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THE 'COUNTERFEIT COIN' AND CULTURAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF BLINDNESS

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ABSTRACT

As long as blindness has been recorded by sighted writers, it has always stood for something besides an alternative way of life. It was, and in fictional works today, still is used as a metaphor for evil, a means of inspiration, a target of pity—any metaphor that does not directly speak to the truth about the blind as individuals or as a community. Fictional blind characters often evoke a reader’s interest not in the character’s own personal development but rather in what their blindness exposes about the plot or the lesson to be learned in the story. Society was and in many ways still is affected by these stories of the blind community based on what messages they pull from sighted works. When compared with an autobiography, written by blind authors, these works expose a much more metaphorical perception of blindness. Despite that many works do this, there are short stories written by sighted writers that actually uncover insecurities and trauma of the sighted and not of the blind. I examined autobiographies by Georgina Kleege and Stephen Kuusisto and short stories “The Blind Man” By D.H. Lawrence and “Cathedral” by Raymond Carver comparatively in an effort to make more pronounced the individualism and independence of the blind.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	i
Table of Contents.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Georgina Kleege’s Autobiographical Blind Experience.....	9
Chapter 2: Stephen Kuusisto’s Autobiographical Blind Experience.....	17
Chapter 3: The Sighted Writing Blindness in D.H. Lawrence’s “The Blind Man”.....	26
Chapter 4: The Sighted Writing Blindness in Raymond Carver’s “Cathedral”.....	32
Conclusion	41
Bibliography	44

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Introduction

Kenneth Jernigan, former president of the National Federation of the Blind, said in his address at the banquet of the annual convention in Chicago in 1974:

History, we are told, is the record of what human beings have *done*; literature, the record of what they have *thought*...I examined with you the place of the blind in history—not just what we have done but what the historians have remembered and said we have done.

The two, as we found, are vastly different (Jernigan).

In most cultures' histories of blindness, the difference between what blind people have done and what textbooks iterate and what fictional texts reveal is indeed significant. The sighted have spoken for the blind for most of recorded history while the blind were either ignored or ostracized for their disability. Thus, their voices were not heard for centuries, creating a false history which is still present in modern society.

Blindness, among every other disability, has been deemed “deviant” from the “norm” in literature and has been displaced from the public sphere into a misrepresentative light. In fact, “within literary narratives, disability serves as an interruptive force that confronts cultural truisms” (48). Mitchell and Snyder reveal that disability is more of an obstruction to society than a part of it, thereby pushing the boundaries of “normal” and “abnormal.” One way that disability is perceived as a non-normative facet of culture is the way in which it is used to describe deviance from an “ordinary” setting in literature: “Many authors—from Grimms' fairytales to Toni Morrison—choose disability to mark deviation from a norm, to refer to some inner structure within the character to which the disability alludes. In short, disability makes textual abstractions tangible” (Ben-Moshe). Utilizing disability as a literary device allows for blind people to be

generalized and categorized into an unwanted (and inaccurate) narrative for blindness—that they are undesirable, intrusive, and burdensome.

Scholar Maxine Wood said that one of the first prominent preconceived notions about blindness was that it was a “pitiabile condition”: “If pity and charity for blind people could be weighed, we have inherited tons of it” (2). She suggests that as long as blindness has been recorded, the sighted perceived and documented it as something to look down upon and that blindness can be viewed in literature as inspirational as long as a person demonstrates a significant skill: “Practically everyone has heard of a gifted blind individual who has been successful in his or her chosen field. Perhaps the first one to come to mind is our own internationally renowned Helen Keller” (2). However, what isn’t always clear is that most blind people, especially those born blind, do not view themselves as pitiable or tragic. Wood vocalizes that in fact, not every blind person should be valued depending on whether they have an extraordinary talent like Helen Keller, and that most blind people are not anything like her: “There are thousands of blind people—without fame, without special gifts—who are earning a living, raising a family, and participating in community activities. They are able to live full, useful lives” (2). There have been a multitude of projected myths about blind people—“The blind have a sixth sense,” “The blind have acute hearing,” and “The blind can tell color by touch” to name a few (4)—that perpetuate inappropriate treatment of blind people, specifically in literature. This treatment, evident in some fictional stories written by sighted writers, still adds to negative stigmas connected with blindness. Wood mentions that even just the phrase, “the blind,” commonly found in literature, is often disliked by blind people precisely because of the negative connotations involved with the phrase—that “loss of sight brings with it a ready-made personality” (5).

The perception that blind people are unable to lead normal lives only distorted many literary works about blindness. Despite that blindness is not recent or uncommon enough to have gone unnoticed,

The literary record reveals no single theme or unitary view of the life of the blind.

Instead, it displays a bewildering variety of images—often conflicting and contradictory, not only as between different ages or cultures, or among the works of various writers, but even within the pages of a single book (Jernigan).

A singular representation of blindness is precisely what should not occur in literature, but a multitude of misrepresentations within one work only further distorts and marginalizes blindness. Many popular pre-20th century stories about blindness were written almost solely by sighted writers, many of whom misrepresented blindness both in terms of the individual and in terms of the whole: “The perception of a ‘crisis’ or a ‘special situation’ has made disabled people the subject of not only governmental policies and social programs but also a primary object of literary representation” (Mitchell and Snyder, 47).

In fictional stories written by sighted writers, one of two cases usually arises: “1) the perception that blindness is symbolic of something (not simply a different form of sensing); and 2) reification of what blindness is supposed to represent, to stand for” (Ben-Moshe). Precisely, blindness is not represented in these stories as itself, and more often is placed within a narrative manufactured by the sighted. Present upon close speculation of these literary works is the allegory of something tragic, admirable, wicked, or other descriptors that paint blindness in a misrepresented light. Jernigan lists a multitude of common motifs and themes that act as lessons or morals from these narratives:

Blindness as compensatory or miraculous power; blindness as total tragedy; blindness as foolishness and helplessness; blindness as unrelieved wickedness and evil; blindness as perfect virtue; blindness as punishment for sin; blindness as abnormality or dehumanization; blindness as purification; and blindness as symbol or parable (Jernigan).

Each allegory, though potentially true of individual characters in some literary works, often strikes a chord with audiences and helps solidify an uneducated idea of blindness. These stories help the sighted to believe that the isolated descriptors used in one text about blindness must be true of all blind people. The two extreme allegories, evil and purity, are a few cruxes within the false narratives. In many fables and folklores, writers have conditioned readers to believe that blindness can bring out poor behaviors in people: “Given the casual cruelty with which the blind have generally been treated, such villainous creatures have also provided a convenient excuse and justification. After all, if the blind are rascals and rascallions, they should be handled accordingly—and no pity wasted” (Jernigan). On the other side of the spectrum, blindness can act as purity and virtue, and though this allegory does not seem as destructive as the evil allegory, the effect can be just as damaging to blind culture. What it proves to audiences is that blindness cannot simply be a human condition, but rather an event in which the blind character is at a pivotal crossroads or transition:

On the surface these two popular stereotypes appear to be contradictory; but it takes no great psychological insight to recognize them as opposite sides of the same counterfeit coin. What they have in common is the notion that blindness is a transforming event, entirely removing the victim from the ordinary dimensions of life and humanity (Jernigan).

The counterfeit coin concept of blindness brings people to draw the conclusion that there must only be two types of blind people—those who are scorned and hateful, or those who exude inspiration or sainthood as a result of their blindness. With these two extremes in place in literature, blindness has little factual identity in fiction.

Sometimes, stories about blindness do not promote certain metaphors and instead they focus on the story, but equally present in sighted-authored stories is the demand for a narrative of *how* a character became blind. More importantly, this demand reveals that sighted characters, and the writer, all expect an explanation for disability in order to find a justification for the condition they consider to be tragic:

Blindness, like all disabilities, is also normatively viewed as a personal tragedy, something inflicted on the individual, a condition that a person suffers from. This narrative is closely related to a medical narrative claiming treatment and cure. Blindness should not be embraced and experienced as an identity, equal to any other, but should be pitied and/or treated (Ben-Moshe).

Naomi Schor, a noted literary critic and theorist, notes the unique differences of the blind narrative in *At First Sight*, a film in which a blind man and a sighted woman fall in love. In the movie, Virgil became blind at age three because of cataract problems. He meets Amy, an architect from New York, when she visits the spa in which he works for a massage. She doesn't know that he is blind at first because the room is dark and he wears dark glasses. After she realizes he's blind, she returns to her hotel room, puts on a blindfold, and attempts to navigate the room. She ends up knocking into the furniture. She is not only unsettled because of her own short-term experience with blindness, but also with her new love's long-term blindness, so she seeks out a surgeon who can correct Virgil's visual impairment. Virgil reluctantly agrees to the

surgery, and he successfully gains back his vision. However, the results are not what Amy or Virgil are expecting:

The results of the operation are surprising: Virgil is cured of his blindness, but contrary to our expectations, he recoils from the world he discovers. Whereas French melodramas and Hollywood films have led us to greet restored sight as a miracle, an instantaneous passage from blindness to vision, the scientific literature that Sacks draws on, stretching back to the celebrated Molyneux case that inspired Locke, testifies to the veritable catastrophe that suddenly restored vision can bring, leading in some cases to depression, suicide, or a longing to recover blindness (Schor).

Schor argues that as opposed to the prejudicial view that blindness is something to treat or eradicate, blindness is simply another way of being. More importantly, taking away blindness from someone who has always been blind is not so much a solution as it is a long-term disruption, and many times, a trauma.

The importance of this film's rejection of the typical "I was blind, now I'm saved" narration draws its audience closer to perceiving blindness as a way of life and not something that must be treated. Medically, depression and suicide are common side effects to suddenly gaining vision, and there are innumerable accounts of people who choose to return to blindness or experienced emotional trauma after having gone through the same successful surgery¹. This concept of wanting to return to "darkness" is not easily accepted by the sighted. Similarly, Amy struggles to accept that Virgil doesn't want to see, but she fails to acknowledge that the sighted life is not one which Virgil can easily adjust to.

¹ See case studies on Michael May, Shirl Jennings, and neurologist Oliver Sacks' recount of the story of Virgil in his book, *An Anthropologist On Mars* as examples of an aversion to the sighted life.

What are we to learn from stories like these compared to stories written by sighted writers that convey metaphorical undertones? The movie is one of the few stories in which a blind character struggles to accept newfound sight—a plot device many sighted people would not understand, but it is a representation of a blind person whose life was obstructed by sight, and not the other way around. Along with this story are many other dynamic individual stories in which blindness is more of a way of life than a lack of a full life, and are important tools to understanding blindness as such. Accordingly, reading a few first-hand accounts of blindness is not only necessary for understanding blindness but also necessary for learning about how the sighted world interacts with blindness. More importantly, these accounts allow us to understand that those born blind or who have been blind do not always find their experience traumatic—in fact, many blind writers do not. Georgina Kleege and Stephen Kuusisto are a part of this group.

What I aim to do in this thesis is compare short stories written by sighted writers that center on blind characters with autobiographies written by blind writers like Kleege and Kuusisto. These autobiographies reveal individual stories that break the mold of one of the many blind narratives created by sighted writers. Though Kleege's and Kuusisto's stories are vastly different, the constant element within them is that neither person was traumatized by their blindness. If anything, the discomfort comes from those around them. Though many short stories written by sighted writers tend to reveal the opposite, D.H. Lawrence's "The Blind Man" and Raymond Carver's "Cathedral" also defy the traditional blind narrative. Like Kleege and Kuusisto, the blind characters in these short stories are not traumatized specifically because of their blindness, and again, the uneasiness only arises from the sighted around them. In the first two chapters, I will explore Kleege's and Kuusisto's personal stories and how they were treated as a result of their blindness. More importantly, I will discuss how their blindness has affected

them and how their traumas, if any, were directly connected to the stigma surrounding their blindness. In chapters three and four, I will evaluate the blind characters in both short stories and challenge the prior depiction and purpose of blind characters in literature—that they are emotionally damaged from their blindness. I am most interested in how blindness is represented in literature and how autobiographies and short stories like “The Blind Man” and “Cathedral” challenge and falsify these representations by instead exposing insecurities of the sighted characters and juxtaposing them against the contentment of the blind characters.

Chapter 1: Georgina Kleege's Autobiographical Blind Experience

"This is not a tragedy. This is merely a fact of my life. Get over it. I have."

Georgina Kleege became legally blind at the age of 11, though she did not fully embrace the term "blind" for decades after her impairment was identified. She hid her blindness from even her closest friends and colleagues because of the stigma she was sure would be attached to her². Her own misunderstanding of what blindness was (as a child she believed the term was reserved for those who could see only darkness) was precisely the reason she did not believe she was blind. Kleege's vision, though extremely limited, still allowed her to perceive light and movement on a certain level:

As a child I knew that I did not see what other people saw. I could not, for instance, read print without holding the text close to my eyes and using extreme magnification. But I knew I could see something—light, form, color, movement—and assumed that this was close enough to what other people saw" (Kleege, 2).

Kleege thought little to nothing of her visual impairment because as far as she knew, as long as she could see *anything*, she could not be categorized with those in complete darkness. She says she has no memory of losing sight—she believed what she was experiencing was completely normal. In fact, she remembers having been shocked at finding out that there were people who could see individual blades of grass in detail while she only saw green. Despite this abrupt realization, her reaction was out of curiosity rather than grief: "It might seem that this discovery would lead to sadness—what else have I been missing all these years? In fact, it has inspired a kind of perplexed wonder—what do sighted people do with all this visual detail?" (2) As a

² "*Blind* meant the man in the subway station, standing for hours near the token booth, tin cup in hand, a mangy German shepherd lying on a bit of blanket at his feet. That was not how I saw myself. Surely there was some sort of mistake" (17).

lecturer and scholar, Kleege is certainly not afraid to answer questions, and when the topic of her sight (or lack thereof) or this particular story arises, she is prompted to answer the question of how she dealt with her discovery by asking in turn how sighted people could handle seeing so much at once. Kleege recognized that the sighted expected her personal finding to have been negative, but it *wasn't*. She argues that she was not broken by what she learned, but was in fact empowered to live a full life and interested in learning more about how she lived life differently from the sighted. She assumed her audience might be itching to ask: *how did you take the news that you couldn't see what we see? How did you deal with it?* Those questions are the ones that she, as a child, was afraid of having to answer once she found that the word “blind” was relative to her own life.

The symptoms of Kleege's visual impairment were due to macular degeneration, a loss of vision particularly in the center of the eye. These symptoms were ignored by her doctor. They began with difficulty reading; her parents noticed her holding her schoolbooks inches from her nose, and they took her to be seen for what they thought was nearsightedness. The doctor tested her for myopia, and when the tests came back negative, he did not pursue the issue any further. Instead, he advised her parents and teachers to pull the books away from her face—he believed she was faking her blindness. As months passed and it became more difficult for Kleege to read, her parents insisted on further testing. Though the conclusion was that she was legally blind, her doctor told her parents not to change her lifestyle as long as she was doing well in school. What he didn't tell her or her parents was that there were available materials to make school easier for her, and he did not explain what exactly legal blindness was.³

³ Kleege notes that her doctor did not feel it was his responsibility to point her to special education materials or to send her to an optometrist to obtain any available magnification devices. He also did not point her in the direction of recorded materials for the blind (16).

Kleege was brought up in a visual world—her parents were visual artists, she loved the movies and art galleries, and since she did not demand visual accommodations in school, she was immersed in materials and literature all made “by and for sighted people” (3). She admits that the only thing she would disclose about her vision throughout her childhood and early adult years was that there was “a ‘problem with my eyes,’ sometimes adding, ‘and they won’t give me glasses,’ indicating that it was not me but the willfully obstructionist medical establishment which was to blame for my failure to see as I should” (18). She refused to admit that she was what she knew herself to be—legally blind—and instead reframed her impairment to as an institutional error. If they only had given her the materials she needed, she would be fine. She used a slightly different approach to disavowing her blindness in her early adult years. Before she started lecturing at the University of California, Berkley, in 1991, she worked as a social worker in a women’s crisis center, and had convinced her colleagues and friends that she could see better than she really could. Speaking from memory, she gave multiple educational talks about domestic violence and sexual assault, among other issues, and directed her eyes about the room in a way that would disguise her inability to make eye contact with her audience—“I do not really know what eye contact feels like or does,” she has noted. Because she never bumped into anything or made a scene of her inability to fully see, she “passed as sighted” (12). Passing made possible a multitude of acquaintances: her lack of eye contact was attributed to shyness or reserve, and this is how she was able to move through her first few decades of life without a great amount of scrutiny from her peers. She concludes that:

The blind, of all levels of impairment and all stages of sight loss, find themselves encouraged to sham sight. And even if there is no overt encouragement from well-meaning family members or social workers, we know, or sense instinctively, that our

charade of sight is easier than the consequences of speaking the single word *blind* (19).

She believed life was easier pretending she was confused or lost or that she was looking for her glasses when squinting to read something, instead of simply admitting to her inability to see.

She feared rejection and stigmatization, but she also worried that if friends and family understood the extent of her blindness, they would feel obligated to help her. Despite these fears, she wanted to move forward after her position at the women's center.

Around the time that she began lecturing, she made the decision to carry a white cane and openly admit that she was legally blind, though she says that the multitude of responses she received, and still receives, are unpredictable. At the beginning of each semester, she informs her classes that she is legally blind and there is always “a pause, a collective intake of breath. I feel them look away uncertainly and then look back.” (9) She says that she feels them become more and more uncertain about how she navigated her way to the classroom, if she needs anything extra in order to instruct the class, and whether any of them need to be responsible for her in any way. Though she knows that joking about her blindness is not how they will fully understand her impairment, she does so anyway to soothe their unease, which she can feel even if she can't see their facial expressions.⁴ After this first day, she observes the number of students who drop her class and wonders whether they dropped it because of her blindness.

Kleege's students make up only a small portion of the people who often react negatively to finding that she is legally blind. She recounts a party at which she told a man that she was a blind writer, and he “was almost reduced to tears” (13). She could tell he was shaken not only in

⁴ Kleege does not want to make her blindness the center of any of her activities, whether it be her lectures or her position as a novelist. However, she says that there are times that she must include it. She opens her classroom with information on her blindness so that the students know what to expect from the class—she asks them to read her their papers in office hours and she chooses a student to count hands for whenever she asks.

that he was worried her condition would worsen, but also by the dilemma or outright contradiction of a writer who can't see. How could she undertake something as massive as a novel when she couldn't see the words on the page? She narrates the way she must patiently explain to him that there are other ways to read, to write, and to interpret; more importantly, she wants him to understand that her blindness is *not* a tragedy, but "he had already receded from me, become preoccupied with a new, reductive view of me and my restricted future" (14). She found that this kind of reaction was common, and eventually refrained from sharing the fact of her blindness. It is sometimes necessary for her to explain why she doesn't drive, for example, and the reaction generally takes one of two directions: people either absorb the news and change the subject, or else find the fact utterly shocking. In those cases

Tension would solidify around us. Their voices would become softer, even hushed with a pious solicitude. I felt them glance around for whoever brought me, whoever was responsible for me. Sometimes there was a degree of desperation in this, an anxiety to turn me back over to the person in charge. (13)

As with her students, new acquaintances often worry anxiously about how exactly she is managing without constant help. Her supposed inability to be responsible for herself stems only from the sighted idea that without clear vision, the blind cannot be trusted to make it through the day without injuring themselves in some way or leaning on someone in a burdensome manner.

Even in a casual conversation, people immediately feel a sense of duty to protect her from herself. Similarly, Kleege likens her story to that of a woman she once observed on an airline flight. The woman, who used a wheelchair, was assisted into her seat by a personal attendant, who then put away the wheelchair, and left. The airline attendants became desperate and angry because they felt a sudden weight of responsibility for this woman, though they seemed

incapable of accommodating her. More importantly, they were incredibly uncomfortable with her being on the flight alone—Kleege says that they were appalled that she was left by herself. They ignored her during the entire flight (it also didn't help that she only spoke French) and at some point she began to cry. Kleege and her husband were a few of the people who stepped in to ask her what she needed, specifically if and when she needed to use the bathroom. Kleege found out that the woman was traveling to the United States to compete in the Special Olympics for swimming. After the flight, the attendants exaggeratedly thanked and praised Kleege and her husband for helping, as if to bring them onto the side of the nondisabled and cast the woman as a freakish aberration. This extremely accomplished woman was diminished to nothing more than a burden because the attendants were uncomfortable with her both independence, and her requests for help.

It is not unusual for sighted people to treat Kleege or any other impaired person around her as a burden or a liability, but she was also accustomed to receiving pity for her blindness. This expectation became a point of bonding with a man she met in Paris. The man disclosed to her that he had a problem with his eyes; he waited for a reaction of pity or horror from Kleege, who hadn't yet told him she was blind herself. She could tell that he was anticipating the “usual responses, the hushed surprise, the ‘So sorry for your loss’” (18). Both were faced with the reality that the sighted look at the blind as those with loss—even successful, happy blind people. Indeed, the sighted seem to need blindness to be thoroughly incapacitating and tragic; for the sighted, blindness equals unmanageable incapacity. As Kleege puts it,

Fear of blindness leads naturally to fear of the blind. The competent and independent blind pose a particular threat to the sighted, and they can't refrain from comment. Every blind person is familiar with the praise. “You manage so well,” the sighted coo. They go into raptures

over the simplest tasks (27). She recites another narrative in which she had people over for dinner and they were utterly shocked that she could cook well. When they asked how she could make something, she first ran through the recipe with them, assuming they were interested in what spices or techniques she incorporated. Eventually, she realized what they were asking. She explained to them how she knew the crab or broccoli were done and tried her best to move onto another subject, though she knew that there was a good chance they would become interested in, and concerned for, her blindness. They may have felt the urge to cry or shrink away from her. She stated simply that her experience wasn't traumatic in the least, and yet those around her could not help but feel responsible for her, and more importantly, uncomfortable in that she could function perfectly without constant aid. Experiences like these prove that somehow, despite any measure of success or achievements, the blind are held to lower standards of independence and ability to do their jobs. Kleege's own doctor admitted he was surprised with how well she was doing independently⁵.

With these issues in mind, Kleege decided to write a novel on blindness.⁶ She began researching other memoirs as models, and she was disappointed to find that there were really only two types of people who wrote memoirs about blindness. First, there were those who she called the "blind whiners" who said blindness was the worst thing imaginable and that sighted people should feel lucky and blessed. Then there were the ones who were focused on a second sight or "inner-eye" that had developed as a compensation for their blindness. She felt she could not relate to either: Both are "structured around conflict, epiphany, and resolution," and both "promote the notion that blindness is something one either triumphs over or is defeated by" (4).

⁵ His surprise in her accomplishments as a fully functioning, happy blind person indirectly alludes to his expectation that she had far surpassed the standard of success for blind people—that the blind man in the subway did pretty well since he was able to just get himself there, and that was enough.

⁶ The time she was writing this novel was 1998-1999. The novel was published in 1999.

Kleege suggests that in her research of these memoirs, whether they were awe-inspiring or tragic, she always found a version of these narratives. Writers divulge details of various telling episodes, or of their mental or emotional states at the end of the work, or how their impairment either brought them to ruin or lifted them above everyone else as a figure of inspiration. She knew her own story was not going to be an attempt at these kinds of narratives, whose resolutions make the sighted feel there is something to learn from or to feel pity. “My story,” she says, “lacks the requisite trauma and drama, and the only thing awe-inspiring in it is the fact that my adaptation to blindness apparently took place before my condition was diagnosed, and without specialized training or even conscious effort” (3).

Kleege’s own experience as a blind person is uninflected by pathos or drama; blindness is simply one of many integral parts of how she lives her life. She doesn’t wish she knew how to make eye contact, she doesn’t wish to see blades of grass up close, and she doesn’t make a point to center her life on her blindness. She displays no resentment about her blindness; she simply lives her life as fully as anyone else.

Chapter 2: Stephen Kuusisto's Autobiographical Blind Experience

Stephen Kuusisto says that “blindness is often perceived by the sighted as an either/or condition: one sees or does not see. But often a blind person experiences a series of veils” (Kuusisto, 5). Kuusisto gives a first-hand account of this claim in his memoir, *Planet of the Blind*, and recalls how he spent decades attempting to deny and hide his blindness.

Having been born premature and with damaged retinas, Kuusisto knew from an early age that at best, his sight comprised of a fading in and out of shapes and blurred colors. However, his parents brought him up in an environment that did not accommodate blind children or instruct parents on how to raise blind children⁷. His parents had a limited view of his impairment; his mother's demand that he be placed in a public school was based on her fear of the stigma that followed disability—a stigma prohibiting the social acceptance and understanding of disability. Though Kuusisto was told to play apart from his peers⁸, his mother insisted that he attend school without an aide, forcing him to juggle the imperatives of detachment and inclusion and muddling his identity—a blind boy living as a sighted boy.

Kuusisto balanced his undeniable blind experience and his presumed sighted experience throughout his childhood. He worked hard to deceive his peers and his parents that his vision was better than it really was in the hopes that he would not embarrass himself. He recalls the particular pastime of riding his bike, and that the activity, though dangerous, was one of his favorite thrills:

⁷ Kuusisto mentions that in his town the only noticed people with disabilities were World War II veterans and that disabled children were not categorized, but rather unseen. (13)

⁸ “I am emphatically told not to mix. In some cases this comes from the parents, who think I might break during ordinary play” (12).

Here's another shadow, and another. I turn sharply but this time plunge into tall weeds.

Insects rise into my hair, cling to my sweaty face. From the road comes the hiss of

angered gavel, a car roars past. Thanks be to God! I'm alive in the wild carrot leaf! (8)

Kuusisto could barely see and endangered himself on every bike ride, potentially riding into a tree or even into traffic, but he demanded such activities of himself in order to feel as much a "normal" kid as possible. Each ride was highlighted by his coming out of it alive, and that was enough for him. He recalls another bike ride where he fell, was stung by a bee, and his glasses flew off, but he cared most about whether his accident had been witnessed. Kuusisto's biggest fear in these moments was precisely that the nature of his accident would give way to the explanation he'd worked so hard to hide. He searched the ground for his glasses and looked up to see shadows, thinking that they were children and started to panic—and decided he had to start protecting himself by feigning clumsiness, which seemed much more tolerable to him than blindness.

Though he attempted to keep his blindness from those around him, he consistently proved that he did not belong—specifically in the classroom. He had several embarrassing experiences in which he makes himself a spectacle. During one, he was simply grasping for an understanding of what he was learning:

I must ask a question, some nearly useless thing like how many dogs are on the blackboard. I turn to Janet, who sits next to me, and whisper, "How many dogs are there?" "I see Stephen talking!" cries the teacher, and there is the staccato of chalk in action. "Stephen's name goes on the Baby Board!" (18)

Kuusisto felt that he in fact did not belong where he was, and that "my little body at this desk is something uncanny—a thing that belongs in the darkness and that has been brought to daylight"

(20). In an urgency to remain as non-blind as possible to the public eye, Kuusisto learned to listen well and to compensate for his blurred vision by trusting “motion and light and temperature” (15). Along with his realization of his blindness came the fine-tuning of his hearing and touch, which allowed him to gain a perspective of the world unlike his peers. He began to use them to his advantage where he could in class, on the street, or on his bike. The issue that remained, regardless of his new senses, was that as a child, he was convinced that “people will only like me if I can see” (42). Because of this belief, Kuusisto sought help after school from teachers—every afternoon he sat with them to rehash the day’s lessons in a detail he couldn’t receive with his classmates. In this way and others, he both acclimated to (and defied) the restrictions of his blindness⁹—regardless, his anxiety clearly stemmed from how his blindness looked to others. Throughout the span of his childhood and even early adulthood, he struggled to maintain nonchalance when his glasses were removed, whether accidentally on his bike or forcibly by someone else. Specifically, his glasses were taken from him in elementary school:

A boy I think of as a friend steals my glasses and my panic brings me alive like a tree filled with birds: I navigate with my hands.

“Hey, Blindo, over here!”

He laughs along with several others, then they run.

I lunge with my arms straight following the sounds of sneakers. I’m determined not to cry
(21).

Kuusisto became panicked and desperate not only because of the ridicule he tried so hard to avoid, but because he realized something even worse than the stigma that was so clearly

⁹ Riding his bike and going to art museums are just a few of the pleasures in which he indulges through childhood and early adulthood despite that both activities typically require [or required in the mid-to late 20th century] better eyesight.

following him. He was viewed as blind with his glasses on, but “without them I’m a wild white face, a body groping, the miner who’s come suddenly into the light” (21). His attempt to avoid criticism had backfired on him. His self-consciousness was deteriorating with every strained effort just to keep his glasses on.

Kuusisto’s low self-esteem and severe discomfort with his blindness deepened in college, and even as a young adult, he fought to hide behind the glasses that were often taken from him. He recounts an episode on a class trip to Greece where his glasses were taken from him in a bar by two foreign girls:

My glasses are passed around like a pocket watch swiped from a tourist in the primate house.

A waiter appears with drinks, but Del and Shepard are rising to leave.

“No drinks,” says Del. “We haven’t ordered any drinks!”

“Yes. You pay. Two hundred drachma!” The bartender seems to be in our way. And he is joined now by five or six silent men.

“Give me my glasses.” I stretch my hand out. I don’t know who actually holds them.

For some reason I feel an exotic dignity, and I stand up.

“Give me the *fucking glasses!*”

Somebody puts them in my hand (81).

In this particular passage, the girls flirted with Kuusisto and his friends and asked them to buy their drinks. Despite the playful atmosphere, he became immediately flustered when someone took his glasses. His reaction was identical to that when he was a child. It is clear that even into adulthood, the source of Kuusisto’s anxiety was both the stigmatized treatment of his blindness

and the even greater fear of losing his glasses, his last attempt at passing as slightly sighted¹⁰.

Eventually, he came to the realization during a trip to the museum that the “cane,” or accepted blindness, was inevitable.¹¹

In Kuusisto’s later years, after he openly admitted to his blindness and began to seek accommodation, he experienced precisely what his childhood nightmares were made of; the stigma of blindness surrounded him and made him unapproachable or pitiful to the sighted world¹². In many of his experiences, he was judged as someone who must have been missing out—someone whose body, though still young and robust, was already failing him. By the time he was middle-aged, he came to the realization not only of the stigma surrounding blindness—that you can either see or you can’t—but to the levels of experience shared in the blind community, and how that life is no less a life or an experience than that of a seeing person:

No two blind people are alike. I, for instance, grew up wearing chains like Houdini, trying to pull off a magic trick. Not everyone with vision loss goes through this long struggle with self-consciousness. There are those who lose their vision suddenly and find tremendous powers of resilience. They give hope to the people around them, both the sighted and the blind. We are, all of us, ecstatic creatures, capable of joyous mercy to the self and to others. The strong blind move like modern dancers, their every gesture means something. The newly blind or the lifelong blind often possess an art of living, an

¹⁰Kuusisto knew from a young age that his glasses did little to help him see, but he chose to wear them through college because it perpetuates his façade of sightedness. He mentions in the beginning of his autobiography that from his experience with the sighted world, many people believe that blindness means seeing nothing. Thus, his glasses are a part of his pass as a sighted person.

¹¹ During Kuusisto’s trip to the museum, he mentions not being able to identify with the paintings, and that he can’t even read about them in the museum guide because the font is too small. The blind museum experience has been the subject of recent scholarly essays, most notably Craig Werner’s piece titled “Getting the Picture: My Experience with Described Art.” The comparison between his experience and Kuusisto’s is a demonstration on the newer accommodations for the blind as opposed to in Kuusisto’s time.

¹² Kuusisto saw a young boy in the hallway of his apartment building and after the boy identified Kuusisto as blind, he told him that “you must be bad!” Two elderly women saw him crossing the street and said “poor man! And he’s so young.” These are just a few examples of how society treated Kuusisto’s blindness like a tragedy. (145-146)

invisible, delicate vessel that they carry...sometimes roses grow on the sheer banks of the sea cliff.” (178-179)

Kuusisto first indicates an undeniable fact: *no two blind people are alike*. His blindness was like a magic trick—something to hide and deceive people into believing it’s not there. Unlike some, Kuusisto was traumatized, specifically by his childhood—he was not given the opportunity to appropriately learn about and accommodate his blindness while others may have. More so, his experience was burdened by the internal pressure to pass as sighted in order to avoid humiliation. Concurrently, he acknowledges countless other blind narratives—those whose visions fail unexpectedly and whose morale boost, those whose each movement constitutes a purpose, while he stumbled in confusion.

Through his experience and despite its traumatic memory, he values himself even more as an open blind man than someone pretending—he is living the life he should have had the opportunity to live as a child. He also values his blind life as one not lacking a vital quality—in fact, he values precisely the opposite. He views the blind as roses that grow on sea cliffs—life that may not be as easy as a life in the garden (similarly, as someone with all their senses), but a life filled with rich experiences not ever shared with the sighted. From the first minute of blindness, Kuusisto cultivated a wealth of language and expression unbeknownst to his parents and his community—a wealth that defines a blind person’s way of being instead of taking from it.

Kuusisto continues writing about his experience in his blog, “Planet of the Blind,” and posts his thoughts on the relationships between the blind and the sighted as well as the sighted and the *idea* of the blind. He also offers many of his own poems on the site. In one piece titled

“Zounds,” Kuusisto admits his struggle to stay quiet while an abled person speaks of blindness critically or with little knowledge:

It’s hard some days to be kind. Alright it’s hard most days. When a professor used blindness pejoratively in a meeting today I was, if not unkind, forceful in my response. I’m not giving ground when it comes to ableist lingo for why should I? And why should you if you’re a woman in a male dominated environment or a person of color in a traditionally white cultural context? But always when you speak up in these matters there’s a look of disapprobation. Zounds! That’s the risk you take. (Zounds)

The risk he speaks of is to speak up and seem too harsh or aggressive—to be discredited because of how one reacts to somebody’s insensitive comment made in ignorance. The ableist professor’s comment prompted Kuusisto to correct him—something clearly seen as not only rude, but out of place and to others at the meeting. The look of disapprobation only further pushes Kuusisto, and others in his position who speak against other uneducated comments, into the corner of aberrations. Kuusisto recognizes that despite his eagerness to speak out against remarks of unawareness regarding blindness, the non-disabled world cannot and will not understand blindness fully. Unfortunately, he also cannot prevent the non-disabled from using blindness inappropriately, whether it is used for inspiration, tragedy, or in an unsuitable manner, and he knows it.

In his deepening irritation at the misrepresentation of blindness, Kuusisto also posted a piece titled “Table: An Essay on Disability,” in which he relates a table to the accommodations appropriated for each person in the world. In the poem, the disabled are often excluded from the comfort of the table:

The Disabled. Tabled. Never at the right one. The culture table. Heavy. Of massive wood.

If they're lucky the table fits wheelchairs; provides ample space beneath for guide dogs; there's a place for your assistant or interpreter.

Mostly never the right one. Infelicitous. Crabbed. (The blind know those tables poorly set.) (Table)

The "table" is both metaphorical and literal: it is a central site of eating, a place of sleeping, and even sometimes a place of birth. Everyone sits at the table at one point or another, and for the disabled, the table at which they sit rarely fits what they need; there is rarely room for a guide dog or a wheelchair. The table is not only a place of human experience but also a reminder of disability's displacement and alienation from the table. Kuusisto's alienation from the table leads him to reflect on one irrefutable truth: that the major privilege of being human is to be allowed an experience of inclusion and accommodation. Unfortunately, the fact is that Kuusisto and every other person with a disability does not have this luxury:

The table can be a diminished fact. The truth is more important than the table.

And yet sometimes it is all I can do to stand or sit before a table. Merely arriving almost kills me. (Table)

Kuusisto states that while truth is more important than facts, the non-disabled world does not prioritize the truth that the disabled are sectioned off from many facets of daily life—this experience can occur from lack of ramps, elevators, braille in buildings, access to text driven development (TDD) telephones, and the list goes on and on. The need for accommodations *like* room for wheelchairs and guide dogs in the world is clear, and if these needs were met, the discomfort felt by the disabled could be diminished and they could be a part of an inclusive human experience. Yet, this need is not met. Instead, the non-disabled make excuses as to why

they can't accommodate the disabled and instead of provide convenience, the non-disabled treat the disabled like an inconvenience.

Emily Ladau, another disabled blogger and owner of the website, "Words I Wheel By," writes in a "Think Inclusive" article that through her school years she was traumatized by the lack of accommodations—she was moved to the further of two schools in her town because the closer one had no elevator and the school refused to find a solution for her, she was forced to write research papers instead of participating in gym class, and in high school she was told that she should remain by a window to be rescued if the school ever were to catch fire while she were on the second floor (Ladau). Both Ladau and Kuusisto, as well as the entire disabled community, knows of the table situation well, and though they have learned to expect poor treatment in accommodation, the non-disabled severe hesitation to find better solutions (in the 21st century, no less) is startling. Despite that Kuusisto knows he is very seldom given assistance or alternatives to sitting at the "table", even standing present in front of the table is enough to anger him precisely because he knows he will meet the non-disabled reluctance to change each time.

After years of hiding his disability, finally coming to terms with it and seeking proper assistance, Kuusisto meets the daily challenge of not being properly accommodated and falling under the blanket of stigma attached to disability and blindness. His acknowledgment and adjustment to his disability richened his quality of life. Thus, his obvious anger stems not from his own impairments but rather from the unwillingness of the non-disabled to understand (to their best ability) and make adjustments for his blindness. Non-disabled society's averseness to find consistent accommodations, especially in the public sphere, is to completely exclude Kuusisto from the table, even though he is living a full human experience worth acknowledging and treating as such.

Chapter 3: The Sighted Writing Blindness in D.H. Lawrence's "The Blind Man"

Kuusisto's intimate narrative of his own experience is nothing short of enlightening, particularly because his autobiography gives a unique perspective of blindness. His childhood and early-adult distress is distinctive from many other autobiographies—as Kleege suggested, many memoirs take the turn of inspiration or self-pity. In order to even vaguely understand blindness, autobiographies are necessary. Despite this fact, there are many more fictional texts about blindness than autobiographies, especially up to the early 20th century. Most of these fictional texts are written by sighted writers, who in essence bestow upon the blind community a narrative (and, often, blindness is used as a social or political allegory). Yet, some stories about blind characters actually reveal a great deal not about the blind, but about the sighted. In these rare stories, the sighted are the ones with shortcomings that vastly outweigh those of the blind, and more importantly, they feel the intense unease in the presence of blindness. Though many sighted writers may perceive the blind as traumatized, there is more evidence within certain stories and most biographies that reveal precisely the opposite.

D.H. Lawrence's "The Blind Man" is one of these stories. In this story, a married couple, a blind husband and a sighted wife, are expecting a visitor from the wife's sighted friend. Though there is no direct narrator, Lawrence indicates the outsider perspective to blindness: the wife and the visitor. The husband, Maurice Pervin lost his sight in the Great War and has been blind for a year at the beginning of the short story. Despite the sudden loss, Maurice does not consider his condition to be anything but another way of life—he is not traumatized in the least. He and his wife, Isabel, "were newly and remotely happy. He did not even regret the loss of his sight in these times of dark, palpable joy. A certain exultance swelled his soul" (Lawrence).

Maurice's loss of sight does not diminish his other senses or strengths—he is constantly working (and efficiently) around his farm and is able to complete the tasks he had before the war. Though he has only just lost his sight, Maurice adjusts well to his blindness and even rejects visualization:

In this state there was a certain rich positivity, bordering sometimes on rapture. Life seemed to move in him like a tide lapping, and advancing, enveloping all things darkly. It was a pleasure to stretch forth the hand and meet the unseen object, clasp it, and possess it in pure contact. He did not try to remember, to visualize. He did not want to. The new way of consciousness substituted itself in him (Lawrence).

He takes pleasure in his alternative reality and finds beauty in being able to get to know things by touch. The feeling of ultimate possession of an object becomes more intense for him now that he leads his life by physical contact. Maurice does not attempt to hold onto his former life—he realizes that he enjoys himself more living fully in the present and adjusting to his new consciousness. Along with his strengthened cognizance is his equally strong body. Isabel describes Maurice's robust features as she fetches him from the stable before Isabel's friend, Bertie, arrives. As Isabel takes his arm to lead him into the house, she thinks that "for a moment he was a tower of darkness to her, as if he rose out of the earth," and illustrates his features:

He was a man with rather sloping shoulders, but with heavy limbs, powerful legs that seemed to know the earth. His head was small, usually carried high and light. As he bent down to unfasten his gaiters and boots he did not look blind. His hair was brown and crisp, his hands were large, reddish, intelligent, the veins stood out in the wrists; and his thighs and knees seemed massive. When he stood up his face and neck were surcharged with blood, the veins stood out on his temples (Lawrence).

His “surcharged” and “powerful” body seems utterly unaffected by his loss of sight; indeed, the excesses of this passage suggest that his body has actually flourished in its blind condition. Despite Maurice’s complete contentment with his new reality and that his physical abilities aren’t in the least hindered, his wife is sometimes terrified by his blindness, this moment being one of them. Her discomfort derives not from worry about his well-being—his blindness clearly does not hinder him from doing what he’s always done—but rather from her inability to ground him through her powers of sight. Lawrence uncovers Isabel’s first serious issue regarding sight, or lack thereof, in this passage. While Maurice works comfortably around her in complete darkness, she loses her own trust in what is around her when she temporarily loses her sight to the darkness. She also begins to fear him “when again he was gone in a black and massive misery” (Lawrence). The darkness a source of comfort for Maurice, but is also a source of Isabel’s fear: “He was still busy, attending to the horses near her, but she saw only darkness. It made her almost desperate” (Lawrence). Isabel feels more comfortable when the two finally return to their house, “of repose and beauty,” the safety of which she prefers to the “animal grossness of the back.” Isabel’s discomfort with Maurice’s comfort in darkness suggests her innate uneasiness toward his blindness with his world of experiences that she cannot share.

Maurice’s and Isabel’s marriage is strong when their only company is each other and when they are isolated from the rest of the sighted world. Isabel even notes that “when we’re alone I miss nothing: it seems awfully rich, almost splendid, you know” (Lawrence). She understands that blindness has not doomed Maurice or their marriage. Despite this fact, Isabel feels shut out of Maurice’s blind experience precisely because of the fact that he lives his life on another level than she does—by touch in the darkness. At the same time, Maurice feels shut out of Isabel’s relationship with Bertie. He and Bertie did not get along before the war—they have

completely different personalities and Bertie's arrival after so much time away is nerve-wracking for Maurice. As he hears Bertie and Isabel talking outside, he becomes jealous and insecure: "A childish sense of desolation [comes] over him, as he [hears] their brisk voices. He [seems] shut out--like a child that is left out. He [is] aimless and excluded, he [does] not know what to do with himself" (Lawrence). Maurice's animosity toward Bertie certainly doesn't change initially, though he and Isabel both speculate that perhaps so much time has passed that the two won't have a problem—his wife speculates to herself that maybe since Maurice has lost his sight, Bertie won't hold his past issues with Maurice against him.

Bertie's asks questions and makes comments about Maurice's blindness, but Maurice is insistent that "there are compensations" that have come with his blindness, suggesting that he has gained as much as he has lost¹³. Despite this response, Maurice is uncomfortable—not because of his blindness, but because he feels a sense of disconnect between himself and his wife and Bertie. Adding to his anxiety is his fear that Bertie will think he needs to be helped, and so he eats quietly and expresses his independence in his dexterity with his knife and fork.

Contrastingly, Isabel and Bertie are left feeling uncomfortable:

The blind man was silent. He touched his food repeatedly, with quick, delicate touches of his knife-point, then cut irregular bits. He 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 (Lawrence).

It is clear that everyone feels uncomfortable during dinner, but Isabelle and Bertie's discomfort with Maurice's blindness is more intense than Maurice's discomfort with not being able to relate to them. Throughout dinner, Bertie and Isabel talk over their shared Scottish heritage—Maurice

¹³ Bertie asks Isabel if Maurice frets, then at dinner says to Maurice that he has been old "that you have not suffered unbearably from the loss of sight." After dinner, he tells Isabel, "nevertheless, it is a great deprivation, Cissie."

notices certain inflections in Isabel's accent that was drawn out almost immediately upon Bertie's arrival. The intimacy with which Bertie and Isabel understand each other makes Maurice begin to feel helpless, *not* because of his blindness taking a part of his presence from them, but because he feels himself an outsider to their Scottishness and their life-long friendship. His blindness, in other words, isn't the cause of his distress, but it heightens his sense of alienation.

After dinner, Bertie and Isabel speak of Maurice, and though Bertie presses Isabel that something must be missing, she responds not that there is something less but that there is something *else*: "there is something else, something *there*, which you never knew was there, and which you can't express" (Lawrence). Maurice's blindness both perplexes his wife and Bertie and isolates them from Maurice. Isabel asks Bertie to look for Maurice, who has gone to the barn, where he finds him. Maurice asks Bertie if Isabel is all right—he looks to Bertie to fill in the holes of what he may not know about his wife. Bertie tries to reassure Maurice that he has nothing to worry about, and immediately after Maurice asks Bertie if his face is badly disfigured. Bertie tells him truthfully that the scar is a disfigurement, and Maurice asks if he can touch Bertie. Bertie agrees, though he is seemingly at the peak of unease: "The lawyer shrank away instinctively. And yet, out of very philanthropy, he said, in a small voice: 'Not at all.' But he suffered as the blind man stretched out a strong, naked hand to him. Maurice accidentally knocked off Bertie's hat" (Lawrence). Prior to this passage, Isabel reveals that though Bertie is animated, he is rather afraid of physical contact, especially with women, and even calls himself a "neuter." This distinction in Bertie's character that may not have been initially clear in his bold personality intensifies here as Maurice pushes him to do the very thing that he is incapable of doing. To make matters worse for Bertie, Maurice does not just lightly touch him—his fingers seem to mold over Bertie's face closely, feeling every bump and feature. He feels Bertie's

shoulders, too, and says that Bertie seems “young.” At that comment, “The lawyer stood almost annihilated, unable to answer.” Maurice then tells Bertie to touch his eyes and his scar next, and Bertie barely obliges. After the intimate contact, Maurice is left feeling enlightened at the very least while Bertie is utterly traumatized—to the point where he is “like a mollusk whose shell is broken” (Lawrence). Maurice believes that he and Bertie have just become close friends as a result of the close physical contact, but the intimacy is taboo to Bertie: “Maurice was actually filled with the hot, poignant love, the passion of friendship. Perhaps it was this very passion of friendship which Bertie shrank from most” (Lawrence). Bertie is utterly broken—he is completely shaken by the intimacy which he feels was “thrust upon him.” Maurice’s means of communicating include such physical contact, and Bertie is not prepared or willing to accept that, even for a moment, into his life. Omran Musa Mohammed notes that Maurice experiences “a change accumulated at the time when he tells the meeker, neutral lawyer to touch his scar. Bertie, at his best, quivers with revulsion, he is now under the power of the blind man, as if hypnotized” (Mohammed, 17).

There is a range of helplessness among the three. Maurice does not feel completely included in his wife’s life, especially regarding her relationship with Bertie, Isabel feels discontented that she cannot experience Maurice’s experience, and Bertie feels completely traumatized while engaging in physical contact with Maurice and ignorant to the reality of blindness—what it means to be blind and how full life can be. Bertie only intensifies Isabel’s discomfort with Maurice’s blindness by pulling her into his own doubts fears about it. Despite the distress felt by all three, Maurice seems to be the only one *not* in some respect distressed or traumatized directly because of his loss of sight.

Chapter 4: The Sighted Writing Blindness in Raymond Carver's "Cathedral"

As Georgina Kleege notes, the basic story of "The Blind Man"—a husband and wife awaiting the wife's friend—finds very strong echoes in Raymond Carver's short story "Cathedral," written 61 years later. One of the major differences between the two short stories is that in "Cathedral," the wife's friend, or "the blind man, Robert, is the interloper" (Kleege, 87)—while the husband and wife are sighted. The short story is narrated by the husband, who hears that Robert is coming to stay with them and immediately he is upset. He is skeptical about his wife's relationship with Robert, whom he has never met, and more importantly, about Robert's blindness. The first sentence of the short story, "This blind man, an old friend of my wife's, he was on his way to spend the night," directly points to the narrator's insecurity with Robert's blindness—he identifies him first as "the blind man" before identifying him as a friend of his wife's.

The narrator's first-person narrative begins an inner conversation wherein he gathers all the information he thinks he knows about blind people: "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). The narrator feels complete unease in his anticipation of his first real interaction with a blind person—this is precisely what keeps him from looking forward to Robert's arrival. He also is wary of Robert's relationship with his wife, and his anxiety is evident when he recounts the story of how his wife and Robert met: she worked for him ten years ago in Seattle and spent a summer reading to him. The narrator mentions that the two became close over the summer, a fact that unsettles the narrator on several fronts:

They'd become good friends, my wife and the blind man. How do I know these things?

She told me. And she told me something else. On her last day in the office, the blind man asked if he could touch her face. She agreed to this. She told me he touched his fingers to every part of her face, her nose—even her neck! (Carver)

He cannot imagine this physical intimacy between a blind man and a sighted woman, nor can he understand their continued intimacy over the years. Their relationship is maintained through the exchange of recorded tapes, on which she tells Robert about her first marriage with an air force officer, her loneliness while he was away, and about Robert's new relationship with his wife.

The closeness of the wife's relationship with Robert reveals a form of resentment and bitterness in the narrator, and Robert's blindness only deepens his discomfort:

"If you love me," she said, "you can do this for me. If you don't love me, okay. But if you had a friend, any friend, and the friend came to visit, I'd make him feel comfortable." She wiped her hands with the dish towel.

"I don't have any blind friends," I said (Carver).

The narrator ultimately is disconcerted with the potential for revelation—as he faces Robert's impending arrival, he recognizes this is a new experience. However, he does not see this experience as an opportunity to grow as a person—his cynicism circles directly back to Robert's blindness and he is emotionally avoiding the meeting. His prejudgment of how a blind person acts is destroyed even as Robert walks through the door. From the first meeting, Robert is a large personality—"The blind man let go of his suitcase and up came his hand. I took it. He squeezed hard, held my hand, and then he let it go. 'I feel like we've already met,' he boomed" (Carver). Robert is clearly content and confident while the narrator finds little to say and stumbles on small talk:

I started to say something about the old sofa. I'd liked that old sofa. But I didn't say anything. Then I wanted to say something else, small-talk, about the scenic ride along the Hudson. How going to New York, you should sit on the right-hand side of the train, and coming from New York, the left-hand side (Carver).

The narrator demonstrates obvious uneasiness—and even lack of confidence in the presence of Robert. He watches Robert at dinner utterly shocked that Robert can hold his own at the table. All through dinner, he details Robert's clothing, his looks—"This blind man, feature this, he was wearing a full beard! A beard on a blind man! Too much, I say"—and the way he eats dinner—"The blind man had right away located his foods, he knew just where everything was on his plate. I watched with admiration as he used his knife and fork on the meat" (Carver). None of them talk during dinner, which excuses the narrator from having to come up with things to say—he does not know how to navigate the conversation between himself and Robert, and does not *try*. Instead, he takes the time to watch Robert eat as though it's one of the most impressive feats he's ever witnessed.

The narrator's realization of Robert's independence at the dinner table is just one of many demonstrations of his ignorance of Robert's abilities. He reveals his own preconception toward Robert's appearance and how he holds himself, simply because he does not believe Robert fits his perception of a "typical" blind person: "But he didn't use a cane and he didn't wear dark glasses. I'd always thought dark glasses were a must for the blind. Fact was, I wished he had a pair" (Carver). Not only is Robert's appearance not making sense in the narrator's mind in terms of what he thinks he knows about blind people, but more importantly, the narrator openly admits that Robert's appearance unsettles him. His belief that dark glasses were a "must" for the blind propels the following stereotype that the glasses are meant to relax the sighted. The narrator's

behavior shows the rare occurrence in which he engages in interaction with a blind person. A clear example is that the narrator calls Robert “the blind man” 70 times in the entire story. His repetition of “the blind man” is not only an attempt to strip Robert of his identity as a human being, but it also marginalizes Robert in order to preserve and justify the narrator’s own prejudice.

Despite the fact that Robert proves to be more than capable of functioning independently during his stay in the home, the narrator insists to himself and even aloud that he can predict Robert, presumably based on his uneducated presumptions about him. In one passage, he offers Robert a drink and Robert says he’s a Scotch drinker. The narrator’s reply, “‘Right,’ I said. ‘Sure you are. I knew it,’” (Carver) suggests that Robert’s reply is predictable and more so that the narrator has Robert (and the behavioral facets of blindness) figured out.

Robert is so relaxed in the narrator’s home that he uses his “big voice,” just one feature of his outgoing attitude and is very pronounced in what he prefers, though the narrator seems to believe that he can either predict Robert or guide him, perhaps as a way to gain an upper hand on Robert. As the trio relax in the living room, the narrator’s wife falls asleep and he offers Robert marijuana, instructing him on how to inhale it: “He took it and inhaled. ‘Hold it as long as you can,’ I said. I could tell he didn’t know the first thing.” The narrator finds it difficult to believe that Robert has experienced very much because of his blindness, and so he takes control of Robert’s experience smoking marijuana. Robert takes the blunt again: “I said, ‘Coming at you,’ and I put the number between his fingers. He inhaled, held the smoke, and then let it go. It was like he’d been doing it since he was nine years old.” Again, the narrator is astounded by Robert—his blindness disables him from doing just about anything in the narrator’s eyes until Robert proves him wrong, and he does this multiple times in the story. Despite this, the narrator seems

not to notice the trend—Robert is completely able when it comes to many tasks, and the narrator needs to be convinced of this fact in each instance that Robert demonstrates able-bodied-ness.

Georgina Kleege notes that the fact that Robert does not fit the model the narrator illustrated in his own head makes the narrator more uncomfortable:

But Robert does not conform to the stereotypes. He's jovial and rather pushy, insisting on calling the narrator 'Bub.' Also he smokes and wears a beard, which the narrator believed are not things blind people do. Robert's failure to fit the narrator's image of blindness only irks the narrator more (Caruth, 88).

At this point in the short story, the narrator can no longer be excused for a lack of understanding of how the blind (specifically, how Robert) lives his life—independently. Now, the issue is the narrator's refusal to take the opportunity to broaden his knowledge and acceptance of blindness. By acting as though he knows Robert's next move—the drink he likes, his experience with smoking marijuana—the narrator is attempting to solidify the stereotype despite its falling apart right in front of him. Jernigan writes that there are various reasons that sighted people tend to stereotype the blind despite having access to a multitude of resources:

Despite the fact that many achievements are being made by the blind and that a good deal of constructive publicity is being given to these achievements, there are strong countercurrents of uninformed and regressive publicity and propaganda. It is hard to realize, for instance, that anyone still exists who actually believes the blind are especially gifted in music or that they are particularly suited to weaving or wickerwork. It is hard to realize that any well-educated person today believes that blind people are compensated for their loss of sight by special gifts and talents (Jernigan, *Blindness: Concepts and Misconceptions*).

Jernigan makes the argument that resources are available, and it is believable that given the technological advances already mentioned in “Cathedral” (recording tapes, telephones, and color television), the narrator has access to such resources. He initially bases the excuse of not understanding blindness on the lack of interaction with a blind person, which was shattered once Robert walked through the door. However, having picked up on these advances, the narrator had every chance to educate himself. In fact, despite his lack of face-to-face interaction, the narrator has had plenty of opportunities to learn more about blind people just from his wife, whom he mentions talked about Robert for as long as they’ve been married. The narrator has no alibi, and he is unraveling more of his own discomfort toward disability with each moment spent with Robert.

Though the scotch and marijuana may have lightened the mood between the two, the narrator’s distress is still apparent, specifically as he begins to notice what’s on the television. He realizes that perhaps out of courtesy, he should describe to Robert what he sees, so he tells him about the show, which is a British documentary about cathedrals. He tells him about the cathedrals that are shown, and the gargoyles and windows on them, and then asks Robert if he knows anything about cathedrals. Robert admits that the only thing he really knows is how long and how many people it took to build them—facts he’d heard from the program. When Robert asks the narrator to further describe the cathedral, the narrator fumbles over his words. What he initially thinks is easy, in fact, is anything but: “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” (Carver).

The narrator finds that he cannot visually explain the cathedral’s appearance to Robert the same way he would explain it to a sighted person. Everything he says relates to yet another

thing he has to describe—for example, what a buttress looks like and how “they remind me of viaducts for some reason. But maybe you don’t know viaducts either?” This is a pivotal point in the story—perhaps one of the narrator’s biggest shortcomings is his inability to describe something visually despite that he is sighted, and this limits him as a sighted person. To accommodate the narrator, Robert suggests trying something different—he asks the narrator to find a paper and pencil and for him to draw the cathedral, Robert’s hand on his. Robert’s request is odd—he asks for a visual explanation rather than through an auditory medium. Though he is blind, the scene reveals his impressive ability to understand visual concepts through multiple mediums of description. The request ultimately deems Robert more competent in understanding visual description than the narrator is competent in describing what he’s seeing right in front of him. Nevertheless, the narrator complies with the request and they start drawing in the hope that he can better make Robert understand. He starts with something that looks like a house, and then expands on it:

I put in windows with arches. I drew flying buttresses. I hung great doors. I couldn't stop.

The TV station went off the air. I put down the pen and closed and opened my fingers.

The blind man felt around over the paper. He moved the tips of his fingers over the paper, all over what I had drawn, and he nodded (Carver).

Robert says he feels he’s getting it, but he takes the experience one step further and asks the narrator to close his eyes so they can share the experience together. The narrator does so, and admits it was unlike any experience in his entire life: “I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn’t feel like I was inside anything” (Carver). The narrator is prompted to perceive the cathedral in a medium unlike any he has ever experienced. Once he achieves this level of insight,

he feels forever changed—Robert is able to bring him to an elevated awareness of vision while he cannot so much as effectively describe a cathedral to him.

At the beginning of the story, the narrator defines Robert by his disability, and Robert is simply absorbed into it. In the narrator's world, Robert does not exist except the occasional passing on the street. From even the first mention of Robert, the narrator is threatened by him. That discomfort is only heightened when Robert is face to face with the narrator in his own home. Throughout the story, the narrator has multiple ideas of what Robert should be acting like or looking like, and Robert's defiance of these stereotypes shakes up the narrator and even slightly traumatizes him. In contrast, Robert, the one *with* the impairment, does not demonstrate any trauma as a result of his blindness (or at all throughout the story). Kleege's anecdote about having people over for dinner and observing their disbelief in her cooking skills is a precise mirror to the narrator's reaction to Robert's independence. Both blind people are second-guessed in their achievements and are treated like anomalies for their individuality and rejection of defining themselves as their disability.

Contrary to Kleege and Robert, her guests and the narrator are actually disabled in that they are not (and on some level choose not to be) educated about blindness and disability. Beside the narrator's initial narrow-mindedness regarding blindness, he believes at the end when he is drawing the cathedral with Robert that he has some sort of insight into this society. What he experiences, in fact, is simply a shared experience with Robert, though the narrator only takes translates this new knowledge to apply to all blind people. The experience can be chalked up to this: Robert learns through a visual medium what a cathedral looks like. Though they are both fully present in this experience, both men share limited perceptions into each other's worlds. Robert will never see the way the narrator sees, and the narrator will never know what it is like to

be blind unless he himself becomes so. To the narrator, Robert is simply a tool used to better understand how to visualize something in a different way. What he takes from this experience calls into question his ability to learn about Robert as an individual and about blindness as a way of life.

Conclusion

While more short stories like “The Blind Man” and “Cathedral” are emerging from a growing number of blind autobiographers, many short stories written by sighted writers remain a crux upon which more sighted writers build—a narrative detached from those of blind writers. The representation of blindness has been and in many ways still is severely skewed precisely because of the perpetuation of various false blind narratives. Blind characters in these stories are often entangled in webs of metaphors—inspiration, tragedy, a multitude of moral lessons. Even when they are not utilized as a literary device, there is a demand for these characters to explain their blindness.

“The Blind Man” and “Cathedral” break this mold. Their characters do not feel shame for or explain their blindness, nor have their lives been doomed as a result of their blindness. Both stories share an intimate setting—three people, two married, interacting with blindness within a home. The blind characters have an equally intimate relationship with one of the sighted characters, and yet as the evening unfolds, the sighted characters find blindness difficult to accept or understand. Their insecurities are projected onto the blind characters—Robert’s self-confidence does not waver and Maurice demonstrates a level of insecurity only because he feels excluded from the connection his wife has with Bertie. Meanwhile, Bertie and the narrator in “Cathedral” crack under their own anxieties—Maurice’s blindness reveals Bertie’s reluctance toward intimate contact with others while Robert’s blindness reveals many of the narrator’s insecurities and inability to transform his experience with Robert into any level of understanding of blindness. These texts draw the critical focus from the blind characters toward the sighted characters while giving the blind characters a narrative based on their personality and not their

disability. Robert's loud, friendly attitude and Maurice's strong and silent disposition are not characterized nor influenced by their blindness.

Kuusisto's and Kleege's personal histories, vividly described in their autobiographies, focus on the effects of their blindness, but not to prove that they were defined by their blindness. In fact, the focus of their stories was on how others defined them. Though Kleege is a successful scholar and lecturer completely comfortable with her blindness, she found that upon learning of her condition, many people retreated from her and felt anxious toward her independence. Kuusisto's childhood and early adulthood were marked by multiple traumatic incidents in which he was on the brink of exposing his blindness and relinquishing his ability to pass as sighted. As a result of his parents' and doctors' assertions that he live a life without aid, Kuusisto was fixated on how his blindness made him look, but because he was ashamed of his blindness—he was afraid of others' reactions and the stigma associated with blindness. Both stories expose the unwillingness of the sighted to cast away the predisposed narrations of the blind and make room for stories like these. More importantly, Kuusisto and Kleege are merely two examples of the blind narrative out of millions of visually impaired people. Their stories are completely different, as are their experiences with blindness.

Ultimately, I intend for this thesis to be one of many small steps to achieving a large-scale understanding of the concept that each person has a right to his or her own narrative without any influence from the history of false narratives. Scholars like Kleege and Kuusisto are just a few voices eager to dispel the labels, characterizations, and stigma of blindness in order to tell their own story and prove that there is no one narrative that belongs to the blind community. The impact of hundreds of years of blind literature is still present among society today through the pervading misrepresentations of blind characters by sighted authors. "The Blind Man" and

“Cathedral” both work to dispel these misrepresentations and accompany autobiographies like Kleege’s and Kuusisto’s in telling stories about blind people who are not traumatized by their blindness. These works give the blind community and each of its individuals a chance to tell their story and prove that their lives are full and purposeful. The only narrative is the one they own, and this thesis aims to voice them.

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- Scan O, The Oprah Magazine's Facebook page daily.
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- Assist in a multitude of research projects by searching and compiling lists.
- Program modules for feeds on Oprah.com.
- Update app landings.

Web Intern—May-July 2014

- Assisted in maintenance of Oprah Magazine's social media presence through Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest
- Built articles, slideshows, book lists and gift lists for Oprah.com using Teamsite and Oprah.com admin tool
- Requested photo crops from newest issue and checked photo and text rights for the website
- Compiled social media data to find trends from reader reception and magazines with successful web presence

The Valley Magazine University Park, PA

Editor in Chief—November 2014-present

- Direct Valley Magazine's 80-person staff to publish daily web content at www.valleymagazinepsu.com as well as publish a biannual print magazine
- Edit weekly web content and all content for the print magazine
- Oversee and assists the photography and design directors and the business division (pr/marketing, events and advertising)
- Conduct a campus-wide search, application and interview for the cover story process
- Lead weekly full staff and director meetings as well as frequent editor meetings

Managing Editor—November 2013-November 2014

- Edit all print material for the spring 2014 issue
- Conduct interviews for new writers and for cover girls

Entertainment Editor—April-December 2013

- Design a section opener article featuring a detailed interview with one exceptionally talented student
- Edit submissions pertaining to the Entertainment section of the print magazine according to AP style