest that the incessant representation of the Unseen Starer is psychosocially problematical for two reasons: first, because it can perpetuate a sense of curiosity among people with unimpaired vision; and second, because it can invoke an idea that in itself has the potential to affect the behaviour of people with impaired vision.

(i) Making Sport with Blind Activity

In the late eighteenth century, substantiating what the dramatic poem *Samson Agonistes* a century earlier had referred to as making ‘sport’ with ‘blind activity’ (Milton, 1671/1958, line 1328), people with impaired vision performed not only in circuses as ‘blind gladiators’ but in taverns as mock musicians (Bickel, 1988, p. 4). A representation of this “sport” can be found in the late nineteenth-century play *The Blind*, which features twelve blind characters who rely on a dead priest to guide them home (Maeterlinck, 1891/1997). Notably, the ‘gripping quality’ of the play has been said to derive from the fact that the audience can ‘see’ that the priest is dead while the characters cannot: ‘the blind are without succour, although they do not know it’ (Slater, 1997, p. xv).

A variation on the theme is provided in the early twentieth-century play *The Well of the Saints*, for Martin Doul’s blindness has been temporarily cured when he finds the ‘fine-looking’ woman Molly Byrne sitting in place of his ‘weather-beaten, ugly’ wife Mary. The sense of “sport” becomes explicit when the sighted characters ‘laugh loudly’ as Martin tries to identify Mary, making advances that are rejected by one ‘handsome girl’ after another (Synge, 1905/1996, p. 79). Indeed, though published more than three centuries on from *Samson Agonistes*, the late twentieth-century play *Molly Sweeney* contains yet another variation on the theme, invoking a rage of anger and defiance in which the title

character danced a wild and furious dance round the room, out to the hall, round the kitchen, back to the room and round it a third time (Friel, 1994/1995).

Notwithstanding the perpetuation of this disabling theme, the underpinning legitimization of the notion that people with impaired vision might make “sport” with “blind activity”, chronological consideration of the three plays suggests a sense of representational progress. Molly differs from earlier characters because - buffed by neither sighted counterparts nor the usual array of strategically placed obstacles - she weaves through a crowd, ‘darting between chairs and stools and cushions and bottles and glasses with complete assurance, with absolute confidence’ (ibid., p. 24). Moreover, in addressing the sighted characters with the exclamation ‘Now watch me!’ (ibid., p. 24), she demonstrates an element of choice that is not available to, say, Samson, who complains of how ‘they must pick’ him ‘out with shackles tir’d’ (Milton, 1671/1958, line 1326). Thus, *The Blind* conforms to the ancient laws of Blind Man’s Buff, but *The Well of the Saints* contains a buffed character who is temporarily ascribed sight and *Molly Sweeney* a blind character who is not buffed at all.

However, because a bewildered character who represents blindness is pushed around by a group of sighted, scornful, jeering and laughing counterparts, *The Well of the Saints* is fundamentally

regressive. The jeering, the laughter, the joke, the scene, the whole plot is premised on the Douls' blindness, and ultimately on the notion that people with impaired vision will be oblivious not only to their own ugliness, but to that of a partner. Similarly, despite the articulation of choice that seems to set *Molly Sweeney* apart from *Samson Agonistes*, a loss of control is conveyed through the way in which the nouns 'rage' and 'anger' are coupled with the adjectives 'wild', 'furious', '[m]ad' and 'frenzied' (Friel, 1994/1995, p. 24). Indeed, more than being lost, the noun 'defiance' indicates that control is passed over to the sighted characters, a hypothesis on which the paper will later expand.

Owing to the connotations of empowerment and disempowerment, a valid comparison can be drawn between the 'evaluating gaze of the "ablebodied" upon the disabled' and the 'evaluating gaze of the male upon the female' (Thomson, 1997b, p. 300). This comparison is elucidated by the contention that the objectification of women in pornography parallels that of disabled people in charity advertising, for in each case the gaze focuses on a passive and available body (Shakespeare, 1994/1997). The comparison is further illustrated in the literary representation of people with impaired vision, as is implicit when the eponymous protagonist of *Molly Sweeney* is watched sitting at her dressing table, trying her hair in different ways (Friel, 1994/1995), much as the narrator of the late nineteenth-century short story 'Glasses' is

'fixed to the spot' by an 'inability to cease looking' at Flora Saunt:

She had been from the first of my seeing her practically motionless, leaning back in her chair with a kind of thoughtful grace and with her eyes vaguely directed, as it seemed to me, to one of the boxes on my side of the house and consequently over my head and out of my sight. The only movement she made for some time was to finger with an ungloved hand and as if with the habit of fondness the row of pearls on her neck, which my glass showed me to be large and splendid (James, 1896/1964, pp. 363-4).

Molly Sweeney was first published a century later than 'Glasses', but in the same way that the Jamesian narrator's vision is magnified to dominate and thus belittle that of Flora's 'vaguely directed' eyes, Frank Sweeney remembers the ease with which he 'watched' through the bedroom door, while Molly saw only 'a blur', 'couldn't read her reflection, could scarcely even see it', had to 'peer', had to 'lean into' the mirror until 'her face was almost touching it' (Friel, 1994/1995, p. 51). Common to these paradoxically mundane spectacles is the pleasure in the Unseen Starer that derives from a psychosexual notion of power, and, ultimately, from the symbolic castration of the Unseeing Victim.

Many parallels can be drawn between the female body and the

disabled body, for both are 'cast within cultural discourse as deviant and inferior', 'excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life' and 'defined in opposition to a valued norm which is assumed to possess natural corporeal superiority' (Thomson, 1997a, p. 279). However, the parallels do not necessarily extend to the level of critical theory, for a person's appreciation of the female body does not necessitate her or his appreciation of the disabled body: 'feminists, like everyone else, including disabled people themselves, have been acculturated to stigmatize those whose bodies are deemed aberrant' (ibid., p. 286). Accordingly, *Jane Eyre* has been commended as a work of 'rebellious feminism' (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p. 338), yet its eponymous protagonist fixes Rochester with an Unseen Stare as follows:

He descended the one step, and advanced slowly and gropingly towards the grass plot. Where was his daring stride now? Then he paused, as if *he knew not which way to turn*. He lifted his hand and opened his eyelids; gazed blank, and with a straining effort, on the sky, and toward the amphitheatre of trees: one saw that *all to him was void darkness*. He stretched his right hand (the left arm, the mutilated one, he kept hidden in his bosom); *he seemed to wish by touch to gain an idea of what lay around him*: he met but vacancy still; for the trees were some yards off where he

stood. He relinquished the endeavour, folded his arms, and stood quiet and mute in the rain, now falling fast on his uncovered head (emphasis added, Brontë, 1847/1994, p. 426).

Having already ‘stretched forth his hand as if to feel whether it rained’, it might seem perplexing that Rochester should proceed with an ‘uncovered head’, that he is referred to as ‘a man without a hat’, but, in psychoanalytic terms, like blindness, any such lack can be interpreted as castration. It is therefore pertinent that this ‘sightless Samson’ is rendered ‘quiet and mute’, that he is said to have ‘descended’ without ‘daring’, to have moved ‘slowly and gropingly’. Moreover, while interpreting Rochester’s behaviour as helplessness, Jane refuses to assist him, instead reaping the reward of the Unseen Stare, an assumption of authority that is implicit in her appropriation of his epistemology – the emphasised suppositions about his intent.

As well as enjoyment that is not climactic, the Unseen Stare that results in neither closure nor exposure, there is a form of Samsonian “sport” that can be explained in terms of *jouissance*, a pleasure that is ‘excessive, leading to a sense of being overwhelmed or disgusted, yet simultaneously providing a source of fascination’ (Fink, 1995, p. xi). Accordingly, resonating in the late twentieth-century novel *Blindness*, where it strikes the doctor’s wife as ‘obscene’ that as if from behind a

microscope she finds herself observing a number of unsuspecting human beings (Saramago, 1995, p. 62), the experience of staring at someone with severely impaired vision has been articulated thus: 'the living signification of their gaze dissimulates for me, in some way and up to a certain point, this body of the eye, which, on the contrary, I can easily stare at in a blind man, and right up to the point of indecency' (Derrida, 1990/1993, p. 106).

This aspect of the Unseen Stare is represented in canonical works such as *Treasure Island*, where Jim Hawkins silently observes a group of horseriders galloping towards Pew. Utterly bewildered, the most infamous of blind characters turns, screams, runs, rolls and finally dashes right under the nearest of the coming horses. The 'rider tried to save him', says Jim, but 'Down went Pew with a cry that rang high into the night; and the four hoofs trampled and spurned him and passed by. He fell on his side, then gently collapsed upon his face, and moved no more' (Stevenson, 1883/1962, p. 30). In other words, standing 'a few steps' away, it is Jim alone who can save Pew, but to guide physically, or even to direct verbally, would be to betray the unseen presence, to interrupt and thereby end the narrative of the stare prematurely.

In another late nineteenth-century novel, *The Light That Failed*, the same reluctance is felt when Maisie observes the blind character Dick Helder rise from his seat and begin to feel his way across the room,

touching each table and chair as he passes. When Dick catches his foot on a rug, swears and drops on his knees to feel what the obstruction might be, Maisie remembers him walking in the Park as though all the earth belonged to him, tramping up and down her studio two months earlier and flying up the gangway of a Channel steamer. The 'beating of her heart was making her sick', says the narrator, 'and Dick was coming nearer, guided by the sound of her breathing' (Kipling, 1891/1988, p. 158). While it might be considered unrealistic that someone with impaired vision would go to such trouble in order to identify a rug, especially in a familiar setting, the point to emphasise is that when Dick does so Maisie is not only fascinated, but disgusted to the point of nausea, so overwhelmed that she can 'hardly move her lips' (ibid., p. 158). Moreover, having 'pressed herself up into a corner of the room', when she does 'put out a hand', she does so 'mechanically', to 'ward him off or to draw him to herself', she does not know which. It touches his chest and he steps back as though he has been 'shot' (ibid., p. 158).

Notwithstanding a reversal in terms of gender, the narrator of 'Glasses' remembers being similarly silent when staring at Flora, a memory that contains implicit sexual imagery that sustains the suggestion of a parallel between the Unseen Stare and the male gaze:

Flora, with the toy in her hand, looked round at her companion; then seeing his attention had been solicited in

another quarter she moved away with the shop-girl, who had evidently offered to conduct her into the presence of more objects of the same sort. When she reached the indicated spot I was in a position still to observe her. She had asked some question about the working of the toy, and the girl, taking it herself, began to explain the little secret. Flora bent her head over it, but she clearly didn't understand. I saw her, in a manner that quickened my curiosity, give a glance back at the place from which she had come. Lord Iffield was talking with another young person: she satisfied herself of this by the aid of a question addressed to her own attendant. She then drew closer to the table near which she stood and, turning her back to me, bent her head lower over the collection of toys and more particularly over the small object the girl had attempted to explain. She took it back and, after a moment, with her face well averted, made an odd motion of her arms and a significant little duck of her head. These slight signs, singular as it may appear, produced in my bosom an agitation so great that I failed to notice Lord Iffield's whereabouts. He had rejoined her; he was close upon her before I knew it or before she knew it herself. I felt at that instant the strangest of all impulses: if it could have operated

more rapidly it would have caused me to dash between them in some such manner as to give Flora a warning. In fact as it was I think I could have done this in time had I not been checked by a curiosity stronger still than my impulse. There were three seconds during which I saw the young man and yet let him come on. Didn't I make the quick calculation that if he didn't catch what Flora was doing I too might perhaps not catch it? She at any rate herself took the alarm. On perceiving her companion's nearness she made, still averted, another duck of her head and a shuffle of her hands so precipitate that a little tin steamboat she had been holding escaped from them and rattled down to the floor with a sharpness that I hear at this hour. Lord Iffield had already seized her arm; with a violent jerk he brought her round toward him. Then it was that there met my eyes a quite distressing sight: this exquisite creature, blushing, glaring, exposed, with a pair of big black-rimmed eye-glasses, defacing her by their position, crookedly astride of her beautiful nose. She made a grab at them with her free hand while I turned confusedly away (James, 1896/1964, pp. 339-40).

This example of *jouissance* illustrates how blindness can be the object of

voyeurism (Hevey, 1992), but present in all three examples is the sense of Aristotelian structure, of a start, middle and end. The Jamesian narrator stares until Flora is exposed; Hawkins until Pew moves no more and Maisie until Dick steps back as though he has been shot. In psychoanalytic terms, the quality of the stare is moving beyond the pleasure principle, to a point where Eros becomes Thanatos, where joy effectively is extinguished by its own intensity.

The trouble is that the optimum pleasure of the Unseen Starer results from pain in the Unseeing Victim, that be it literal or metaphorical, Hawkins and Maisie remain unsatisfied until the death of Pew and Dick, as is the Jamesian narrator until the exposure of Flora. Indeed, for reasons that will become apparent as the paper progresses, the commonality to note is the act of disempowerment. All three Unseen Starers could halt the ontological diminishment of their victims by simply calling out. In choosing to appear passive, therefore, the Unseen Starer actively contributes to the condemnation of the Unseeing Victim.

It is sometimes so that Samsonian “sport” becomes sublimated in the form of a topic, that quizzed, queried and quantified, diagnosed, defined and dissected, people with impaired vision are reduced to objects of research, subjects of demonstration (Jernigan, 1971). This claim is substantiated when a late twentieth-century photographer entertains a girl with impaired vision by imitating a dog, cat, peacock,

horse and so on (Berger & Mohr, 1982), for 'While she laughs along with his imitations, he secretly photographs her, because her laughing but blind face was "so beautiful"' (Hevey, 1992, p. 70). Consideration might also be given to the following account of a late eighteenth-century meeting between Valentin Haüy and Francois Lesueur:

[T]he sympathy and pity that had so moved Valentin Haüy at the autumn fair surged anew. He found a few coins in his purse and placed them, silent, in the outstretched hands, and then watched, suddenly engrossed and fascinated by the boy's fingers. The embossed faces of the coins were explored with delicate touch, fingertips traced the rims for serrations that would indicate higher value. The movements were light, but certain and quick. Valentin Haüy was entranced, not just by the dexterity of the boy's fingers; there was more to this than sorting coins into values by feel. This was intelligence by touch! Fingers served as this boy's eyes (Bickel, 1988, p. 6).

The imagery of the account is problematical in that Haüy is said to have been 'engrossed', even 'entranced' by Lesueur's use of haptic recognition, or put differently, by his "blind activity". Moreover, a sense of Samsonian "sport" is implicit in the adjective 'silent', suggesting Haüy's reluctance to relinquish the Unseen Stare as well as his mockery of

Lesueur.

This form of objectification is represented in *Molly Sweeney*, when ophthalmologist Mr Rice ponders the contents of what he calls Frank's 'essential' folder, finding the photographs of Molly cycling by herself across a deserted beach of more interest than the results of medical tests that she had undergone years ago, than the letters from two specialists whom she had consulted in her late teens (Friel, 1994/1995). Indeed, topical objectification is demonstrable in Frank's very preparation of what amounts to a medical, educational, sociological and philosophical study of his wife's life. The implication is that as well as the folder Frank has compiled and thus written Molly's life experience. It is particularly revealing that the folder's cover reads: 'Researched and Compiled by Frank C. Sweeney' (ibid., p. 6), a displacement of the subject that is indicative of the Unseen Starer's Assumed Authority over the Unseeing Victim.

(ii) The Reduced Status of the Unseeing Victim

Although many parallels exist between the social meanings that are ascribed to female and disabled bodies, a significant distinction should be emphasised: 'the disabled body is the object not of the appropriating gaze but of the stare. If the male gaze informs the normative female self as a sexual spectacle, then the stare *sculpts* the disabled subject as a

grotesque spectacle' (emphasis added, Thomson, 1997a, p. 285). Thus, in the mind of the Unseen Starer, the Unseeing Victim can be reduced to the point of inanimation, to the extent that he or she is regarded quite literally as an object, not one of fun or desire, but the paradoxical figure of a being without ontology.

Again resonating with attitudes from the eighteenth century, when 'young, sightless boys and girls were often sold to chimney sweeps, who thrust them like human brushes into blocked flues' (Bickel, 1988, p. 4), numerous instances of "the inanimate blind" can be found in nineteenth and twentieth-century literary representation. For example, echoing *Jane Eyre*, where Rochester is said to have referred to himself as a 'sightless block' (Brontë, 1847/1994, p. 430), the early twentieth-century novel *La Symphonie Pastorale* informs its readers that the blind character Gertrude 'allowed herself to be taken away like a lifeless block', inanimation that is sustained when the pastor's wife asks, 'What do you mean to do with that?' (Gide, 1919/1963, p. 14). The implication is that Gertrude cannot 'do' anything, that she is a thing with which something must be done, and that this something can only be done by a counterpart with unimpaired vision. Other examples can be found in *The Light That Failed*, where Mr Beeton 'would take Dick out with him' (Kipling, 1891/1988, p. 168); *The Well of the Saints*, where Molly 'pushes' Martin Doul, the people 'push him' and Timmy is 'turning' him 'round' (Synge,

1905/1996, pp. 75, 99); the early twentieth-century short story 'The Blind Man', where the brothers of the title character 'took him along to the theatre every now and again' (Brecht, 1920-4/1992, p. 22); and the early twentieth-century novel *Blindness*, where Nanny decides that she could 'take' newly blinded John Hays 'out for walks' (Green, 1926/1996, p. 144).

The kernel of truth in these representations is that in a disabling society people with impaired vision are likely to require assistance from people with unimpaired vision. However, the obscured reality is that assisting is distinct from taking, pushing or bringing. To assist a person who has impaired vision, to offer, say, a guiding elbow, is to contribute to what is predominantly her or his activity, whereas to take, bring or push is to ascribe passivity, to objectify, to possess, indeed to construct a sightless, lifeless block.

It is through the inducement of self-consciousness that the Unseen Stare *sculpts* the Unseeing Victim in a number of late twentieth-century literary works. For example, in the novel *How Late It Was, How Late*, interaction between the blind character Sammy and his sighted counterparts is described as follows:

It's just sometimes man ye see these cunts and the look they give ye can be different. It isnay just a look in passing, ye could be sitting there ye can imagine it, if okay ye're blind,

ye're blind and ye're sitting there, just minding yer own business, relaxed, ye're enjoying a quiet pint. But cause ye're blind ye dont know it but every cunt's staring at ye, staring right into ye, like one of these terrible wee nightmare movies (Kelman, 1995, p. 274).

The idea that horror enthusiasts and Unseen Starers are similarly motivated can also be found in the novel *The Insult*, where Martin Blom refers to his sighted counterparts by saying, 'I sat up. Smiled. Dusted my left sleeve, even though it didn't need it. You have to do normal things or they don't go away. You have to reassure them. Or they just stand there staring at you, as if you're a car-crash, or pornography' (Thomson, 1996, p. 65). This sculpting capacity has a theoretical basis in panopticism, a function of which is to 'induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility', ensuring that 'surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action' (Foucault, 1975/1977, p. 201, see also Bozovic, 1995).

Because the Unseen Starers of literature function in accordance with panopticism, the inducement of self-consciousness can become that of paranoia. This scenario is illustrated in the short story 'The Girl in the Corner', where the blind character Ivy is described as follows:

There was a certain self-consciousness about her movements; the swift, nervous smoothing of her skirt over

her knees; the quick glance round the compartment - a defensive, independent glance which flickered swiftly, seeming to see without deigning to look; and, with the glance, went a secret little smile, as though what she saw had caused her amusement (Norton, 1998, p. 5).

The shift from self-consciousness to something more pathological is implicit when the narrator refers to Ivy by saying, 'She seemed, without once having glanced at her, to be conscious of Pippa's far from obvious scrutiny' (Norton, 1998, p. 6). The accuracy of detection is rendered moot by the ambiguity of Pippa's scrutiny, from which it follows that Ivy may come to feel watched and self-conscious irrespective of the starrer's physical presence. It is this consciousness of scrutiny where there is no scrutiny that can be interpreted as delusional, as persecutory anxiety. Accordingly, in *The Insult*, having admitted to feeling followed and paranoid, Martin refers to his apparent residual vision by saying: 'My secret power, I thought. What if it wasn't a secret at all? Or rather, what if it was a secret everybody knew about except me? What if it was actually a secret I'd been excluded from? And what if it was being monitored? What if it had been monitored all along?' (Thomson, 1996, p. 196).

The sculpted nature of the Unseeing Victim becomes still more evident when consideration is given to the likelihood that persecutory anxiety will result in affectation, that feelings of self-consciousness will

lead to self-conscious behaviour. The literary representation of this behaviour can be found in 'Glasses', when the Unseeing Victim Flora Saunt suddenly picks up a 'little double-barrelled ivory glass' as if to look back at the Unseen Starer (James, 1896/1964, p. 364); in *The Insult*, when Martin Blom dusted [his] sleeve, 'even though it didn't need it' (Thomson, 1996, p. 65); and in 'The Girl in the Corner', when Ivy gives a 'quick glance round the compartment' and is depicted 'looking at the magazine' (Norton, 1998, pp. 5, 9). These responses to the Unseen Starer raise a pivotal point, for if the behaviour of "the blind" is induced or reduced by that of "the sighted", the former are effectively controlled by the latter. Indeed, according to folk belief the eye is sometimes 'used as a sadistic weapon, and looking confers absolute power over the object looked at' (Kirtley, 1975, p. 21).

(iii) The Elevated Status of the Unseen Starer

The gaze can be understood as a dynamic in which one role is to be 'gazed upon, measured, and passive', but the other role is to 'look, judge, and act' (Thomson, 1997b, p. 300). This dynamic illustrates one of the ways in which disabled people enable nondisabled people to feel good about themselves, for by demeaning the former the latter can feel powerful (Shakespeare, 1994/1997). Literary representation perpetuates this ideology by positing unimpaired vision as not only a necessary but

sufficient condition of the doer. For example, in *The Light That Failed*, Dick Heldar is rendered inferior to Mr Beeton's son Alf, despite the fact that the latter is only nine years old: 'Dick had no earthly desire to go to the Parks. Once and only once since Maisie had shut the door he had gone there under Alf's charge. Alf forgot him and fished for minnows in the Serpentine with some companions' (Kipling, 1891/1988, p. 172). Similarly, the narrator of 'The Blind Man' refers to the title character by saying, 'When a child took him out for a walk it ran off to play and he was seized by a great fear and was not brought home till late at night' (Brecht, 1920-4/1992, p. 22).

In terms of panopticism, the assumption of authority in the Unseen Starer is superlative, for 'A gaze and a voice that cannot be pinned down to any particular bearer tend to acquire exceptional powers, and by themselves, as it were, constitute divine attributes' (Bozovic, 1995, p. 11). This means that while the epistemological and ontological status of the Unseeing Victim is reduced, the contrary is true of the Unseen Starer. In other words, the Unseeing Victim is sculpted and the Unseen Starer sculpts in a dynamic that parallels the relationship between text and author. For example, the early twentieth-century novel *Invitation To The Waltz* contains a blind character whose marriage is described thus: 'She's sensible, she's matter-of-fact, she takes it for granted. How dare

she... She keeps his life practical and orderly, keeps him cheerful. They've got a child. So he must love her. And it doesn't matter to him that she's not young or pretty' (Lehmann, 1932/1981, pp. 255-6). Because each stereotype has its own narrative, its own intrinsic text, the fact that Olivia has only just met Timmy has no bearing on her apparent appreciation of his life. The sightless-unsightly pair is a stereotypical construct from which comes the conclusion that 'it doesn't matter' to Timmy that his wife is 'not young or pretty'. It is as if the ability to deliver the Unseen Stare confirms authority, as if the Unseeing Victim has no story to tell, no life experience or individuality to express.

Naturalised by the assumption of authority is eye-to-eye complicity, which in its simplest form involves two or more Unseen Starers uniting to displace someone with impaired vision in favour of Samsonian "sport". Literary representation of this phenomenon can be found in 'Glasses', where Flora waits alone at the opera, unaware that she is the 'aim of fifty tentative glasses' (James, 1896/1964, p. 363); in *The Well of the Saints*, where Martin and Mary try to hide behind a bush, but remain 'clearly visible' (Synge, 1905/1996, p. 98); and in the early twentieth-century short story 'The Blind Man', where the scent of a 'little crystal bowl of violets' causes Maurice a moment of profound disturbance: '[T]he two watched the blind man smelling the violets. He bent his head and

seemed to be thinking' (Lawrence, 1920/1955, p. 358).

The paradox is that while being of great curiosity-value, "the blind" are ontologically insignificant, effectively vanishing in the identification of their sighted counterparts, the identification of Unseen Starers. Hence, in 'The Girl in the Corner', when Ivy is asked if she would like to 'see' some pictures, her husband's eyes 'swivelled round to Pippa - and he smiled apologetically, as though to say: "We have to put it like that - we have to play her game"', much as when she asked if she might buy a kitten, 'another helpless one to care for, his eyes seemed to say, another tie' (Norton, 1998, p. 14).

Because Maurice is betrayed by his wife and Ivy by her husband, the implication is that comparable visual acuity constitutes a stronger connection than even the closest of relationships. This scenario is worsened by the fact that Ivy is betrayed to a complete stranger, as though elevated status can be not only appropriated by, but taken for granted among, people with unimpaired vision (see also Eliot, 1863/1956). Thus, although gazes are exchanged in a manner that can be defined as linguistic, the Unseen Stare only communicates exclusion.

Conclusion

Foreshadowed by Samson's assertion that the 'vilest here excell me', for they 'creep, yet see' (Milton, 1671/1958, lines 74-5), the idea that sight is

a sufficient condition of epistemological and even ontological elevation is implicit in a number of late nineteenth and twentieth century literary representations. Irrespective of morality, criminality and so on, “the sighted” automatically assume superiority over “the blind”. In this respect the paper has identified a conceptual link with the Panopticon, the inspector of which can be motivated by ‘the curiosity of the indiscreet, the malice of a child, the thirst for knowledge of a philosopher who wishes to visit this museum of human nature, or the perversity of those who take pleasure in spying and punishing’ (Foucault, 1975/1977, p. 202). The ‘curiosity of the indiscreet’ has been illustrated with constructs of the Unseen Starer; The ‘malice of a child’ with “the Inanimate Blind”; the ‘thirst for knowledge of a philosopher’ with Topical Objectification; and the ‘perversity of those who take pleasure in spying and punishing’ with visual violation. Indeed, the paper has found that within literary discourse the power of the Unseen Stare is utilised to violate, belittle, inanimate, castrate and objectify the Unseeing Victim, a process that thereby elevates the status of the Unseen Starer.

This ideology is particularly concerning because the Unseen Starer in literary representation resonates with the reality that is faced by people with impaired vision, as is confirmed in numerous autobiographical works (see, for example, Hull, 1990; Kuusisto, 1998; Kleege, 1999). The extent to which these experiences are shaped by representation is disputable,

but its capacity for perpetuating customs cannot be denied. It is also worth noting that a mid twentieth-century psychology paper found people with impaired vision 'frequently disturbed by a fear of being observed', and, since unable to 'determine' when this observation 'begins or ends', compelled to 'control' all 'movements' and 'behaviour' (Lowenfeld, 1948/1981, p. 77). The problem is that fiction has the capacity to initiate this very fear, meaning that when left unaddressed literary representation itself functions as an Unseen Starer, potentially making Unseeing Victims of not only blind characters but people with impaired vision. In the terms of panopticism, the 'apparent punishment' acts 'upon the mind', while the 'real punishment' acts 'not any farther than as giving rise to that idea' (Bozovic, 1995, p. 4). In other words, the Unseen Starer and Unseeing Victim combine in an exemplary form of hegemony, their fictional presence being theoretically enough to bring about psychosocial results. For this reason it is necessary to break the Unseen Stare, to return it by critically engaging with the literary representation of visual impairment in a way that is appreciative of disability.

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