

# Blindness in literature

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Different cultures through history have depicted blindness in a variety of ways; among the Greeks, for example, it was a punishment from the gods, for which the afflicted individual was often granted compensation in the form of artistic genius. Judeo-Christian literature positioned blindness as a flaw; only through a cure could God's love be made manifest, when the scales would fall away from the eyes of an afflicted individual upon contact with a holy man or relic. Almost without exception in early literature, blind people could bring this condition down upon themselves through sin or trespasses against the gods, but were never the sole instruments of its reversal.

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## Blind people in literature written by visually able authors

It is impossible to make a blanket generalization about how the blind were treated in literature beyond that point – they were marvelous, gifted, evil, malicious, ignorant, wise, helpless, innocent, or burdensome depending upon who wrote the story – except to say that blindness is perceived to be such a loss that it leaves an indelible mark on a person's character.

Even pioneers in training the blind, such as Dorothy Harrison Eustis, harboured negative stereotypes about them. Blind people had, in her opinion, grown so accustomed to waiting on others as to be passive and 'whiney.'

Father Thomas Carroll, who founded the Carroll Centre for the Blind, wrote *Blindness: What It Is, What It Does and How to Live with It* in 1961. In it, he characterized blindness in terms of 20 losses, and as the 'death' of the sighted individual. <sup>[1]</sup>

In "Moumoku Monogatari" Junichiro Tanizaki retells the well-known tale of Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi from the perspective of a blind servant. The character is portrayed as demonstrating a number of traditional Japanese virtues, but ultimately falls prey to his own human flaws.

"The Country of the Blind", a short story by H. G. Wells, is one of the most well-known stories featuring blind characters. A sighted man finds himself in a country that has been isolated from the rest of the world for centuries, wherein all the inhabitants are blind even as their ancestors had been. These people are depicted as self-sufficient, having developed their other senses, but they are ultimately closed-minded and insular to the point of xenophobia. As they themselves have no sight, they wish to deprive the traveler of his own eyes in this allegorical tale of stagnation.

*All the Light We Cannot See*, a Pulitzer prize winning novel by Anthony Doerr, tells the story of Marie-Laure LeBlanc, a young girl who has gone completely blind due to cataracts at the age of 6. She keeps her mind sharp with intricate puzzle boxes, which her father carves for her, and Braille novels.

## Literature by blind people

While blind and visually impaired people had contributed to the body of common literature for centuries, one notable example being the author of *Paradise Lost*, John Milton, the creation of autobiographical materials, or materials specific to blindness, is relatively new.

Most people are familiar with Helen Keller, who was both blind and deaf, but there has been considerable progress since the publication of her work.

- Blind author Tom Sullivan has written several inspirational books, including *If You Could See What I Hear*, about his life and accomplishments.
- Jorge Luis Borges, who suffered from a congenital condition that caused him to become blind by middle age, discussed his condition in many autobiographical and semi-autobiographical works.
- Stephen Kuusisto wrote about his experiences as a visually impaired person in *Planet of the Blind*, and his upcoming memoir, *Eavesdropping: A Life By Ear*.
- John Hull, a university lecturer, wrote about going blind in *Touching the Rock: An Experience of Blindness*.
- Reinmar von Zweter 13th century German writer of Gnostic poetry, featured in the *Codex Manesse*.
- Georgina Kleege, visually impaired since age 11, wrote about her life and how it was affected by cultural perceptions of blindness in *Sight Unseen*.
- Sally Hobart Alexander became blind when she was about 25 and a schoolteacher, during the 1970s, because of an eye disease. She wrote at least three autobiographical books about adapting to blindness.
- French author Jacques Lusseyran, who was visually impaired at the age of 7 when he injured his eyes on the sharp corner of a teacher's desk, became part of the French resistance during World War II. He spent a year in concentration camps, surviving the experience and writing several books. "And There Was Light" chronicles his experiences from early childhood until his liberation from a concentration camp.

## See also

- On His Blindness by John Milton
- Blindness and education
- Category:Blindness organizations
- *Nico* (also known as *Nicholas*), a TV series for educating children about blind people (considering television a sort of literature)
- Thérèse-Adèle Husson

## References

1. "American Printing House for the Blind Hall of Fame". [www.aph.org](http://www.aph.org).

## External links

- Blindness: Is Literature Against Us? (<https://web.archive.org/web/20040417060049/http://www.blind.net:80/bpba1974.htm>)
- The Country of the Blind and Other Stories, by H. G. Wells (<http://www.gutenberg.net/etext/11870>)

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