

الحقيقة غير المرئية: العمى بوصفه استعارة درامية في مسرحية "بئر القديسين" لـ (سينغ)، و"بلد العميان" لـ (هيغينز)

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الملخص

تناول الدراسة الاستخدام الذي يزعم المعاني التقليدية لفقدان البصر بوصفه استعارة درامية في مسرحية "بئر القديسين" لـ (جون سينغ)، ومسرحية "بلد العميان" لـ (فرانك هيغينز)، المأخوذة عن القصة القصيرة لـ (هربرت ويلز)؛ حيث تسعى إلى تحدي الصورة النمطية السائدة في الأدب التي تربط العمى بالفشل الأخلاقي أو العقاب أو الانحراف. وتستند الدراسة إلى مناهج دراسات الإعاقة، ونظرية الاستعارة، ونقد الأداء؛ لتأطير العملين ضمن تقليد أدبي واسع يصور العمى بوصفه رمزاً للضعف أو التهديد، ولتسليط الضوء على كيفية تشكّل دلالاته في سياقات ثقافية وفنية.

يعيد الكاتبان تخيل فقدان البصر بوصفه حلاً تنويرية تقوّض المفاهيم النمطية للإدراك والهوية والقيمة؛ أي تلك الأفكار السائدة ثقافياً حول معنى الرؤية، ومعنى أن يكون الإنسان شخصاً، وما الذي يُعدّ ذا قيمة أو طبيعياً. ويتماشى هذا التقييم مع التطوّرات المعاصرة في مسرح الإعاقة الذي يسعى إلى تمثيل الإعاقة البصرية بأصالة وواقعية من خلال نقد الفرضيات الجمالية والثقافية والأيدولوجية التي تؤطر طرائق تصويرها. وتكشف الدراسة من خلال قراءات دقيقة وسياقية كيف يستخدم الكاتبان الاستعارة لتسليط الضوء على العمى بوصفه موقعاً للتأمل الفلسفي؛ حيث ينخرطان في خطاب مسرح الإعاقة لمقاومة الخطابات النمطية والنزعة الإقصائية المبصرة، والتأكيد على أهمية إعادة النظر في مفاهيم الإدراك والمعرفة.

وفي نهاية المطاف، تؤكد الدراسة بأن الأداء المسرحي يُمثّل وسيطاً فعّالاً لزعة السرديات المهيمنة حول الإعاقة، ولتعزيز تمثيلات أكثر تجسّيداً وشمولاً على خشبة المسرح. كما يبرز النصّان قيد الدراسة الإعاقة البصرية بوصفها حلاً تُتيح سُبلاً بديلة للمعرفة والوجود. وتُظهر الدراسة، من خلال إبراز الوظيفة الدرامية للعمى، كيف تعمل الاستعارة ليس فقط بوصفها أداة أدبية، بل أيضاً بوصفها عدسة نقدية يمكن من خلالها تفكيك الافتراضات القادرة والمهيمنة. وبذلك، تسهم الدراسة في النقاشات النقدية حول الكيفية التي تُشكّل بها الأدبيات تصوّراتنا عن الإعاقة، وتدعو إلى تبني أطر تمثيلية وقراءة أكثر شمولاً.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستعارة الدرامية، مسرح الإعاقة، الإعاقة البصرية في الدراما، الأداء والإدراك.

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The Unseen Truth: Blindness as Dramatic Metaphor in Synge's *The Well of the Saints* and Higgins's *The Country of the Blind*

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Abstract

This article examines the subversive use of blindness as a dramatic metaphor in John Millington Synge's *The Well of the Saints* and Frank Higgins's stage adaptation of Herbert Wells's short story *The Country of the Blind*, challenging the entrenched trope that links blindness with moral failure, punishment, or deviance. Drawing on disability studies, metaphor theory, and performance criticism, the analysis situates these works within a broader tradition in which blindness symbolizes vulnerability or menace. Synge and Higgins reimagine blindness as an enlightening condition that destabilises normative conceptions of perception, identity, and value—that is, culturally dominant ideas about what it means to see, to be a person, and to be considered valuable or normal. This re-evaluation aligns with the contemporary disability theatre, which aims to represent disability authentically by interrogating the aesthetic, cultural, and ideological assumptions. Through close readings, the article explores how the two dramatists deploy metaphor to foreground blindness as a site of philosophical insight. In doing so, they engage with disability theatre to resist stereotypical and ableist discourses. Ultimately, this article argues that performance offers a powerful medium to unsettle dominant narratives about disability and promote more embodied and inclusive representations on stage. Both the texts under scrutiny frame visual impairment as a condition that enables alternative ways of knowing and being. By foregrounding the dramatic function of blindness, the article demonstrates how metaphor operates not only as a literary device but also as a lens through which ableist assumptions can be dismantled. Thus, the article contributes to critical debates on how literature shapes perceptions of disability and advocates for more inclusive reading and representational frameworks.

Keywords: dramatic metaphor, disability theatre, visual impairment in drama, performance and perception.

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Introduction

A brief overview of English literature reveals how frequently texts mimic stereotypical perceptions of life, particularly in their depiction of disability. Often, texts emphasise the stereotypes and misconceptions associated with disability, which are commonly portrayed as “an easy marker of pity, vulnerability, or, less frequently, the heroic supercrip” (Davis 106). For example, across many literary traditions, blindness is generally depicted as a punishment for sin or as a characteristic of figures to be feared and treated as inferior. In “Disability as Metaphor in Literature”, Kriegel argues that “in the history of Western literature, both before and after Shakespeare, disability is usually depicted as either a pity or a threat and there is little to be added to these two images” (32). In “Disability and Representation,” Garland-Thomson not only reaffirms the persistent binary in literary representations but also calls for moving beyond such reductive metaphors to embrace more complex and nuanced portrayals of disability (280). However, despite this call for nuance, most fictional works continue to portray blind individuals as tragic, burdensome, and sorrowful, both to themselves and to those around them. A notable example is Mr. Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, who loses his sight after attempting to marry a second wife while the first is still alive. Similarly, in drama, this notion is echoed in Sophocles’ *Oedipus*, where the protagonist blinds himself upon discovering that he has killed his father and married his mother. These are merely a few literary instances in which blind or visually impaired individuals are represented as “a menace or like an evil stalking beast that would devour society” (Beauchamp et al. 9) and are punished through the loss of sight.

Nowadays, disability theatre is a well-established literary phenomenon, referring to drama written or performed by disabled artists or staged works that explore disability. Through their interaction with the actors, and particularly their capacity for improvisation, audiences often experience a sense of intimacy and connection with those on stage. Fahy suggests that such reactions may stem from entrenched social attitudes, arguing that “a blind person carries some sort of social stigma ... that [he] is not only abnormal but [also] physically, psychologically, morally, and emotionally inferior” (12). This stigmatization highlights the social barriers that disability theatre seeks to confront. Ideally, as Johnson contends, the role of disability theatre is to “appropriate and rearticulate labels that the mainstream once used to silence or humiliate” (36). By reclaiming these labels, disabled artists challenge dominant narratives and reshape cultural and social perceptions. Moreover, Schechner stresses the importance of performance as a powerful “means of investigating social and cultural processes and producing social change” (5), emphasizing how theatre can enact transformation beyond mere representation.

Staging and audience reception are not passive components of disability theatre but active forces that shape meaning. The physical presence of disabled bodies on

stage disrupts conventional visual aesthetics, challenging normative expectations of ability, beauty, and movement. This disruption is not merely visual—it is also ideological, inviting the audience to re-examine how they perceive difference and embodiment. The audience's responses—whether empathetic, resistant, or unsettled—become part of the theatrical experience, blurring the boundaries between observer and participant. In this way, the reception of disability performance becomes a site of negotiation, where spectators must confront their own assumptions and biases. As Fischer-Lichte argues, “the co-presence of actors and spectators transforms the performance into a space of potential change” (7). Disability theatre thus does more than depict disability; it performs it in ways that demand critical reflection, ethical engagement, and emotional presence from its viewers.

Disability has become a category of social and cultural exclusion. Discourse surrounding disability and deformity serves as one of the countless mechanisms through which individuals are scrutinized and regulated across the lifespan. Like gender, race, and class, disability is understood as a social category, one that Longmore describes as a “deep-seated, pervasive cultural devaluation and systemic institutionalized discrimination” (1). Disability, therefore, is not just one subject of art among others, nor is it a mere theme. Oliver reinforces this by defining disability not as a medical issue but as a “social phenomenon ... arising from the failure of society to accommodate people with impairments” (15). It is also not limited to personal or autobiographical expression embedded in an artwork, nor is it solely a political act. It is all of these and more. This study approaches the two texts through the lens of Garland-Thomson, among other scholars, who assert that, in literature, the “body is a cultural text that is continuously written and rewritten [according to] the context of social meanings” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 10). More precisely, disability is an aesthetic value—that is to say, it participates in a system of knowledge that provides materials for and increases critical consciousness about how some bodies make other bodies feel.

Disability theatre also helps to reclaim “individual bodily experience through art, performance, and literature ... and to recuperate a more embodied reference point for disability” (Kochhar-Lindgren 83). Furthermore, disability theatre helps not only to “provide creative opportunities for close reading, but [it] can also initiate a re-imagination and a re-writing of literary and cultural history” (Hall 1). There are other reasons why theatre is such an important medium for disabled people. It allows for enlightenment and education, being a tool whereby the reality of disability and the experiences of people with disabilities can be reintroduced, redemonstrated, and rediscussed. This is because dramatic metaphors act as a screen that can express thoughts and ideas brilliantly in a manner that illuminates various historical, social, and cultural concepts. Thus, disability as a metaphor constructs our ableist ideology through language and reconceptualises society's views of disabled people.

Contradicting the negative conceptions of blindness found in most literary texts, this paper examines two plays that consider blindness as a dramatic metaphor for a blessing or a gift. The two plays suggest that blindness should not be accepted passively but rather embraced as a blessing, inviting one to find value in living in the dark. The study emphasises the importance of theatre as a space for humanistic and social change, counteracting the stereotypes surrounding blind people as sinners and blindness as a punishment.

Given the nature of the subject, these plays provoked dissent upon their initial production. As Warner believes, "Culture tends to confirm stereotypes and reinforce rather than erode prejudice" regarding disability (37). Theatrical traditions have historically marginalized disabilities by framing them only as narrative tools—symbols of moral failure, spiritual insight, or comic relief—rather than as lived experiences. This tendency flattens the complexity of disability and often erases the voices of disabled individuals themselves, reinforcing a limited and exclusionary cultural imagination. It is interesting to witness the effects of the stage in undermining social perspectives, especially concerning this type of disability. Much of the literature on attitudes is concerned with improving the public's perception regarding disability, and it is often suggested that more rational and informed opinions could be promoted through the de-emotionalization of old stereotypes. The two plays raise fascinating questions about blindness, beauty, self, and life. Thus, this article focuses on how the two dramatists redress the metaphor of disability to create new meanings through performance.

As an influential Irish writer, Synge acknowledges this power of theatre. When he started writing, he decided to portray the Irish life that "has never found expression" (Howe 21). This idea suggests his dedication to giving a voice to the marginalized and often overlooked aspects of rural Irish existence. It is admirable how Synge resists idealizing rural life, choosing instead to present it with raw honesty. He died at the young age of 37, producing only six plays before his untimely death. He states that the stage can change the conceptions of the audience because "common objects, simple words, and actions, once placed on the stage – set apart from the familiarity of everyday life – evoke heightened significance" (Aston and Savona 8). This reflects Synge's understanding of how theatrical presentation can reframe everyday reality, encouraging audiences to see the ordinary with renewed insight. According to Skelton, in all of Synge's plays, there is "obstinate questioning for the fresh and living truths" about life, especially those that "naturally arise from the emotional or imaginative life" (37). This persistent questioning suggests that Synge viewed theatre as a space for honest inquiry into the emotional depths and truths of the human condition. This quality is the most compelling aspect of Synge's work—his refusal to offer easy answers encourages deeper reflection from the audience. His work, therefore, serves as a conduit for exploring the intersection between internal experience and external reality.

Synge proposes that "all art that is not conceived by a soul in harmony with some mood of the earth is without value" (Hewitt 2). In fact, this conviction expresses Synge's deeply rooted belief that authentic art must arise from a profound connection with nature and the human spirit, reinforcing his commitment to truth and emotional resonance in his work. These observations highlight Synge's artistic mission to probe the complexities of human emotion and imagination through his dramatic work.

William Butler Yeats, one of the founders of the Irish Abbey Theatre, described Synge as an artist whose "core is always an overpowering vision of certain virtues" (420) and a "kind of intense, narrow personality which necessarily raises the whole issue" (206). It is no wonder that Synge achieved fame and acclaim, because his mind was shaped by the "tragic reality" he was born into, since his "low vitality helped him to be observant and contemplative" (397-400). His physical weakness, rather than being a hindrance, gave him a unique sensitivity to the subtleties of human experience reflected in the emotional depth of almost all his writing. Thus, even for Synge, like the characters in his play, his low health was a blessing for him after all. Even though the play was well received by critics, no one could explain the reason for its value. Bourgeois states that the play "has often been proclaimed Synge's most perfect achievement" (191). This high praise underscores the critical consensus that the play stands out among his other works, even if its merits are hard to define. He further asserts that its story is "among the simplest and most moving ones ever chosen by modern dramatists, and has in it all the searching beauty of an ancient parable" (183). Here, Bourgeois highlights how the play's emotional power lies in its simplicity and timeless, almost sacred quality, resonating with audiences on a deeper, symbolic level.

Yeats and Synge promised each other to "express a life that has never found expression" (Figgis 25). According to Figgis, "If *Riders to the Sea* is Synge's loftiest achievement, *The Well of the Saints* is his most human" (52). The serio-comedy *The Well of the Saints* was composed in 1902 and performed for the Abbey Theatre Company in 1905. Synge celebrated his play, believing it to be "like a monochrome painting, all in shades of one colour" (Fay 31). It has been produced in Ireland, England, and America and translated into German. Jones described the play as "a new growth possessing the abundance and beauty of dialogue" (49). Using different dramatic techniques throughout his plays, Synge "brings to the audience's mind the glory of the Irish peasantry, their hopes, dreams, despairs, and joys using the language of their daily lives" to express the enchanting newness of the old (Michener 11). In fact, as Mathews notes, *The Well of the Saints* celebrates the imagination and heroism of the dissident who refuses to be coerced into conformity at the behest of the moral majority (3). Through its vivid language and emotional depth, *The Well of the Saints* quietly affirms Synge's belief in the power of theatre to dignify the overlooked and challenge conventional moral perspectives. By blending poetic realism with symbolic elements,

the play not only captures the richness of rural Irish life but also subtly critiques the social structures that marginalize those who see the world differently. In doing so, Synge elevates the voices of characters often dismissed by society, proving that true insight can emerge from the most unexpected places.

Synge is a nature-loving writer, known to be “a man detached from the sways of the modern world: political, solitary, even insouciant” (Hewitt 1). In his view, social norms “were in a state of chaos – that religious, social, and political norms were being destabilised by modernity” (Hewitt 14). This is evident in the play, which argues that it is better to be blind than to live in the modern world. What makes the decision of the blind couple, Martin and Mary Doul, to go blind again so impactful is Synge’s use of language. Blind once more, they begin to appreciate the other senses they possess: “hearing a soft wind turning round the little leaves of the spring and feeling the sun, and we not tormenting our souls with the sight of the grey days, and the holy men and the dirty feet trampling the world” (Synge 88). Synge clearly perceives “nature as the prerequisite factor for a healthy society” (Aston and Savona 5). Martin and Mary are free to perceive the beauty within themselves and the natural world around them. The gift of sight only offers them a glimpse of the grim world. Commenting on Synge’s art, Strong states, “As in all his works, Synge records, but never judges” (33).

Obviously, blindness is not dramatised as a physical disability but rather as a theatrical motif. Benson acknowledges Synge’s genius in manifesting “his ability to take a complex and literary theme – the power of imagination to transform reality – and make of it a work of art instilled with drama and theatricality” (111). It is this metaphorical use of blindness that provides the play with its significance. The relationship between blindness, on one hand, and knowledge and power on the other makes the play worthy of serious critical attention. The play dramatises the idea that people constantly idealise something they long for or do not possess; yet, once there is a way to obtain it, they lose interest in it because they realise their previous state was blissful. We simply create a beautiful world out of nowhere, like the elderly couple who dream of a world that would be a beautiful place to live in. However, when the illusion vanishes, they soon lament their past as blind people. Interestingly, Synge’s well-known humour – by turns ironic, bitter, and boisterous – adds further complexity to this exploration of illusion and disillusionment. The play explores the power of falsehood to transform our harsh reality into a bearable fantasy.

The play narrates the story of two old, visually challenged beggars, Martin and Mary Doul. Out of pity or jest, the town convinces the two that they are “so fine looking” (Synge 17) and “the finest man and the finest woman of the seven countries of the East” (72). Martin believes that he has “wedded with the beautiful dark woman of Ballinatone” (19) who has “yellow hair” and “soft skin” (38). The blind Douls believe this to be true when, in fact, they are old and ugly. When the town receives a saint with holy water

from the famous well of the saints, their blindness is cured. Ironically, however, the two do not find happiness with their sight; instead, they are miserable and almost lose each other. At first, they are disgusted by each other. They are first deceived by their fellow villagers, but since what they hear fits their imagination of their desired beauty, they accept the lie without making much effort to question it. When Martin gets his sight back, he runs to find Mary. When he sees Molly Byrne, with her grand hair and soft skin and eyes, sitting in Mary Doul's seat, he mistakes her for his wife. When Molly makes a game of him, he goes from one young girl to another to identify Mary. People cruelly mock him, saying, "Try again, Martin, try again, and you'll be finding her yet" (39). This results in immediate disappointment and mutual rejection, worsened by the villagers' ridicule. The reality of living with sight comes to him like the reluctant awakening from a happy dream: "I was like the little children who listen to the stories of an old woman and do be dreaming after in the dark night" (39). Martin goes to work for Timmy the Smith and tries to seduce Timmy's betrothed, Molly, but she viciously rejects him. Moreover, her fiancé, Timmy the Smith, expels Martin from his forge. Martin and Mary both lose their sight again, and they refuse the Saint's offer to cure their blindness once more. The Saint considers their act an offense, and the townsfolk banish the couple, who head south in search of kinder neighbours.

Mary's character is remarked for her pride and arrogant self-satisfaction. On the other hand, Martin appears to be a passionate man with a solid sense of distinction. When Martin gains his sight, he discovers the ugly truth of the world around him, and specifically about his wife, who was once called the wonder of the Western world. He starts to work hard but earns less money than when he was sitting blind, begging people at the crossroads. "It's more I got a while since, and I sitting blinded in Grianan than I get in this place, working hard and destroying myself the length of the day" (46). The play ends on a philosophical note from Martin, who remarks that sight is a queer thing to upset a man. The stage directions note that he "*with a sudden movement, strikes the can from the SAINT's hand and sends it rocking across the stage*" (88). This sudden action symbolizes Martin's rejection of false comfort or illusions. Then, he stands "*up triumphantly, and pulling Mary up beside him*" (88) and makes himself "a grand man ... at finding his way" (76). These movements demonstrate his assertion of independence and newfound confidence despite the difficult reality he now sees. After regaining his sight, he realizes the misery of the real world. He states, "It's a hard thing for a man to have his sight, and he living near the like of you [*he cuts a stick and throws it away*], or wed with a wife [*cuts a stick*]; and I do be thinking it should be a hard thing for the Almighty God to be looking on the world bad days, and on men, the like of yourself walking around on it twirled" (*He reaches out to touch her but cannot*) (48). Here, Martin reflects on the painful burden of awareness, recognizing both the flaws in those close to him and the harshness of the world itself. In the end, Martin's disillusionment serves not as a defeat but as a form of liberation, where clarity—though

painful—grants him the strength to reclaim his agency. Synge does not romanticize blindness or sight, but instead presents vision as a complex metaphor for truth, self-awareness, and personal growth. This nuanced portrayal challenges simplistic moral binaries, offering a deeply human exploration of what it means to see clearly in a world that often thrives on illusion.

Another misconception challenged by the play is the idea that blind people are consumed by envy of the sighted, defined solely by their longing to regain vision. Instead, the play reveals a more nuanced reality, where blind individuals possess unique forms of knowledge, agency, and fulfillment independent of sight or the desire to recover it. Synge's couple are neither helpless miseries, nor dependent characters; rather, they are blind, happy, and content, embracing the richness of their imagination. They no longer consider themselves beautiful but are consoled in their fancies about their future. To them, it is clear that sight is nothing but a thief of joy in living, of each other's company and their dreams. Unfortunately, when they finally gain their sight, they never find relief but with coldness, hunger, and the overwhelming fear of impending death. In this harsh reality, they have lost the comfort and support they once found in each other. This is why Martin screams out, "Ah, God help me ... The blackness wasn't so black at the other time as it is this time" (67). In their desperation, they strive to create a new image—one that can help them reclaim their self-respect and dignity amid the darkness surrounding them. While Mary envisions her future self as an old woman with beautiful white hair, Martin imagines himself as an old man with a "beautiful, long, white, silken, streamy beard" (72). Then, laughing cheerfully, Mary says, "Well, we're a great pair, surely, and it's great times we'll have yet, maybe, and great talking before we die" (74). Synge's use of language is remarkable since it, "rather than imposing definition, is the agent of the imagination, turning fantasy into truth – in the mind of the speaker" and the audience (Upton 354). Nevertheless, Nicholas Greene maintains that what the couple seeks from their illusion is to "retain an inner feeling of dignity and freedom" (130) a state they had paradoxically achieved through blindness. Their return to sight does not bring liberation but rather exposes them to suffering and disillusionment. In contrast, their blindness had allowed them to construct a shared inner world, one where dignity was not dependent on external circumstances. Greene's insight highlights the central irony of the narrative: that vision, often associated with truth and clarity, brings despair, while blindness had once offered them emotional clarity and a fragile sense of autonomy. It is interesting to find out that now blindness here is synonymous with "not with ignorance but with insight" (Upton 356). Synge's talent, as Ellis-Fermor describes it, is "unique not because it was different from that of his contemporaries, but because he alone fuses their attributes into something rare and perfect" (184-6). In this light, blindness emerges not as a deficit but as a conduit of truth, mirroring Synge's rare ability to weave his era's diverse talents into a luminous whole.

The mixed reception of the play's conclusion, even among its supporters, underscores the unsettling power of Synge's thematic choices. Martin's final decision—to embrace illusion over harsh reality—signals his acceptance of what Gerstenberger calls the “meaninglessness of outward appearance” and his conscious “preference for a lie” (45–57). Rather than presenting illusion as mere escapism, Synge frames it as a coping mechanism in a world devoid of comfort or meaning. This radical inversion of values challenges conventional expectations surrounding truth, vision, and resolution in drama. Bourgeois rightly identifies the ending as “the truest expression of [Synge's] pessimistic view if not philosophy of life” (192). The play does not offer redemption through truth or clarity, but instead suggests that illusion—though fragile—is the only refuge for human dignity in the face of existential despair. The characters' retreat into self-fashioned identities reflects a bleak, yet honest, worldview in which survival may depend more on imagination than on confronting reality. The Douls are happy because they are blind, but the sighted people cannot comprehend the source of their happiness. They never consider themselves imperfect or dependent. Mary Doul asks, “What good'll our grey hairs be itself, if we have our sight, the way we'll see them falling each day, and turning dirty in the rain?” This is a profound question asked by the old beggar. It is interesting to notice that “their fall to knowledge on being cured of blindness by the saint reveals their moral corrosion as well as that of the wider community” (Burke 41). Notably, they choose the superiority and the advantages of the imaginative life over that of the reason-sighted people, because they understand that blindness, not sight, means happiness and that the things of the world and material pleasures are impermanent and cannot bring them lasting happiness. Moreover, they realise their true selves and attain the knowledge of the self from ignorance, though the journey to knowledge ultimately reveals their own moral corrosion, along with that of the wider community.

The dramatic metaphor of the play suggests that the more the Douls distance themselves from modern life, with its materialistic distractions, the more spiritually secure and happy they are. The gift of sight – often connected with perception – is considered a burden. They search for their lost inner peace and security, even if they remain in the darkness of their blindness. The blind Douls are connected to an ideal world, devoid of the ugliness and toil of their modern middle-class society. Thus, the play explores a blind couple to create a parable about society. The blind are the only ones with true insight into the beauty around them. Perhaps the most problematic question about this play is whether Synge is suggesting that blindness, in some cases, is better than sight. Should we believe that Synge intends to explore and incriminate the sighted society for its immorality and prejudice against the blind rather than to exploit blindness itself? On the contrary, Synge invites us to reconsider the very nature of perception, using blindness not as a limitation but as a lens through which to expose the moral and societal failures of the sighted world.

Simplicity and the strangeness of reality are the striking features of this play. The Douls have built their image of themselves through the eyes of the villagers. Martin assures himself that he looks his best, saying, "I've heard them say when I'm dressed up with that thing on my head" (Synge 26). The medium through which this couple constructs their fantasies and dreams is the villagers. According to King, it is not a coincidence that "language has a mediating role for the blind couple since they are dependent on it to construct their vision of objective and subjective reality" (106). It shows that "through the medium of language, the blind couple shares in a social interaction with the community, in which the villagers serve as a mirror" to them (King 109). The couple used to live a comfortable life; they did not need to work or worry because they got what they needed from the villagers. Mary warns Martin that, like the villagers, he would be a victim of false appearances if he were to get his sight back. She believes that "[he]'d be as bad as the rest of them if you had your sight, and did well, surely, not to marry a seeing man ... for the seeing is a queer lot, and you'd never know the thing they'd do" (Synge 19-20). Later, they discover that the world of the sighted is not as they had envisioned. Their dignity and pride came from the illusion that they were living in. On this ground, Synge manages to evoke our pity for Martin and Mary. In fact, he suggests that their loss of illusion is more tragic than blindness itself, as they are deprived not only of their imagined beauty but also of the dignity and contentment that once gave meaning to their existence. Through this, Synge successfully explores how illusions can provide purpose and hope, and how their loss can be more painful than any physical hardship, including blindness. Ultimately, Synge's portrayal invites us to reconsider the value of perception itself, suggesting that sometimes the comfort of illusion holds more power and meaning than harsh reality, and that the loss of such illusions can be a profoundly human tragedy.

On the other hand, Frank Higgins, a Kansas City-based playwright and poet known for addressing social themes and challenging traditional narratives, reverses the conventional notion of blindness as a disability in *The Country of the Blind*. The play examines the adage, "In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king." It tells the story of Eduardo, a one-eyed, blind, and poor farmer who dreams of becoming rich and famous. He risks his life to visit a mythical village where everyone has been blind for fifteen generations and the streets are said to be paved with gold. Contrary to expectations, Eduardo does not become king; instead, he finds himself subservient to the blind villagers, who refuse to accept him unless he agrees to remove his eyes. By reversing the binary opposition of supremacy and subordination, Higgins challenges traditional ideas about power, ability, and social acceptance.

Eduardo dreams of being the king of this village; however, he learns that the blind people have skills that he does not possess. Moreover, they believe his presence is like an infection that needs to be destroyed by death or cured by removing an eye. The village community assigns a girl called Medina to decide whether he deserves to live or not. When Medina and Eduardo fall in love, the priest decides that Eduardo's deranged

behaviour is because of the tumours that he calls "eyes" and that he would be much better off if they were removed. In the end, Eduardo escapes to his village, and, after fifty years, he still remembers Medina, having tried several times to return to her but never succeeding. The play ends with Eduardo wondering, "Does she still remember me when we danced and twirled?"

The 2006 play is a stage adaptation of Herbert Wells' 1904 short story. In the original story, the main character, Nunez, does not accept having his eyes removed and escapes from the valley. He is tired, lies down, and presumably dies beneath the blue sky. The more romantic ending of the one-act play creates a stronger impression on the audience regarding the protagonist. In both texts, the protagonist rejects the closed-mindedness of the blind community. Eduardo refuses the temptations of love and wealth to escape with his one eye to his impoverished hometown. The lack of scholarly reviews of the play is inexplicable, since it is a truly valuable addition to the previously known short story. In fact, Higgins manages to give fresh and provocative meanings to the original by changing the ending.

The story embodies the perspectives of power and disability. Rather than encouraging its masses to overcome the barriers of disability and integrate with sighted people, the blind community forces them to remain isolated in the mountains. They regard the ability to see as a mental defect that must be cured. Sight is viewed as a metaphor for how society stifles forward-thinking individuals. In the play, the masses consider the ability to see as a blockade – whether social, religious, political, or cultural – that can prevent innovative minds from developing. The community of the blind fails to accommodate and accept people with different abilities. Eduardo demonstrates to the rest of the community that the Leader and the Priest are obscurantists regarding the nature of the wall. It is both ironic and clear that the religious and political leaders believe they are doing the rest of the people a favour.

The one-eyed Eduardo calls for the liberation of the village, claiming he "can prove there is more to life than what [they] know" (Higgins 32). So, he confronts the High Priest, stating he was not meditating and went to the wall: "How could I know you were there? Unless I have powers that none of you have" (32). To acknowledge sight would be to acknowledge weakness, yet they are anything but weak. Ironically, he approaches them with the ingrained stereotypes, prejudices, and misconceptions of his own sighted society. Unfortunately, he is proven wrong. While they are blind, they are richer and more developed than those in his town. He proclaims that he is not only an artist but a "king! A good king! I can make your lives better!" (33). Ironically, the Priest believes he is not a baby, as Medina believes, but "an infection" that needs to be treated (33).

This text sets out to explore conventional concepts of disability representation in literature and culture. Such representations are often experimental and resistant to

conventional notions of disability. What this work invites us to do is to deeply question our boundaries of literary form and the definition of disability itself. After reading the play, one begins to examine their understanding of disability. Who is disabled: the blind community or the one-eyed Eduardo? The blind villagers have developed their own sophisticated society, with knowledge and skills adapted to their sensory experience, and do not view their blindness as a limitation. They have golden-paved roads and have developed their own methods of life. For example, instead of minutes and seconds, they count time by heartbeats:

MEDINA. Just give me a hundred heartbeats.

PEDRO. A hundred heartbeats. But no more! (Higgins 38)

Besides, the society of the blind lacks even the concept of sight. Thus, the play counterattacks the simplistic, pity-driven narratives of visual impairment and instead presents disability as part of the human experience that is neither inherently tragic nor inspiring in itself but can have its own rich and varied meanings.

The adage of “in the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king” traditionally suggests that someone with even a minor advantage – in this case, partial sight – can dominate or lead in a society where others lack that ability. It implies that blindness is a deficiency and that sight, even if limited, inherently confers superiority. This common interpretation rests on ableist assumptions that equate ability with power and legitimacy. It reflects a normative and hierarchical view of ability, where physical traits associated with non-disabled bodies are considered inherently better or more valuable. These notions tend to marginalize those who do not conform to conventional standards of normalcy. From a disability studies perspective, however, this notion is problematic because it reinforces the idea that disability is synonymous with weakness or incapacity.

Higgins's play *The Country of the Blind* critically subverts this adage by reversing the assumed power dynamic. Rather than confirming the superiority of sight, the play interrogates and destabilizes its privileged status. Upon entering the village of the blind, where blindness has persisted for generations, Eduardo discovers that his sight is not considered a gift but a threat. The community has evolved without reliance on vision and sees no need for it. Rather than being celebrated, he is pathologised; the villagers regard his eyes as abnormal growths, likening them to tumours, and demand their removal as a condition for acceptance and love. Their rejection of sight underscores a fundamentally different epistemology, one that challenges visual supremacy. Far from being regarded as a king or granted authority because of his sight, Eduardo is rendered powerless, even subject to communal judgement and the threat of death. Ironically, he has to learn how to overcome his disability—sight. In fact, Medina believes that he is in danger, stating that “if he's thought of as a danger, then a danger must be destroyed. They will destroy him”

(Higgins 37). This portrayal highlights the relativity of disability suggesting that what is considered an advantage in one context can be a liability in another.

Another dimension to the meanings of disability in the play is proposed by Hunt, who argues that disability lies “not only in the impairment of function and its effects on us individually, but also, more importantly, in the area of our relationship with normal people” (146). However, using disability as a metaphor must be approached with caution, as it carries social and cultural implications that actively shape public perceptions. This conceptual inversion highlights the social model of disability, which asserts that disability is not inherent in the body but is instead constructed by societal norms, values, and barriers. By challenging the assumptions embedded in the original proverb, Higgins’s play offers a nuanced critique of dominant views on disability and reclaims agency for those traditionally viewed as lacking it.

Conclusion

Despite the obvious differences between the two texts, they share one common feature: the depiction of disability – particularly blindness – as a narrative device for social and cultural reform. The transformation of blindness and sight is not physical but rather a journey of the souls of the main characters. Knowledge and material pleasures cannot bring true happiness. The two texts suggest that life without sight might contain beauty – a fact not fully understood by sighted people. The representation of disability as a dramatic metaphor in these selected plays demonstrates how society contributes to making a person less able. Social, political, and cultural structures help to shape and influence the cultural, moral, and humane awareness of disability. The two texts evoke the disfigured reality of disabled persons living in their idealised worlds and challenge our established and well-known concepts of sightedness and blindness.

This study provides a lens through which to examine the metaphorical significance of blindness in the two texts. The imagined lifestyle of the Douls offers an escape from the harshness and moral decay of the settled community. Their rejection by society stems from their alternative values, which challenge conventional norms. As Benson observes, the only truth the couple gains from the ability to see is that “self-delusion is to be preferred to deception based on the lies of society” (98). This insight reinforces the plays’ broader critique of societal norms and emphasises the subversive power of blindness as a metaphor.

By contrast, the love story of Eduardo and Medina deepens this exploration by emphasising the tension between the idealised world of blindness and the oppressive societal structures that inhibit genuine freedom. The theme of blindness is examined more intensely through Eduardo’s direct confrontation with the entrenched societal, political, and religious systems that constrain his autonomy. Higgins’s play delves into the psychological and emotional turmoil of living without sight in a world that equates

vision with truth – a world in which blind characters must navigate both physical and ideological obstacles. This nuanced portrayal reveals the internal struggles of characters as they come to terms with their blindness, which is simultaneously viewed as both a curse and a path to deeper understanding. The romantic subplot, rather than offering escape, serves as a lens through which larger philosophical questions about autonomy, identity, and perception are explored.

Building on these complexities, this study explores how blindness functions not only as a metaphor for inner awareness but also as a dramatic strategy that redefines knowledge, beauty, and power. Blindness becomes a performative and thematic device that challenges dominant visual epistemologies, prompting both characters and audiences to question the authority of sight. In both plays, the blind characters serve as the authors' mouthpieces, asserting the transformative and liberating potential of blindness as a counterpoint to the stereotypical assumptions of the sighted. More dangerously, however, the metaphorical blindness of the mind symbolises a deeper moral and intellectual failure – one that afflicts the sighted. The blind characters employ various dramatic techniques, such as irony, metaphor, and inversion, to emphasise the subjectivity of knowledge, perception, and beauty. These techniques not only humanise blindness but also expose the fragility of sight, destabilising the audience's trust in what is seen versus what is understood.

Sight, in this context, does not equate to superiority; on the contrary, the protagonists come to recognise the value of respecting and understanding others' perspectives, rather than imposing their own. The blind characters in both texts advocate a conscious rejection of visual supremacy and modernity, as both are portrayed as disruptive forces that threaten their inner peace. Ironically, these insights remain inaccessible to the sighted characters, who continue to misread the true nature of perception and understanding. Ultimately, the plays challenge the audience to reconsider their preconceived notions about sight and blindness, urging a deeper engagement with alternative forms of knowledge. In doing so, they position disability not as a deficit but as a site of epistemic resistance, capable of reshaping how individuals relate to the world and to dominant systems of knowledge. They offer a powerful critique of prevailing societal values, particularly those surrounding normalcy and ability, and call for a more inclusive, empathetic, and pluralistic understanding of human difference, especially in relation to disability.

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