

JIHOČESKÁ UNIVERZITA V ČESKÝCH BUDĚJOVICÍCH

FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA

ÚSTAV ANGLISTIKY

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

GENDER AND BLINDNESS IN LITERATURE

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Studijní obor: Anglická a americká literatura - Bohemistika

Ročník: 3.

2023

I confirm that this thesis is my own work written using solely the sources and literature properly quoted and acknowledged as works cited.

České Budějovice, 04.12.2023

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Acknowledgment

I want to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Einat Adar, M.A., Ph.D., for her invaluable guidance and persistent support, which have been instrumental in shaping this thesis.

Anotace

Slepota byla v literatuře zkoumána z různých úhlů pohledu a z různých kulturních prostředí v průběhu celé historie. Slepé postavy v literárních dílech mohou v rámci literárního kontextu fungovat jako symboly, metafory či reprezentace určitých stereotypů. Tato práce se zaměřuje na vztah a souvislost mezi slepotou, genderem a sexualitou ve vybraných literárních dílech.

Tato diplomová práce zkoumá přijetí či odmítnutí genderových stereotypů ve vztahu ke slepotě, analyzuje a porovnává aspekty slepoty aplikované na gender hlavních hrdinů, zkoumá specifické genderové role a stereotypy a jejich vliv na vnímání slepoty v literárních dílech.

Klíčová slova: slepota, gender, stereotypy, sexualita, literatura, postižení, společnost

Abstract

Blindness has been explored in literature from various perspectives and cultural backgrounds throughout history. Blind characters in literary works can function as symbols, metaphors, or representations of certain stereotypes, depending on the literary context. This thesis focuses on the correlation between blindness, gender, and sexuality in selected literary works.

The diploma thesis examines the acceptance or rejection of gender stereotypes in relation to blindness, analyses and compares aspects of blindness as applied to the gender of the main protagonists, and explores the specific gender roles and stereotypes and their impact on the perception of blindness within literary works.

Key words: blindness, gender, stereotypes, sexuality, literature, disability, society

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Introduction

Sight is one of the fundamental human senses, allowing us to learn about the world around us. However, what happens when we lose this sense? Blindness and other visual impairments can affect anyone, regardless of background or status. What is it like living with blindness? Blindness and other types of visual impairment can affect everyone without distinction. What can such a life with blindness look like?

Throughout history, literature has depicted numerous blind characters and individuals with visual impairments. However, how are such characters portrayed in literature? What is the attitude of the author or other characters towards the blind characters? And how does the reader or society perceive such figures?

Stereotypes are formed over time and applied to various groups based on cultural and societal norms. These stereotypes are closely tied to the cultural concept of society and its prejudices towards individuals or minorities. They usually hold a traditional view of a particular thing and do not allow for other or more modern interpretations. Blindness is often portrayed negatively in literature and society as a disease or disability that prevents a person from integrating into conventional society, relegating them to the margins of society. Although it may not be the case nowadays, it is still challenging to remove these traditional stereotypes and accept blindness as a regular part of human existence.

Even though gender is not as rooted in the literary discourse as, for example, blindness, gender issues are also quite discussed, not only in literature. Gender roles and stereotypes significantly impact how men and women are perceived in literature and society, affecting their social roles and behaviours. The primary objective of this thesis is to analyze the portrayal and perception of blind characters in two selected literary texts: David Herbert Lawrence's "The Blind Man" and Margaret Atwood's "Torching the Dusties." The main goal of this thesis is to investigate whether blind characters are subjected to particular stereotypes, and how gender stereotypes and biases contribute to shaping these stereotypes. The research will also examine how blind individuals respond to these stereotypes, whether they accept or reject them.

1. **Blindness, Gender and Sexuality**

Since the beginning of human existence, sight has been perceived as one of the most important senses of all. It helps humans to recognize colours and shapes, orient themselves in space, and generally help to form a coherent and realistic picture of the world..

Generally, human cognition and knowledge of the external world undoubtedly depend on the ability to see.

Eyesight is inherently linked to blindness as the opposite of the sense that is considered fundamental to human existence and experience.

What can be considered blindness? As is common knowledge, there are various eye conditions, but where does one draw the line on what can and cannot be defined as blindness? Blindness is the absence of visual and light perception or complete vision loss. In most cases, it is also irreversible. The causes of blindness can vary. In some cases, it may be a gradual process in which the eye gradually loses the ability to perceive sight over time. Examples of this gradual loss may include age-related macular degeneration (cataract or glaucoma), inflammation of the eye (conjunctiva or cornea) or inadequate eye nutrition.

In another case, blindness can also be a sudden process, for example, in the case of injuries to the eye or optic nerves. There are also examples where blindness is due to developmental defects or may be congenital.

Julia Rodas and Georgina Kleege, in their texts ("On Blindness" from 2009; "Blindness and Visual Culture: An Eyewitness Account" from 2013), agree that, on average, 10-20% of people suffer from complete blindness. However, according to the World Health Organization, 2.2 billion people have blindness and visual impairment, which accounts for about one-quarter of the population in total (updated August 2023). (The WHO does not distinguish between the numbers of complete vision loss and visual impairment). The WHO also states that blindness and visual impairment are caused primarily by refractive errors and cataracts, most commonly affecting people over 50. It also states that half of the 2.2 billion people who have blindness and visual impairment could have avoided their condition through early prevention (Blindness and Vision Impairment).

Kleege claims that the absence of visual and light perception is referred to in society as "total blindness". This, she explains, is a term created by the sighted society to label and

name in a certain way those whose sight is lacking or damaged in various ways. She reflects on this term and asks if there is a term "total blindness" and if there is also such a thing as "total vision" (454). From these explanations, it is clear that nothing like "total vision" can be defined, and it also follows that vision and blindness should not be considered as binary oppositions but as conditions that are present in and intertwined with each other.

It is in the context of sight where blindness finds its definition and meaning. The meaning of the term 'blindness' presupposes the presence of sight, as it directly contradicts the norm of visual perception. The absence of sight derives its meaning precisely from the omnipresence and significance of sight within the human experience.

Blindness and visual impairment have always been a part of human history and marked a particular state and condition of vision. The symptoms of blindness and visual impairment have been relatively constant over time, but what has changed is the attitude towards and perception of blind or visually impaired people.

In premodern times, Moshe Barasch claims that the perception of blind individuals was a complex and ambiguous one. On one hand, blindness was considered mystical and spiritual, as blind people were believed to possess extraordinary powers that allowed them to communicate with higher powers or gods. This was a unique ability that no other human being had. On the other hand, blind individuals were also seen as miserable beings who were deprived of the most essential sense – sight. With the loss of sight, their independence was taken away and they were forced to rely on others for their basic needs (3).

According to Michalko and Titchkosky, in pre-modern times, the blind had a unique ability to communicate with the deity, which gave them a special and otherworldly clarity (72). Barasch adds that this ability stemmed from the fact that blind people lived between two worlds and were able to communicate with both the sighted and the deity, resulting in a duality of experience (3).

In their work, Michalko and Titchkosky discuss the qualities attributed to blindness, namely ambiguity and ambivalence, which arise from the contrast between "unhappy creation" and "direct contact with the surroundings". They explain that the world of sight is not ambiguous, as it opens equally and unambiguously to all who can see. Ambiguity only exists for those between two worlds or who hover between them. Blind individuals live ambiguous lives characterised by communication between the sighted and the divine.

According to the authors, blind individuals have no choice but to communicate with the divine, as communication with sighted individuals is limited and only occurs when the blind require assistance. Sight is considered a precious gift, and those who are deprived of it are often seen as "unfortunate creatures", leading to unhappiness. Sight, on the other hand, is considered a valuable gift that allows us to explore and discover the world and achieve independence and freedom.

Sight is often imagined not merely as a gift, but as a "precious gift". It is a gift that opens the world to us with all of its beauty and ugliness, its glory and shame, its mystery and certitude, its possibility and limitation, its open horizons and closed borders; it is this world that is the precious gift, the gift that is given to us when we are presented with the gift of sight. But the precious character of sight does not end here. Not only does sight open the world to us, it also gives us freedom of the most precious sort: the freedom of movement without the burdensome necessity of "help" and without the equally burdensome necessity of need in the form of interdependence understood as dependence. (Michalko and Titchkosky 71)

Modern society looks at blindness from a different angle. Undoubtedly, specific fragments of premodern ideas have partly influenced the view of blindness in modern times. However, with the development of science and culture, it can be said that the modern concept of blindness and its definition differ from the premodern one.

Michalko and Titchkosky mention that in modern science, blindness can be viewed as a natural phenomenon. However, this perspective includes blindness as both natural and unnatural. Natural on the view that blindness is biological in origin, unnatural because it is biologically "right" to have sight and not to be blind. Blindness is thus taken as something biologically "wrong" (72). This paradigm describing blindness as something unnatural is one example of blindness being associated with a negative connotation.

There are many opposing views of blindness or people affected by blindness. It is not only the negative perception of other people but also how blind people perceive themselves that is important. As Michalko and Titchkosky mentioned above, communication of a blind

person with others who can see was not possible, so it was assumed that he was talking to a deity. This method of "removing" blind people from communication (or possibly from society directly) caused blind people to isolate themselves (willingly or unwillingly) from others. If the blind wanted to continue to be part of society, it was necessary to adapt to this seeing society. John Howard Griffin supports this assumption of adaptation and the perception of blindness as an "unnatural condition" when he argues that:

"Sightlessness is an unnatural condition, a minority condition, thus it is largely up to the sightless to adjust themselves to the rest of the world and not the contrary. It was in those things that I had allowed myself to react spontaneously but without understanding" (Griffin 154). In his monograph *Scattered Shadows* (where he documented his becoming blind after World War II blindness) blindness is described as an "unnatural condition", "minority," or "childlike state". He also claims that "blindness isolates a man," and when becoming blind, "he will return to fundamentals, as the child does" (Griffin 154).

In Griffin's statement, in addition to the examples mentioned above, one can also notice that he indicates that blind people should conform (or rather, submit) to everyone else who (let us assume) can see. This indication again puts blindness in an inferior position to sight and assigns it negative attributes – the status of inferiority. The subordination of blindness is pervasive, ongoing, and can be observed even in today's life. It is rooted not only in culture but also in human society. For blind people to "operate normally," they need to adjust to the majority of people and the culture of the sighted. Examples of this are the invention and use of Braille, the use of blind canes or dogs, or adapting their environment to society's needs. With the development of technology, it is evident that the aids of blind people are better adapted to their needs to live in the ordinary sighted world using modern technological aids such as bionic eyes and sensor canes.

As mentioned earlier, there is a long-standing belief in society that sight is the central sense and the only way to know and understand the world around us. That is why the stereotypical view prevails that if blind people cannot orient themselves in space, they always need the help of someone who can see, either in orientation in space or in describing the surrounding world and events. However, this belief is not indeed true. Blind people can orient or explore the world independently, but they use other senses except for sight.

When the world is recognized by other means (such as touch or hearing), the culture sees it as incomplete and tries to "give" the blind ones the "correct idea" of the world around us. It is believed that blind people will never acquire a complete idea of the world and that something will always be missing.

For the sighted ones (the sighted culture), it is almost unimaginable to explore the world in any way other than sight. "Lack of information", as Griffin puts it, leading to the lack of knowledge about the world marks the fundamental ground upon which notions of dependence as an essential characterization of blind people are built" (Michalko and Titchkosky 64).

According to Michalko and Titchkosky, blindness always needs to adjust to sight (the blind ones to sighted ones), as the world of the blind contains very little information about the world we live in. Therefore, sighted people have no interest or reason to adjust to the blind ones. To them, blindness has nothing to offer. It is also considered an unnatural and minority condition, so (to the sighted ones) it makes sense that the blind ones will be those who adjust (65).

Griffin's interpretation of blindness, as described above, reflects many of the ideas and traditional concepts of blindness prevalent in modern culture and society. One of them is ocular-centrism.

The superiority of sight, also called ocularcentrism, is closely connected to the thinking of the modern Western world and, according to David Michael Levin, history of Western culture is the history of ocularcentrism (398). Ocularcentrism represents sight as a significant and fundamental way of knowing, perceiving and experiencing the world around us.

David Bolt, the director of the Centre for Culture & Disability Studies at Liverpool Hope University, developed the concept of ocular normativism, "meaning the mass or institutionalized endorsement of visual necessity" (5).

"If ocularcentrism is thought of as the baseline of assumptions, the very foundation of the meta-narrative of blindness perhaps, then this neologism ocular normativism denotes the effect: the perpetuation of the conclusion that the supreme means of perception is necessarily visual" (Bolt 14).

Ocularcentrism assumes that perception of the world relies on sight. The Molyneux problem attempts to answer the question of how blind people would perceive the world if they were suddenly given the ability to see. Specifically, how would they distinguish and perceive objects, such as cubes and spheres, through sight when they have already learned cognitive schemata? George Berkley's *A New Theory of Vision* provides the most famous answer to this question. According to him, a blind person would not understand the question and would only see a colored surface without any depth or distance (47). He would have to learn how to interpret objects' shapes, sizes, and distances based on visual and tactile stimuli to distinguish between them. Berkley's theory suggests that this knowledge is not based on direct perception but must be acquired through experience. Recovering sight, therefore, is like discovering new knowledge and truth (Adar 3).

Georgina Kleege distances her opinions from the connection between ocularcentrism and knowledge. She claims that sometimes there may be situations when perceiving the surrounding world with senses other than sight is better. As an example, she mentions the situation of September 11, 2001, where people who were at the site of the collapse of the World Trade Center testified that the only thing they were able to perceive in that horrific situation was the surrounding sounds and smells. Because of the fire, dust and smoke, they could not observe visual aspects, and their memories were all non-visual (450).

Michalko and Titchkosky claim that sight and blindness are always connected and that the cultural history of blindness would not exist without the cultural history of sight. In other words, if blindness had a history, it would be closely connected with the cultural history of sight throughout time and space (77).

"The potentiality of perceiving what sight might not is the perceptual space from which blind people may offer a creativity and a conversation that says more than how sighted culture sees and knows" (Michalko and Titchkosky 77).

Based on the previously discussed examples and concepts regarding the perception of blindness, both in contemporary and historical contexts, it is evident that blindness is consistently intertwined with the notion of sight. Modern culture and social perceptions see it as the antagonistic opposite of sight and vision, something inferior and unnatural. In history and present-day society and culture, there is still a prevailing concept of ocularcentrism, which privileges sight over the other senses. In a society where sight is viewed as superior to

other senses, it becomes challenging to demand justice and equality between blind and sighted individuals. It is doubtful that any sense other than sight would receive equal treatment. As a result, blind individuals will still be marginalised despite some people feeling otherwise. This is because, as previously mentioned, accommodating blind people in a sighted society is often not prioritised, mainly when such a notion prevails.

Exclusion from society can profoundly impact a blind person's psychological characteristics, identity, and self-perception. It can lead to isolation and separation from the majority. To change or reverse this social and cultural perception, having more conversations about this topic is crucial to try to understand the world of the blind without comparing it to the world of the sighted. Above all, it is essential not to show in any way that blind people are less valuable than those who can see because they, too, have a world that is perhaps better than the visible one.

Even today, blindness is considered more of a minority in society. It is often portrayed as strange and unnatural and given different importance and attention than sight. This is mainly because ocularcentrism, the traditional concept that sight is the most essential sense, still prevails in contemporary society and its history. It is still challenging to place blindness on the same level as sight and to treat it as such.

Besides facing blind-focused stereotypes, contemporary society and the characters in "The Blind Man" and "Torching the Dusties" struggle with the issue of gender and gender stereotypes. Society still holds certain traditional concepts or prejudices, and eliminating them is difficult. While blindness is not yet subject to such tendencies, they are deeply rooted in society.

Gender studies is an interdisciplinary academic field that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. It responded to diverse socio-economic, political, and cultural issues affecting women and marginalized gender identities. The momentum for the birth of gender studies was primarily feminist movements and women's studies that focused mainly on women's limited rights, such as legal, sexual, and reproductive rights. These encompass making decisions about one's body regarding reproduction and sexuality and women's autonomous decision-making not to be dependent on a man/husband. Violence against women, such as domestic violence, controlling women, or deliberately silencing them, was

also a significant focus. Gender studies aimed to address gender inequality that existed across cultures and societies.

Women were often denied equal rights to men but were discriminated against in many other things just because they were women. Women did not have the same voting rights as men, nor the opportunity for equal education and employment as men, nor did they have equal work and pay.

Feminist movements were primarily a response to patriarchy, an established social system where men have a dominant position, are given privileges and are socially perceived as superior to women.

Feminism and women's studies were the starting point for the emergence of other movements and studies, such as not only gender studies but also many of its disciplines, such as gender identities, sexuality, gender roles and representations, representations of minorities or masculine and feminine studies.

Gender studies had and still have a significant influence on challenging and dismantling traditional views and stereotypes within the framework of gender equality and promoting an inclusive and diverse perception and understanding of (modern) society.

Clyde W. Franklin explains that the foundation of the claims that the basis of gender studies are three basic concepts, namely "sex", "gender", and "gender identity" (1). These concepts are detailed in Wallum's text *The Dynamics of Sex and Gender: A Sociological Perspective*.

According to Franklin, sex is "an ascribed status assigned to persons at birth" (2). Walum describes sex as "the biological aspects of a person such as the chromosomal, hormonal, anatomical, and physiological structure" (5).

It implies that the person with XY chromosomes is born with male genitalia (a penis, testicles) and is generally categorised as male. A person born with XX chromosomes and female internal and external sex organs is generally categorised as female. Sex is considered a biological concept, the set of biological features and predispositions of a person. Male biological features are different from female biological features (Franklin 2).

Unlike sex, gender is perceived culturally and socially. "Gender refers to an achieved status, which is a function of socialization and has social, cultural and psychological components" (Walum 5). Walum claims that people develop masculinity or femininity

(masculine and feminine qualities) as a result of experiences (direct or indirect), formal and informal learning and certain perceptions (5). "Furthermore, generally, people behave, hold attitudes and feel the way society says that a male or female should do so. When a male does so, he is seen as masculine and when a female does so, she is seen as feminine" (Walum 5). Walum also claims that these definitions have undergone specific changes through time; however, it is vital to express that the status and meaning of gender are cultural and social rather than biological (5).

"Gender identity" could be explained as a person's view of his/her gender. Berger and Berger explain that in our society, some persons are perceived as male and identify themselves as masculine and males identify themselves as feminine. For the person's gender identity, other people must confirm a person's self-identification unless the person can

Table 1
Stereotypic Traits

| Male-Valued Traits | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Aggressive | Feelings not easily hurt |
| Independent | Adventurous |
| Unemotional | Makes decisions easily |
| Hides emotions | Never cries |
| Objective | Acts as a leader |
| Easily influenced | Self-confident |
| Dominant | Not uncomfortable about being aggressive |
| Likes math and science | Ambitious |
| Not excitable in a minor crisis | Able to separate feelings from ideas |
| Active | Not dependent |
| Competitive | Not conceited about appearance |
| Logical | Thinks men are superior to women |
| Worldly | Talks freely about sex with men |
| Skilled in business | |
| Direct | |
| Knows the way of the world | |
| Female-Valued Traits | |
| Avoids harsh language | Interested in own appearance |
| Talkative | Neat in habits |
| Tactful | Quiet |
| Gentle | Strong need for security |
| Aware of feelings of others | Appreciates art and literature |
| Religious | Expresses tender feelings |

TABLE 1

become psychotic (4-20). "Gender identity, therefore, refers to an individual's view or belief that he or she belongs to a particular gender, supported by self-identification and the identification of others" (Franklin 3).

Regarding gender identity, Franklin speaks about the traditional sex-based social meanings and masculine and feminine qualities in society. He created a list of characteristics expected from each gender – Table 1. "Stereotypic Male and Female Valued Traits" (5).

The list shows stereotypical values and qualities assigned to males and females by society. Women must behave according to female-assigned qualities, as men must follow theirs.

Attributing specific characteristics to men and women is also related to fulfilling male and female social roles. Gender positions, social gender roles, prejudices and stereotypes are probably the most resonating problems in society. All of them stem from the patriarchal system of society. Women were supposed to fulfil the role of mothers, stay at home with the child, take care of the household, ensure the running of the household, take care of the family and fulfil the husband's (partner's) needs. Men were supposed to provide for the family financially, take care of it and support it. Franklin claims that married men assumed the roles of breadwinner and handyman and made the major decisions in marriage. On the other hand, their wives were assumed domestic, childcare and minor decision-making roles. Men were also expected to be the head of the household and not expected to do domestic and childcare responsibilities (107).

Sexuality is also very closely connected with gender identity and personal self-expression. Sexuality is a complex and multifaceted component of human identity and experience. It includes sexual orientation, desires, attraction, behavioural patterns and types of relationships. Mottier claims that sexuality is understood as how people experience themselves, their bodies, pleasures and desires. She adds that people define themselves through their sexuality. According to Mottier, people can define themselves as gay, lesbian, straight, bisexual, exhibitionists, submissives, dominatrixes and others (1). These definitions sometimes get confused with types of sexual orientations, such as heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, pansexuality, asexuality or queer.

Sexual identity is a modern phenomenon that emerged in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries (Mottier 2). However, Mottier explains how people made sense of their sexual

experiences in those times, which differs significantly from the understanding of sexuality nowadays. "The ways in which different cultures and different time periods have made sense of erotic pleasures and dangers vary widely. Sexuality is shaped by social and political forces and connects in important ways to relations of power around class, race, and, especially, gender" (Mottier 2). She explains that the main feature of the biological model of sexuality was the claim that the natural (and therefore normal) form of sexuality and sexual behaviour contained only heterosexual acts and desires (36). "Heterosexuality was thus treated as the implicit norm, whereas homosexuality, in particular, came to be conceptualized as, somehow, an abnormal departure from the norm" (Mottier 36). Certainly, non-heterosexual sex existed during those times. However, these practices were considered unnatural sins and often persecuted (Mottier 36). Later, "the biological model of sexuality saw homosexuals not as sinners or criminals, but as abnormal individuals who were in need of cure" (Mottier 39). Homosexuality was, until 1992, classified by the World Health Organization as a mental illness (Mottier 40). This fact only confirms that even the feeling and expression of one's sexuality and, at the same time, identity were influenced and regulated by traditional stereotyped opinions and attitudes until recently.

Stereotyped characteristics of individuals are also associated with sexuality. In traditional society, the opinion prevails (prevailed) that the relationship must always be only between a man and a woman, i.e. heterosexual. Other sexualities or sexual orientations were not allowed and, in some cases, even punished.

This approach seems to be the reason why, in society, sexual orientations other than heterosexual were understood as something unnatural, abnormal or even immoral.

Nowadays, there are countries where these traditional concepts do not exist anymore, and people can openly present their sexuality without worry. However, there are also countries where expressions of sexuality other than heterosexual are punishable by death.

Different types of sexuality are sometimes automatically assigned stereotypical characteristics. In society, there is (was) an opinion that, for example, homosexuals are more effeminate, emotional, take more care of themselves, or are interested in culture, art and other "non-masculine" specialities or characteristics that are predominantly attributed to women, such as these that Franklin lists above: gentle, interested in their appearances or aware of feelings of others (5).

It does not have to be only about the mentioned qualities. However, they can also be labelled as such if they show their emotions (even non-sexual ones) towards male friends because men should be, in general, unemotional and never express their weaknesses (Franklin 121). "Men also should not express any emotions, or emotions towards other men as they could be labelled as "gay" (Franklin 121). Lewis claims that it is the fear that they will be labelled "gay" that prevents them from making any (emotional) relationship with males (121).

On the contrary, if a woman shows signs of male characteristics and predispositions – physical (she has strength, muscular body) or inner characteristics (ambitious, dominant, self-confident, unemotional) or, for instance, she has a different/opposite/inappropriate style of clothing, she is automatically considered a tomboy, a homosexual, or a woman that does not fit in the "group" of other "normal" women.

The Western world nowadays is very open in questions and attitudes toward gender perception, identities and gender and sexual expression of each person. Despite efforts from various societies, cultural and literary groups, academic fields, and other groups to eliminate gender-based prejudices and associated gender roles, some communities around the world still uphold traditional norms and values and do not support this idea of destroying traditional concepts.

In some countries, however, those who deviate from or reject traditional (and mostly also religious) values and stereotypes, which are based on gender differences, are still considered inferior minorities who are not accepted by society and, in some cases, are severely punished.

As mentioned above, not only blindness but also gender and its branches, such as gender identities, roles and sexuality, have been attributed throughout history with various stereotypes, predominantly based on traditional social, cultural and social values. Since these aspects and elements did not fulfil stereotypical ideas and deviated from them in various ways, they were often considered abnormal, unnatural and unacceptable. Based on this, the human community began to understand them negatively, and thanks to this, the idea was established in society that blind people, or people outside of traditional society to a certain extent, are not considered human, and others must avoid and shun them.

These negative ideas prevailed in society for a long time, and changing their status, meaning, and understanding is challenging nowadays. Nonetheless, there are ways and different academic directions that fight against these prejudices and stereotypes and try to eliminate them in today's society and culture.

2. Gender and Blindness in "The Blind Man" by D. H. Lawrence

David Herbert Lawrence was a well known English novelist, poet, essayist and critic writer. He is considered a significant figure of twentieth century literature as he depicts the themes of psychological complexity of human sexuality, human relationships or social expectations. He is very appreciated, even for his specifically descriptive and poetic language, however as he focuses on (in the time) controversial topics, he is also a subject of critics. As Mullen "states Lawrence betrays no moral, aesthetic, or intellectual timidity at experiencing the unknown or the forbidden. From his iconoclastic attack on sexual conventions in to his fictional probes into the human psyche, he insists on leveling conventions, overturning expectations, unsettling complacency" (69). His most famous works include *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), *Sons and Lovers* (1913) or *The Rainbow* (1915).

"The Blind Man" is a short story published in the collection *England, My England* in 1922. The story depicts the life of Maurice, a blind man, and his wife Isabel. The theme of blindness is central in "The Blind Man" as it introduces and describes the life of a person with visual disability.

Maurice Pervin, also referred to as the blind man, is the central and crucial figure of the story. At the very beginning of the story, the reader can get a clear description of Maurice. He is presented immediately after his wife, and one of his features primarily emphasised is that he is "totally blind" (Lawrence 55). The cause of his blindness is not precisely stated, but when the author mentions he "had been blinded in Flanders, and who had a disfiguring mark on his brow" (Lawrence 55), the reader might conclude that he may have lost his sight in the Battle of Flanders, which was a part of First World War.

Suffering a war injury can leave not only physical but also psychological marks on a person. Blindness can be a notable intervention in an individual's life. In the case of Maurice, he undergoes a very crucial change. However, it does not limit him in his daily activities or activities he was used to doing before the injury. Blindness affected him more psychologically and caused an important transformation in his perception of himself and in how he is perceived by the people around him, especially his wife.

In the case of blindness, it is impossible to resist certain stereotypes attributed to blind people.

As David Bolt mentions, the social role of men is to be starers (observing women), and a sight confirms this gender stereotype. Therefore blind men, or men with any visual impairment, are emasculated by the inability to look at others (52). "Man's social role is starer, women's social role is staree; looking masculinizes, being looked at feminizes; and we all internalize and identify with the requirements of the system" (Garland-Thomson 146). Bolt adds that blindness affecting men can cause identity crises and that the emotions they are experiencing can lead to questioning their existential aspects. Also, "the profound and powerful emotions unleashed by visual impairment bring some men face to face with aspects of themselves that they have previously deemed too feminine and wished to develop, perceiving, as they do, that masculinity can no longer be easily expressed" (Bolt 52).

Considering the point of view of "starer" and "staree", Maurice could be considered emasculated because of his visual impairment. Bolt adds that the eye injury resulting in blindness is also closely associated with male castration and, therefore, inability to reproduce and sexual intercourse and has been a significant part of the metanarrative of blindness. The relationship between blindness and castration is based on the concept of the eye. According to Sandor Ferenczi's studies, the eyes symbolise a male sexual organ (273). For this connection, Bolt uses the term phallocentrism and indicates that this similarity is the basis of man's virility and reproductive force (55).

The claim that a man who is blind or loses sight must necessarily be incapable of sexual activity or reproduction seems harsh. However, it cannot apply to every man suffering from this condition.

Maurice breaks down these prejudices very effectively. Even though he lost his eyes in the war battle and has a "disfiguring mark on his brow" (Lawrence 55), he does not suffer the lack of reproductive force. His wife expecting a baby is living proof. The author suggests that his verility is the same as before the injury. "But now, in a few weeks' time, her second baby would be born. The first had died, an infant, when her husband first went out to France" (Lawrence 56). The reason why Lawrence mentions this fact might explain that Maurice's leaving to war is a trigger of negative events that happens to both of him and his wife Isabel

or can suggest that Isabel is not able to take care of the child. However, there is no mention of the cause of death of the infant, so the first option is more likely to be applied.

Another deep-rooted stereotype occurring in literature and in the narratives of blindness is the groping blind figure construct. According to Bolt, it is an understanding of the blind person as tragically helpless (77). The naming of this construct is based on the depiction of a blind person orienting in space using haptic functions. "The verb grope is used to differentiate the gait of the blind from that of the sighted. The repeated suggestion in twentieth-century writing is that, rather than walking, people with visual impairments grope their way around" (Bolt 77). Bolt adds that at the discursive level, these people do not grope while walking; they are considered not walking at all (77). "In keying characters to the metanarrative of blindness, the grope may well signify disempowerment, may affect or indeed displace the assumed normal act of walking" (Bolt 77). To orientate in the space, Maurice uses, except hearing, also haptic functions, such as touch. A touch is a form of communication with the outside world for him. However, when exploring the space around him, he does not look nearly as a groping figure:

He walked erect, with face rather lifted, but with a curious tentative movement of his powerful, muscular legs. She could feel the clever, careful, strong contact of his feet with the earth, as she balanced against him. For a moment he was a tower of darkness to her, as if he rose out of the earth. In the house-passage he wavered, and went cautiously, with a curious look of silence about him as he felt for the bench. Then he sat down heavily. 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. She did not look at his blindness. (Lawrence 63)

From the description of Maurice's body posture and certainty of movements above, it is visible that he is the exact opposite of the construct of a groping blind figure. His posture is strong, powerful, stable, confident and anchored to the ground. The description does not quite fit the stereotype of blind person. Again, Maurice breaks stereotypes and shows that not all blind people have to stumble but can be confident in their walk, just like sighted people.

It is not only walking in which Maurice is the same as sighted people. He can do everyday activities on the farm without blindness affecting him.

Sightless, he could still discuss everything with Wernham, and he could also do a good deal of work about the place - menial work, it is true, but it gave him satisfaction. He milked the cows, carried in the pails, turned the separator, attended to the pigs and horses. Life was still very full and strangely serene for the blind man, peaceful with the almost incomprehensible peace of immediate contact in darkness. (Lawrence 55)

Maurice has to face many stereotypes, most of them being prejudices against blind people in general. However, the connection between castration and blindness can already be considered a gender stereotype. Up to this point, Maurice, as the main male character, has disproved rather than confirmed these prejudices, aiming to point out that blind people are no different from the sighted, can do the same things, share values, and should be equal. The story depicts certain prejudices that can apply to Maurice's behaviour and societal position.

Bolt, in *The Metanarrative of Blindness*, explains the problem of normate reductionism and nominal identity. General terms, or labels, are used instead of personal names to remove the character's subjectivity and consider it a representative of the general group. Usually, the substitute name is an adjective which is used for the description of the whole. Bolt also mentions that normate reductionism is common in the writing of the twentieth century (35). That is the case of the label blind man. "In such cases blindness is overtly posited as a key characteristic. Indeed, flying in the face of the person ... the problematic adjective blind is used as the primary component in the naming of several literary

characters" (Bolt 56). The consequence of using the available label instead of the personal name could be selfhood and personhood (Bolt 56).

This assumption is confirmed in the story's title, "The Blind Man". The expression blind man is used frequently in the story, such as in "the blind man stretched out a ... hand to him" (73), "the hand of the blind man grasped the shoulder ... of another man (73) or "yet, he was under the power of the blind man" (73). As Bolt claims, the usage of the expression blind man signifies the difference between the disabled and non-disabled characters, as it is apriori used as something negative and might have negative outcomes of the perception of blind people. The story's protagonist, Maurice Pervin, is referred to by name as well as by placeholder term. The use of the label, however, denotes a distance of the character from the others and confirms that despite Maurice's above-mentioned qualities, which put him in the position of human equal to sighted people, the blindness is still present and removes his value and ability to be seen differently and without preconceived stereotypes. Even though Maurice breaks certain stereotypes and traditional views on blind people, some prejudices persist, and it is hard to eliminate them entirely.

In the narrative of blindness, another commonly occurring theme is dehumanisation. According to Bolt, the majority of human society is not blind; therefore blind people are a rare occurrence in this society. He claims that people with and without visual impairment are antithetical. Therefore, the problem of representation, potentially based on this binary opposition, results in the fact that people with visual impairment are not considered people by the sighted. (84). "Humanity is obviously fundamental to people who have and people who do not have visual impairments alike, but the ocularnormative endeavor to construct a counterpoint for the sighted often results in dehumanizing depictions of the blind" (Bolt 84).

Bolt adds that the description of a person as an animal is also an example of dehumanisation, and it might contain a description based on the similarity of appearance. Animals, unlike humans, are not so meticulously cared for, and this difference in treatment can contribute to the comparison between animals and humans. In other words, according to the given stereotype, one should take care of oneself and always be well-groomed. If this is not the case, one may not be considered "human" but may be compared to gawkers, in the case of David Bolt, because they, too, cannot take care of themselves. That gives rise to the notion of being likened to animals, and in this way, man loses his human qualities and

dehumanises himself. Bolt depicts this in the ability to shave. A blind person (according to stereotypes applied to blind people) should not be able to shave himself because it is practically impossible if he cannot see himself in the mirror. In Maurice's case, however, it is different, as Maurice can shave himself without the help of others. David Bolt argues that shaving may be problematic, but visual impairment does not necessarily restrain a person's shaving ability (89). The case of Maurice, who has a beard and the capability to shave despite his blindness, might be seen as a symbol challenging and opposing traditional stereotypes and expectations against blind people (men). Lawrence mentions in the text that although Maurice can shave, he is very cautious when using the razor, to the point of being afraid. "He had to handle the razor very carefully, as he shaved, for it was not at one with him, he was afraid of it" (Lawrence 65).

This statement suggests that Maurice is not as self-conscious when shaving as when doing other activities and chores around the house. Maurice does not shave with such confidence as he does everyday activities. He is afraid of the razor; he respects it and knows he can hurt himself. Even though sighted men can also hurt themselves while not paying enough attention to shaving, this example might support the point that it is not in his domain to shave, and he is aware he can hurt himself. The reason for his ability to shave may also be that he does not want to be compared to animals because he cannot take care of himself and thus does not want to be dehumanised. Even though the dehumanization might be slightly questionable here, Bolt believes the "problem resides in the homogenizing assumption that, for men, a beard is a consequence of blindness" (Bolt 89). This assumption, however, may not be universally applied. Having a beard (and being able to care for it) may not be primarily the result of blindness. Beards are taken as one of the masculine markers of men. Even sighted men have beards and can take care of them. A beard does not make Maurice primarily a blind man. On the contrary, the fact that Maurice keeps his beard and takes care of it himself (to a certain extent) marks the fact that he opposes blindness being taken as a demasculinizing factor and thus supports the concept of masculinity.

Denying the fact blindness is an emasculating process or something that must be perceived negatively a priori also supports the way Maurice perceives his blindness. He does not regret being blinded. He perceives his blindness very naturally, positively, with calmness and excitement. It is a new part of him and has filled his life with new energy and, to some

extent, pleasure. Blindness seems to have enriched his life with a new experience, and he seems to be happy despite the injuries he suffered in the war that resulted in his blindness.

It was a pleasure to him to rock thus through a world of things, carried on the flood in a sort of blood-presence. He did not think much or trouble much. So long as he kept this sheer immediacy of blood contact with the substantial world, he was happy, he wanted no intervention of visual consciousness. 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. (Lawrence 64)

His new experience of blindness, of a world without sight, is also intimately connected to Marvin's sexuality, mainly through an inflow of new energy, passion and sexual desire for his wife. "The rich suffusion of this state generally kept him happy, reaching its culmination in the consuming passion for his wife" (Lawrence 64).

His wife Isabel, however, did not share his attitude towards blindness. Yes, they both considered their marriage happy and content. Maurice found his marriage joyful even after he returned from the war. He found his marriage to Isabel so fulfilling that he never hesitated or regretted losing sight. He had his wife to lean on and with her "had a whole world, rich and real and invisible" (Lawrence 55).

His wife Isabel, however, did not share his attitude towards blindness and marriage, seeing blindness as a tremendous harmful interference in their lives (and especially in hers). She could not bear the fact that her husband was blind; she could not accept it. Her husband's blindness burdened her; she could not bear it. She wanted her husband all to herself and often, almost compulsively, wanted the former spontaneous joy and cheerfulness between them. She felt she had to take care of her husband because he could not. Her lack of reconciliation and understanding of her blindness caused her to transfer all the negative emotions she felt about her husband's blindness to him. She wanted to escape the situation; she could not bear to be with her husband. Although he used to be her joy, he gradually became a burden. Isabel

is afraid of Maurice; what is more, she is afraid of his blindness and darkness, which blindness metaphorically represents. Just as blindness is metaphorically blunted by the stable that Maurice often goes to, Isabel dares not set foot in it herself because she is not ready to perceive and grasp this blindness/darkness herself.

Isabel's perception of her marriage changed, and it hurt Maurice. Isabel was his support system, and he was convinced he could do anything with her. However, he began to feel her dismissive attitude, either towards him or towards his blindness, which also began to affect his view of blindness, and he began to re-evaluate his feelings and perceptions. He also began to reassess his position as a suitable partner for Isabel. Maurice began to experience melancholic to depressed mood states, frustration, anger, rage, irritability and feelings that "his presence was unbearable for his wife" (Lawrence 56).

His emotions and inner feelings start to increase negatively. In his last chapters, Bolt confirms that people mourning and feeling differently after the loss of vision is very common in the metanarrative of blindness. Suicide thoughts also might occur while dealing with visual impairment; however, only in literary representations (112-114). According to Bolt, the cause of these feelings is the assumption that people with blindness or other visual impairments tend to long to see (113) because that is what society considers "normal". The failure of this desire may cause existential issues. Maurice's feelings worsen, however, not so much that he starts to think about suicide, not primarily because he would desire to see; Maurice's feelings are exacerbated more by his wife's perception of him.

To control or at least overcome these feelings, Maurice visits the stable to take care of the horses. He feels confident and protected there, in the darkness. He feels comfortable surrounded by horses, and horses feel comfortable with him around. "She could hear and feel her husband entering and invisibly passing among the horses near to her in darkness as they were actively intermingled" (Lawrence 62). As mentioned above, the connection with horses might suggest a comparison to an animal and, thus, a certain dehumanization. However, in this case, it is more of a defence mechanism for Maurice against his feelings and the world of sightedness.

Maurice experiences a great rush of emotions when his wife's friend Bertie arrives. However, during Isabel's conversation with Bertie, he feels excluded as a blind person in a conversation between two sighted individuals. Whether this exclusion is intentional or

unintentional is debatable, but it could be argued that his exclusion may be deliberate, as Isabel may invite Bertie to visit to escape the dull and isolated world of living with her blind husband. This exclusion, whether from society or the collective, would affect the feelings of even a sighted person to some extent. However, Maurice's experience is compounded by his awareness that his blindness may be the reason for his exclusion.

Pervin heard no more. But a childish sense of desolation had come over him, as he heard their brisk voices. He seemed shut out - like a child that is left out. He was aimless and excluded, he did not know what to do with himself. The helpless desolation came over him. He fumbled nervously as he dresses himself, in a state almost of childishness. He disliked the Scotch accent in Bertie's speech, and the slight response it found on Isabel's tongue. ... He was fretful and beside himself like a child, he had almost a childish nostalgia to be included in a life circle. And at the same time he was a man, dark and powerful and infuriated by his own weakness. By some fatal flaw, he could not be himself, he had to depend on the support of another. And this very dependence enraged him. He hated Bertie Reid, and at the same time he knew the hatred was nonsense, he knew it was the outcome of his own weakness. (Lawrence 65-66)

A comparison to a child may indicate the desire for attention or dependence on another person (as the child is dependent on the mother, Maurice should be dependent on his wife). This realisation might also be humiliating and degrading for a grown-up man, and the rage may come from this frustration. Rodas, however, is inclined to explain the rage and hatred that has seized Maurice against the world of the sighted and the world of light (125). "This is one of our perennial concerns when it comes to the blind. We suspect that the rage is always there; whether or not it is visible, the blind seem always to be nursing their anger. Even when it is dormant, that rage is lurking, ready to manifest itself" (Rhodas 127). On the other hand, Maurice, who can control his feelings (anger, frustration or weakness), advocates a masculine social role, namely that men should not show their inner emotions and weaknesses.

The dependence on the other person (as is mentioned in the excerpt above) is generally understood to be caused by blindness. On the other hand, can Maurice be understood as dependent on someone? In "The Blind Man", Maurice is not a priori portrayed as the character who is entirely dependent on the help of another person (in this case, his wife). He is portrayed as relatively independent - he does not need anyone's support or a cane to walk, he can shave himself (although he is cautious), he can dress himself, and he is still able to do farm work such as "milk the cows, carry in the pails, turn the separator, attend to the pigs and horses" (Lawrence 55).

This description does not fit the stereotypical idea of blind people, which claims that people who are blind are dependent on other people. Maurice is certainly not dependent on help and not on his wife's help.

As the traditional conception of marriage based on gender roles, stereotypes, and the patriarchal conception of society suggests, a woman is more likely to be dependent on a man than the other way around. The man takes the position of "the head of the family", is responsible for the financial status of the family and his wife and takes care of things around the house. The woman should be in the household, taking care of children, making sure that her husband is always "happy" and in principle, not interfering in the "men's business".

Gender roles in Isabel and Maurice's marriage seem to confirm this assumption. Isabel is the woman who is mostly at home and takes care of the household. Regarding childcare, it is mentioned in the text that while her husband was at war, she took care of their child until he died. (It is also important to note that the war was previously a source of financial income for the man, so it can be mentioned that Maurice could previously have been financially responsible for his family). On the other hand, Maurice does things on the farm and around the house, which also confirms the gendered division of social roles.

Unfortunately, the text does not say the couple's current primary income after Maurice has gone blind. However, since they live on the farm, it can be assumed that their earnings will be from farming or caring for the cattle. As for Isabel, it is mentioned in the text that she used to review books for the Scottish newspaper, so it can be assumed that she was also partly providing income for her family. However, since the text does not specify precisely the family's primary income, it can be taken as fact that both spouses contributed to the financial provision.

As far as not interfering with purely male and female roles in the traditional notion of marriage, Maurice and Isabel's relationship no longer corresponds to this. Lawrence mentions in the narrative that "he shared in Isabel's literary activities; she cultivated a real interest in agriculture and cattle-rustling" (Lawrence 58). Thus, it can be said in general that their marriage has specific prerequisites of gendered marital roles. However, it cannot be said unequivocally that Isabel held purely feminine roles and Maurice purely masculine roles. From a particular perspective, it is possible to conclude that the mixing of these gender roles may have occurred only after Maurice returned from the war (but this assertion is based on only a few details about their lives before Maurice's blindness - Isabel was taking care of the child and the household and Maurice was a soldier trying to provide financially for the family by going to war).

This situation can be looked at from different points of view. In the context of gender roles reversal, when Maurice became blind and unable to work, Isabel had to take charge of earning more money and started reviewing books. Traditionally, Maurice's lack of financial contribution could have emasculated him. However, in this case, it was due to his blindness. On the other hand, Isabel's financial provision for the family was considered emancipating as she had taken up the role of the provider, which was traditionally viewed as the husband's responsibility.

But if we look at the financial income of the spouses in a way that each contributes equally to their budget, the situation can also be viewed as emancipatory. Isabel's contribution is as important as Maurice's, and this breaks down the traditional and patriarchal notion of family and marriage. Importantly, this did not degrade Maurice or cause his emasculation or inability to provide for his family.

Popenoe claims in his study that "both wives and husbands would change during their time apart, but he clearly believed that women alone needed to anticipate making adjustments in the postwar years. Never a romantic, he also told wives they could in fact be disappointed with their husbands and with their married lives together" (63).

Many a marriage was wrecked after the war simply because neither husband nor wife had planned to meet these (personality) changes. ... Accustom yourself, in deadly earnest, that he won't seem so wonderful when he returns as he did when he

went away. Makeup your mind that he will come back less than you expected, but in the meanwhile you will make every effort to greet him with more than he expected. (Popenoe 24)

Cellelo contradicts this assumption and claims that the woman is responsible for a marriage that was in some way affected by the war or the departure of a man to war. "This idea that anticipating and coping with postwar disappointment in their marriages was women's work became a common refrain in wartime marriage discourse" (Celello 63). Therefore, Isabel's position as a "leading" partner of the marriage does not have to be affected only by her husband's blindness but also by different (even physical) expectations of him while returning from the war.

Isabel's and Maurice's relationship has undoubtedly changed, after Maurice has returned from the war. Maurice has retreated into himself to cope with his blindness, and Isabel is burdened with fear and doubt about her future with her blind husband.

As Clauson confirms in "Practicing Deconstruction, Again", Isabel's and Maurice's marriage is not ideal, and is negatively influenced by Maurice's blindness (117).

In fact, it is Isabel's awareness that Maurice's retreat into his dark world is not good for him or for their marriage that leads her (Isabel) to hope for a friendship between her cousin and her husband. Finally, it is not marriage that has transformed Maurice but his blindness, and the price of this transformation has been estrangement from his wife. (Clauson 117)

Their stereotypical and unfulfilling cohabitation is disrupted by the visit of Bernie, a long-life friend and "a second or third cousin" (Lawrence 57). Bertie, seems to be the exact opposite of Maurice, the distraction Isabel (and plausibly her whole marriage) needs. Bertie is "a barrister and a man of letters, a Scotchman of the intellectual type, quick, ironical, sentimental, and on his knees before the woman he adored but did not want to marry" (Lawrence 57). Maurice Pervin, on the other hand, is described as "different".

He came of a good old country family – the Grange was not a very great distance from Oxford. He was passionate, sensitive, perhaps over-sensitive, wincing – a big

fellow with heavy limbs and a forehead that flushed painfully. For his mind was slow, as if drugged by the strong provincial blood that beat in his veins. He was very sensitive to his own mental slowness, his feelings being quick and acute. So that he was the opposite of Bertie, whose mind was much quicker than his emotions. (Lawrence 57)

Lawrence uses this description to contrast the two men based on their characteristics and their backgrounds.

The qualities assigned to Maurice may not be considered primarily masculine-related. The (over)sensitivity and "mental slowness" (Lawrence 57) is not something that would be conventionally chosen to describe "normal heterosexual man".

Even though Maurice is described as having physical masculine qualities, the description of personal qualities might feel less masculine. According to this description,

Table 1
Stereotypic Traits

| Male-Valued Traits | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Aggressive | Feelings not easily hurt |
| Independent | Adventurous |
| Unemotional | Makes decisions easily |
| Hides emotions | Never cries |
| Objective | Acts as a leader |
| Easily influenced | Self-confident |
| Dominant | Not uncomfortable about being aggressive |
| Likes math and science | Ambitious |
| Not excitable in a minor crisis | Able to separate feelings from ideas |
| Active | Not dependent |
| Competitive | Not conceited about appearance |
| Logical | Thinks men are superior to women |
| Worldly | Talks freely about sex with men |
| Skilled in business | |
| Direct | |
| Knows the way of the world | |
| Female-Valued Traits | |
| Avoids harsh language | Interested in own appearance |
| Talkative | Neat in habits |
| Tactful | Quiet |
| Gentle | Strong need for security |
| Aware of feelings of others | Appreciates art and literature |
| Religious | Expresses tender feelings |

TABLE 1

Maurice might be seen as emasculated compared to Bertie. Bertie has better qualities, more fitting to an intellectual man, when his qualities are portrayed more positively than Maurice's. According to the stereotypical gender-divided view, the qualities described as "passionate, sensitive, over-sensitive, being quick and acute" (Lawrence 57) could be considered feminine and therefore attributed preferentially to women. Nevertheless, let us look at Franklin's chart of stereotypic traits (Table 1) presented in the theory chapter (5). It shows the male and female valued traits used to identify sex-based (masculine and feminine) qualities in society.

The male-valued traits that can be assigned to Maurice are aggressive (when discussing the anger and rage of his frustration from blindness or perception of others), independent (previously discussed that as a blind person, he is not dependent on the help of anyone), active (while considering that the work at the farm is considered an active lifestyle), skilled in business (considering that the farm work is understood as "business" because Maurice knows how to treat the animals on the farm), or knowing the way of the world.

On the other hand, Maurice possesses some of the female-valued traits, such as being gentle (Isabel describes him as sensitive and passionate), expressing tender feelings (again, based on Isabel's description, and being aware of the feelings of others (in connection to being sensitive).

Female-valued traits assigned to Bertie could be that he appreciates art and literature (Bertie is described as a man of letters) and expresses tender feelings (based on his sentimentality). From the male-valued traits, the quality that would fit the best is that he is direct (when Isabel says Bertie's mind is faster than emotions, which can be considered direct).

However, it is impossible to determine who would be more or less masculine based on these traits. It can be inferred that neither Bertie nor Maurice possess purely male-valued traits, but female-valued traits are also present. This observation can be seen as a partial shift in breaking down stereotypical ideas about men because men should be able to display traits attributed to women (such as interest in literature and art or displaying emotions) just as women should be able to display traits that are primarily attributed to men (such as being independent or successful).

It is necessary to consider a critical aspect of the narratology in the story "The Blind Man". The description of Maurice and Bertie's qualities is presented through an omniscient

narrator. However, this paragraph is placed in the middle of Isabel's thoughts and feelings. It may suggest that the description of their qualities is influenced by Isabel's attitude towards both men, assuming that the description is mediated through Isabel's character. If this is the case, describing their qualities cannot be considered objective. It would be a subjective description based on Isabel's judgement and opinions. This could put Maurice at a disadvantage as Isabel's negative view of his blindness might make her see him as "less" than Bertie.

Based on Maurice's and Bertie's description of qualities previously mentioned, it is difficult to say that one is more masculine than the other, considering that the description can be subjective and masculinity has no strictly determined specifications by which it could be defined. As Kimmel mentions, masculinity "refers to social roles" (94); therefore, are there any gendered social roles acquired by Maurice and Bertie through which masculinity could be explained? According to Clyde W. Franklin, II., "masculinity for a particular male also is determined by whether he is perceived to enact "masculine" gender roles" (130).

Defining masculinity, however, is very difficult, as it is not a permanent set of qualities, rather than an acquired pattern of behaviour and assigning oneself to certain, socially constructed social roles. Masculinity is volatile, fluid and can be changed during times.

Darrity explains that masculinity is not a constant and universal essence all men share. This is because masculinity is dependent on gender, and since gender varies greatly, it is different across cultures within men and women; masculinity cannot be considered constant and easily generalized. Gender needs to be seen as a fluid, ever-changing set of meanings and behaviours, and on this basis, there is a need to refer to masculinities in the plural. By referring to masculinities in the plural, we achieve an acceptance that masculinity can mean different things to different people at different times (2).

Kimmel argues that masculinity refers to the social roles, behaviours, and meanings ascribed to men at a particular time. Thus, he emphasizes gender, not biological sex, and affirms that different identities exist among different men. He also adds that since gender is seen as an internal component of identity, masculinity is, to some extent, constructed within social institutions and everyday interactions (94).

Franklin's book *The Changing Definition of Masculinity* introduces four male social roles "assumed by most males in America at some point in their lives: married male, father, male friend and male worker" (130). These social roles are considered stereotypical gender roles of "modern man". Even though the research was made in the USA, on the men of the USA, it can be generally applicable, as it portrays stereotypical social roles assigned to men.

In his argument, Franklin contends that men are automatically assigned a higher status and responsibility in marriage by their social roles. According to this view, married men are expected to be the head of the household and take on the primary roles of breadwinner and decision-maker. This leads to better social status, advantages in earning money, and greater social power. Conversely, women have traditionally been relegated to the minority roles of childcare and minor decision-making (Franklin 107,112).

Regarding the father's role, it is not necessary to discuss this topic in the case of Maurice and Isabel, as they do not have any children. Even though Isabel mentions her pregnancy and looks forward to bringing up the baby, there is no mention of the care taken from Maurice's side. Only Isabel's deep concerns about whether he will be a great father persist.

Bertie is not committed to these gender roles (married male and father). He is described as someone who "did not want to marry" (Lawrence 57). His attitude towards the marriage (and generally towards the women) is presented as unwanted and relatively avoidable. "And he had his friends among the fair sex - not lovers, friends. So long as he could avoid any danger of courtship or marriage, he adored a few good women with constant and unflinching homage, and he was chivalrously fond of quite a number. But if they seemed to encroach on him, he withdrew and detested them" (Lawrence 68). Both Maurice and Bertie fail to obtain these social and gender roles - Maurice on account of his blindness and Bertie intentionally, by his own decision or, presumably, his sexuality.

In describing the kinds of male friendships and their essential features, Franklin claims that emotionally expressive friendships thrive on cooperation, sharing, and encouraging behaviours. However, society sets restrictions on male friendships, which can make it challenging for men to develop close ties with each other. Even though most men understand the importance of being emotionally expressive with their friends, they often lack the spontaneity, warmth, and emotional closeness that define the concept of a "friend" due to

their socialization into masculinity. He adds that heterosexual men who enter into friendships with other men may constantly ask themselves whether they should be emotionally close or not. This is because male socialization creates deep-rooted beliefs that men should not be emotionally intimate with other men, and that doing so would decrease their masculinity.

These restrictions can make it difficult for men to establish genuine friendships that are emotionally fulfilling. It is important to recognize and challenge these opinions to enable more meaningful connections between men (120).

Lewis explains that men in our culture are assumed stereotypes when men are portrayed as "stoic and unemotional", and they fear making emotionally expressive and intimate friendships in order to avoid (their sexual identities) being labelled as "gay" (114).

Franklin adds that the fear of making intimate and expressive friendships is probably based on the cultural norms against homosexuality and the inability of society to distinguish between sensuality and sexuality (121). "As a result, men are likely to feel that in order to present a masculine identity they must not reveal their weaknesses. Often this means that males maintain "fronts" of toughness, confidence and independence" (Franklin 121).

In the stable, Bertie and Maurice's prejudices are revealed. Maurice, who is blind, explores the world and people around him through touch, which is a new way for him to perceive his surroundings. Maurice wants to befriend Bertie and get to know him better, either out of his own will or because his wife wants them to be friends. For Maurice, it is crucial to first get to know people through touch to be able to establish a friendship with them. Likewise, he tries to persuade Bertie to touch him so that he can know him better.

Nevertheless, Bertie treats touch as an intimate affair. He is distraught when Maurice touches him when they meet in the stable together. It makes him uncomfortable. Does he dislike Maurice's touch because he is afraid to show emotion or when touching another man? Is he afraid to show these emotions because his actual sexual orientation would be "revealed", or he would be found to like being touched by another man? Or is this the moment when he becomes aware of his own identity and associated sexuality? Is he afraid of being different from heterosexual men and being judged by society for it? Is he able to accept that he may be homosexual? (This assumption is based on Isabel's description of Bertie when she mentions that she does not want to get married). Why else would he be so bothered by Maurice touching him when he knows there is nothing romantic behind it in the first place?

"Do you mind if I touch you?" The lawyer shrank away instinctively. And yet, out of very philanthropy, he said, in the 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. ... "So do your hands. Touch my eyes, will you? – touch my scar." Now Bertie quivered with revulsion. Yet he was under the power of blind man, as hypnotized. He lifted his hand, and laid the fingers on the scar, on the scarred eyes. Maurice suddenly covered them with his own hand, pressed the fingers of the other man upon his disfigured eye-sockets trembling in every fibre, and rocking slightly, slowly, from side to side. He remained thus for a minute or more, whilst Bertie stood as if in swoon, unconscious, imprisoned. Then suddenly Maurice removed the hand of the other man from his brow, and stood holding it in his own. "Oh, my God," he said, "we shall know each other now, shan't we? We shall know each other now". (Lawrence 73,74)

Touch is for Maurice a crucial instrument in learning about the world around him. Maurice recognizes things and people around him the way all blind people do - with his hands. It is his way of communication and he expects Bertie to communicate back the same ways he does, when he asks him to touch his scarred eyes. Touch is a basic sense Maurice uses everyday. Touching each other's hands is also a very important moment of intimacy. Not in a sense of sexual intimacy, but rather sensual, emotional. However, for Bertie, touching another man is something unimaginable. He has never experienced something like this before and he is really concerned. "Bertie could not answer. He gazed mute and terror-struck, overcome by his own weakness. He knew he could not answer. He had an unreasonable fear, lest the other man should suddenly destroy him" (Lawrence 74).

Maurice evaluates the situation positively because he is sure that he has made friends with Bertie, but for Bertie it is a very overwhelming experience. Bertie experiences an identity crisis. As mentioned above, men should not establish emotional and (intimate) relationships with other men. Touch, is, however, also for blind people very personal, intimate and also the result of emotional expression. Bertie is not comfortable with that. He

is trying to understand internally that another man has touched him. It's not just any man, this man is blind. For Bertie, this can be even more humiliating because he probably sees Bertie not as an equal but as a man with a disability. This may explain why Bertie is so concerned. He is afraid of him, he does not know what to say. Maurice has shown him his own world, a world full of touch, and Bertie has been completely shattered by it. This situation can also be described as a crisis of stereotypical masculinity. In terms of realizing and probably accepting values and emotions that Bertie had not experienced before, moreover, they were triggered by another man.

While both men are somehow excluded from society, or do not conform to socially set gender stereotypes, Bertie still feels superior to Maurice because he is not blind. In doing so, he unwittingly set up a hierarchical ladder in which he automatically occupied a higher position than Maurice because he saw Maurice as disabled. After this close contact, this idea collapsed and Bertie had to reconsider these values. He was touched by a blind man. That is worse than any man touching him.

Having a blind man in his hands, in his power, relegated Bertie to a lower hierarchical place and Bertie has a hard time dealing with this and experiences a crisis of identity and his masculine awareness. He feels used by the power of the blind man's touch, which may cause Bertie to be unable to understand his masculine disposition and probably feel that his masculinity has been taken from him by the power of the blind man.

While Bertie is going through an indescribable and, for him, incomprehensible life experience, Maurice is happy that he and Bertie are finally friends and expects Isabel to be happy with him. However, Isabel does not seem to share Maurice's joy but sympathises with Bertie.

"She was watching Bertie. She knew that he had one desire to escape from this intimacy, this friendship, which had been thrust upon him. He could not bear it that he had been touched by the blind man, his insane reserve broken in. He was like a mollusc whose shell is broken" (Lawrence 75).

It is evident that blindness is perceived, primarily by Bertie, as something unnatural, something unknown to him. Can we say that he would react in the same way if a man who is not blind were to touch him? Probably yes. What is essential in this case is not only how blindness affects the one who suffers from it but also how it affects people in society and

how others perceive it. Blindness is pervasive in the story. However, the perception of blindness varies and is reflected through the characters' behaviour. Interestingly, it is not perceived the same in all cases in the story.

In the story, blindness is a pervasive theme that affects different characters in different ways. Bertie, for example, is deeply affected by the metaphorical blindness caused by his encounter with Maurice, a blind man. This experience causes an identity crisis for Bertie, including questions about his sexual identity and orientation. Isabel, Bertie's wife, is also negatively affected by blindness, as she feels she must care for Maurice and experiences negative emotions towards him. However, blindness has also helped Isabel overcome certain gender stereotypes in her marriage.

For Maurice, who is actually blind, blindness is a new experience, but he has learned to live with it and has created his own world. It does not affect him much in his daily activities, and he is still able to maintain his masculinity and self-determination. In fact, his positive experience with blindness helps to break down stereotypes against blind people and gender stereotypes applied to men, especially to blind men. Overall, the story shows how blindness not only affects the individual who suffers from it but also how it affects people in society and how others perceive it.

3. Gender and Blindness in "Torching the Dusties" by Margaret Atwood

Margaret Atwood is a Canadian writer, poet and essayist, currently considered an influential and prominent figure in contemporary literature and culture. Her works usually focus on themes of feminism, gender and identity, environmental issues and climate change, politics, religion or dystopia. She was awarded many literary prizes for her writing, including two Booker Prizes, Arthur C. Clarke Award and Franz Kafka's Prize. Her best-known works include *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Blind Assassin*, *Oryx and Crake* or *The Testaments*. In 2014 she published a collection of short fiction stories, *The Stone Mattress*, including the tale "Torching the Dusties".

"Torching the Dusties" is a dystopian story that captures the generation gap and the resulting problems of the young and old generations, and is also the last of the stories in *The Stone Mattress* collection. The story captures two days in the life of the main protagonist Wilma and her friend Tobias, who are elderly residents in the retirement home Ambrosia Manor. Wilma has Charles Bonnet Syndrome, a visual impairment condition, which puts her at a disadvantage in everyday life activities. Suddenly, her life in the retirement home is threatened by a group of young protesters supporting the "Our Turn" movement, an anti-elderly movement aiming to burn the retirement houses down and kill the elderly to make space for younger generations.

Blindness in "Torching the Dusties" is one of the themes commonly appearing throughout the story, described from numerous perspectives.

First, there is a need to explain the meaning and semantic connotation of the term "blindness". Julia Miele Rhodas addresses the issue of understanding the term in her work "On Blindness". She claims that blindness, usually understood as "the total absence of light perception or visual sensation" (118), is, in fact, very rare and affects "only about 10% of those designated as legally blind" (118). She explains blindness not as a sudden change in condition but as a gradual process of loss of vision. "Rather, sighted people usually enter into blindness slowly – a process of becoming. Loss of vision is gradual, taking place over the course of years, even decades" (119).

Rodas mentions that blindness is a much broader concept than is perceived and describes the so-called diversity of blindness or the range of the blind experience. This range includes everything that compromises sight and causes "other ways of not seeing" (118).

According to Rodas, this range may include colourblindness, fuzziness or mistiness of vision (especially affecting pregnant women), cataracts, glaucoma, Macular Degeneration (MD) or Retinitis Pigmentosa ¹ (RP). However, not all visual impairments can be considered a variant of blindness:

The most prevalent varieties, the near-sightedness or far-sightedness that comes naturally with age, the commonest astigmatism of the glasses-wearing public, these count not at all. If one's vision is correctable to within the average range (i.e., 20-20), one is not ordinarily considered blind at all, even though the same deficiency at another time or in another place (without the ready availability of prosthetic or surgical invention) might be seriously disabling. (Rodas 118)

The previously mentioned examples included in the spectrum of blindness Rodas calls "the sighted blindness". She claims visual impairments can fade, mist or alter (119). "This reality, this continuum of seeing and not seeing, this diversity of blindnesses, obscures the imagined boundary between blind and sighted, confounding our abstract sense of blindness as an absolute (119).

The protagonist of "Torching the Dusties", Wilma, suffers from Charles Bonnet Syndrome (CBS) which is a symptom of macular degeneration. Macular degeneration, also referred to as age-related macular degeneration (AMD), is according to the National Eye Institute, an eye disease that blurs central vision when ageing damages the eye macula (which is a part of retina). As a result, AMD stands out as a primary factor contributing to visual impairment in the elderly population (Age-related Macular Degeneration (AMD). Loss of vision due to macular degeneration usually leads to possible hallucinations or the aforementioned Charles Bonnet Syndrome. Steadman's Medical Dictionary defines Charles Bonnet Syndrome as: "complex visual hallucinations without attendant psychological abnormality; more common in old people with vision problems" (1892).

Charles Bonnet syndrome occurs predominantly in elderly, visually impaired people. Around 11%–15% experience complex visual hallucinations, whereas a significantly greater number, between 41%–59%, experience elementary visual phenomena. Such individuals do not have psychological or cognitive problems, and in my experience, despite recognising that their visions are not real they often believe this is the first sign of imminent insanity, something regrettably often reinforced by their medical practitioners who are unaware of the syndrome. Explaining to them that their hallucinations are normal and related to their visual impairment elicits palpable relief. (Kennard 434)

FFitche claims that "visual hallucinations occur across the entire spectrum of eye diseases, from those affecting the transmission of light into the eye (cataract, corneal scarring), to those affecting the retina itself" (172).

Hallucinations can have various forms and occurrences. Reichert, Series and Storkey describe them as "very complex with vivid, life-like, and elaborate imagery of objects, people, animals, or entire visual scenes" (1). FFitche describes two types of hallucinations, according to the kinds of syndrome. The first type of hallucination (connected with prototypical disorder macular disease) "is taken from a palette consisting of simple unformed lines, dots, colors and flashes, grid patterns and lattices, distorted faces (grotesque or gargoyle-like), unfamiliar figures in bizarre costume (often wearing elaborate hats), and extended landscape scenes. Not all these hallucination contents are experienced by a given patient and different content may occur at different times" (174). The second type of hallucinations (prototypical disorder Parkinson's disease) "is taken from a palette that does not contain the simple unformed lines, dots, colors and flashes, grid patterns and lattices, but consists instead of isolated animals and figures (often familiar and without the bizarre costumes and hats of the first syndrome), extracampine hallucinations, and multimodality hallucinations" (174).

Wilma's hallucinations are very similar to these descriptions. She sees little folk people, wearing colourful theatrical costumes and little hats, smiling and dancing on the furniture around her. The story begins with a detailed description of these little people:

The little people are climbing up the nightstand. Today they're wearing green: the women in pannier overskirts, broad-brimmed velvet hats, and square-cut bodices shimmering with beads, the men in satin knickerboxers and buckled shoes, with bunches of ribbons fluttering from their shoulders and outsized bird plumes decorated their tri-cons. They have no respect for historical accuracy, these people. It's as if some bored theatrical costume designer got drunk behind the scenes and raided the storage boxes: an early Tudor neckline here, a gondolier's jacket there, a Harlequin outfit over there. Wilma has to admire the splapdash abandon. (Atwood 241)

Wilma knows her condition and realises these people are not real. At the beginning of the story, she tries to understand and identify the origin of her eye damage and attributes it to her carelessness. She believes her current condition results from inadequate eye protection in her youth. "Too much golf without sunglasses, and then there was the sailing - you get a double dose of the rays from the reflection off the water - but who knew anything then? The sun was supposed to be good for you" (Atwood 245). However, as pointed out earlier, hallucinations are a consequence of macular degeneration, a condition inherently associated with ageing. Therefore, it cannot be said that the lack of eye protection was the direct cause of the loss of sight and the development of Charles Bonnet Syndrome.

Kennard claims that the cause of Charles Bonnet Syndrome "remains uncertain" (434). Hallucinations may occur as a symptom of macular degeneration, but this may not necessarily be the rule. Nor is it a rule that if hallucinations occur, they must always be associated with CBS. However, this does not contradict the fact that people with macular degeneration lose their sight, whether slowly or rapidly, and are thus labelled blind because they cannot fully see.

Wilma's condition is described as not that serious, suggesting she can still see a little bit. "From the corners of her eyes she can still get a working impression, though the central void in her field of vision is expanding, as she's been told it would" (Atwood 245).

The diagnosis makes Wilma feel less inferior when she recognizes she is different. She realises her disability. "Macular degeneration. Macular sounds so immoral, the opposite of immaculate. "I'm a degenerate," she used to quip right after she'd received the diagnosis. So many brave jokes, once" (Atwood 245).

The eye damage and vision loss caused by macular degeneration are irreversible and cannot be cured. Of course, if the diagnosis is discovered early, it is possible to reduce the symptoms, such as taking vitamins or changing the lifestyle. Nevertheless, it is not possible to fully restore the state of vision (Age-related Macular Degeneration (AMD)).

The same can be said of hallucinations in the case of Charles Bonnet Syndrome. Research by Cox and Ffitch shows that 75% of respondents have hallucinations lasting five years or more. However, these results contradict previous findings and research where, for example, Jackson's and Bassett's study showed that after one year of CBS, 28% of respondents are cured of CBS hallucinations (1303-4), and Holroyd's and Rabins' study showed that CBS hallucinations last an average of 18-23 months (188-9). However, Ffitch and Cox argue that these surveys and studies did not consider participants with longer CBS durations and did not record previous CBS persistence. Thus, this study demonstrates that CBS hallucinations have a much longer duration than earlier estimates and eliminates the fact that CBS hallucinations are a transient condition. This survey also states the fact that the hallucinations have a short duration (they last minutes or seconds) and can occur regularly (daily, weekly, monthly) rather than constantly (only 13% of respondents) (1236-9).

A person suffering from CBS cannot in any way interact with these hallucinations, nor can the hallucinations interact with one.

The inability to communicate with hallucinations is confirmed by Wilma's doctor, Dr. Prasad. He says the hallucinations - the little people Wilma sees - are primarily benign and rarely change shape, size, or dissolve before her eyes. They can occasionally be in different moods, angry or sullen. But these moods do not concern Wilma because they do not perceive her. Wilma cannot talk to them, even though she would like to. She would also like the little people to talk to her sometimes.

One can certainly be affected by visual impairment in perceiving things, orientation or everyday activities. Wilma is no exception. As it is prevalent for people with kinds of visual impairments or certain stages of blindness, the use and improvement of the other senses is very crucial – especially hearing, smelling and haptics.

It is not that Wilma is completely helpless and dependent on the help of another person. Of course, her loss of the vision is not allowing her to do things as she used to. However, Wilma has adapted to her condition and simplified her life with vision loss and

hallucinations. She has exchanged the sight for use of the touch, hearing and smell to get to know the surroundings, the position of things or to orient herself in space. She also remembers the position of things and furniture from before she lost her sight, which helps her orient herself better in space.

She uses her touch to locate things – searching for the slippers by her toes or locating her radio on the counter. She also remembers how to get to the bathroom, and it is easy for her to recognise the bathroom space, as she remembers the layout of things in there from times she still had a sight. She can identify people by smell, as she always sniffs the air. She recognises her friend Tobias like this (she can smell his aftershave), as all she can see is a blob instead of his figure. Wilma realises that her other senses have become stronger and sharper. That is a widespread change in the orientation of blind people.

Wilma also uses better-fitted things. As she cannot fully see, she is no longer able to fasten buttons and zippers on her clothes because they are too small. So, she has Velcro instead, allowing her to get dressed easily. Even the small radio Wilma uses is adapted for people with poor eyesight. It has only two buttons to switch off and on and to tune in stations, and it is easier to grip thanks to its ergonomic shape and bright colour.

Tobias, her Ambrosia Manor friend, is also a great help. He usually guides her while walking together or describes what is happening around to extend her knowledge of the surroundings, as Wilma cannot fully perceive the world around her. However, Wilma does not seem comfortable in these situations because she does not want to be dependent on anyone. Likewise, she does not trust Tobias to tell her everything exactly as it happens around her. "It's at times like this that her disability is most discouraging to her. She'd rather see for herself; she doesn't trust Tobias to interpret; she suspects him of holding things back. Protecting her, he'd call it. But she doesn't want to be protected" (Atwood 252). This example suggests the tendency of independence to show that she can live and enjoy life regardless of her disability and without dependency on men, even though she is visually impaired and needs help.

Wilma's vision impairment also disables her from expressing her femininity. In other words, losing the vision causes her not to "take care" of herself, which she considers a crucial part of being a woman, and she feels that she is losing it, losing the part of her feminine identity.

The term feminine identity is often associated with traditional stereotypes attributed to women, such as being well-groomed and wearing makeup. These expectations are closely linked to the stereotypical ideal of beauty, where young, thin women who wear lipstick and mascara are considered beautiful, and those who don't meet these requirements are not. However, the need to care for oneself or be beautiful is not always related to the need to please men. Women's beauty gives them confidence and can be part of their identity and self-perception. Some women feel confident with lipstick on their lips, beautifully groomed hair, or without any grooming or makeup at all. Simply looking at oneself can give women confidence, and the view and perception of one's body are an integral part of their identity.

However, if someone is denied the opportunity to view themselves, it can negatively affect their perception of self and identity. This is demonstrated by the example of Wilma's morning preparations. Her loss of sight has dramatically affected her perception of herself. She relies on Sasha, the hairdresser at Ambrosia Manor, to keep her trimmed because she cannot do it herself. But the most challenging thing for Wilma is that she cannot see her face in the mirror. She cannot distinguish the details of her face and describes it as "one of those face-shaped blanks that once appeared on Internet accounts when you hadn't added your picture" (Atwood 246). She would like to put on eyebrows, mascara or lipstick, but because she cannot see herself, it is not possible. She wants to try but is afraid of looking like a clown. Her concern is not that others would judge her for putting on makeup wrong, but that she would feel bad about herself. Her vision loss prevents her from being herself as she used to be, and this experience might make her feel inferior and lead to a loss of self-confidence.

As already mentioned, CBS is a consequence of age-related degeneration of the eye; it is not so common and differs from, for example, long-sightedness, which can be considered very usual in old age. Wilma realises that she is not only indisposed by CBS and loss of the vision but also by increasing age. She observes that her body is changing and that she cannot control it or care for it she used to. The question is to what extent and why she is trying to simplify her life. As is common knowledge, older people can no longer do certain things regardless of how good their eyesight is. It is common knowledge among older adults that their sight, hearing and mobility deteriorate, so they (or their relatives) buy things that will alleviate these difficulties associated with age. These things are, for example, various holders,

magnifiers, hearing aids, and mobile phones with a limited number of buttons and functions. The elderly use these aids to facilitate movement and daily activities.

In the case of Wilma, her desire for the greatest possible facilitation of daily life, which causes (prevents) her not to ask for help, rather stems from the fear that she will be moved to another part of the retirement home (*Advanced Life*), which, as she describes herself, is only waiting for death. She does not want the other staff to think that her vision loss has made her so indisposed that she can no longer care for herself. That is the reason why Wilma tries to handle as many things as possible on her own, to avoid being seen as an old, incompetent person, and to prove that despite her disability, she is still independent and just as capable of doing things as she was before the sight loss.

The fear of being seen as an incompetent older woman before death seems to have disabled her far more than her visual impairment. And this disability is mainly the view of oneself and the perception of oneself. The feeling of being dependent on someone when she has been independent all her life, the reduced opinion of her beauty (as mentioned earlier). She also doesn't have as wide a range of options as she used to, not only because of her eyesight but because of her age and because she relies on living only at *Ambrosia Manor*. Overall, it is more of a self-awareness and realisation that the life she is currently living is not likely to get any better and that she will probably end up like the other people at *Ambrosia Manor*.

Blindness is indeed one of the themes underlying this story. It is not only a physical blindness (or visual impairment) but rather a metaphorical blindness connected to other crucial themes. Julia Miele Rodas discusses the possibilities of the semantic meaning of the term blindness. As previously mentioned, the first meaning, the meaning and definition of blindness, is a term related to visual impairment or the loss of sight. The other possibility to understand blindness is from the metaphorical (language) point of view.

Blindness is our metaphor for fairness, for ignorance, for trust, for love, for vulnerability, for insensibility. The wealth of meaning that has been fabricated around the idea of blindness, our cultural reliance on blindness as metaphor, thus metonymizes the blind man, recreating him as a figure of speech, the component of

the joke, a poem; or, the same gesture enables all of us, blind or sighted, to recreate ourselves as metaphorically blind. (Rodas 117)

The following discussion will analyse metaphorical blindness concerning identity, age differentiation, relationships and socio-economic-political issues.

At first glance, the visual impairment that the main protagonist Wilma suffers from might be very disabling and causes Wilma to feel less than others. Her visual impairment is only a symptom of what is bothering Wilma. As mentioned above, CBS is without any doubt limiting to some extent, but not as much as her own fear of old age limits her.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines gerontology as "the comprehensive multidisciplinary study of ageing and older adults" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Gerontology is a "theme that Margaret Atwood uses in her works in order to challenge the stereotypes of the elderly, especially focusing on women, as inactive, matronly and asexual figures" (Snaith 119). Snaith claims these stereotypes are demonstrated through the limitations of sex, mobility and motility (119).

Examining the portrayal of the elderly, regardless of gender, in "Torching the Dusties" reveals that they are not portrayed in the best light. Older adults are not considered decent human beings after they reach a certain age. "An inhabitant of The Advanced living wing will escape despite all precautions, and will be seen wandering aimlessly, in pyjamas or partly clothed, peeing here and there - an activity welcome in a cherubic fountain ornament but not acceptable in a decrepit human being" (Atwood 251). They are, de facto, relegated to the margins of society to retirement homes, where they are expected to spend the rest of their lives. They are considered unable to handle the responsibility for their behaviour or decisions like being old makes them incompetent people. This view of older people is likely based on the stereotypical idea of older adults as incapable of caring for themselves. This stereotype may stem from the assumption that in old age, the elderly are afflicted by various (either mental or physical) illnesses that make them unable to care for themselves – such as Alzheimer's or Parkinson's disease or the symptoms of a central stroke. These illnesses are prevalent in old age, and it is essential to provide some form of daily assistance to the elderly when they occur. However, not all the elderly suffer from these kinds of illnesses, and it is

not appropriate to generalise or attribute to them the characteristics of the majority. Their relatives and family members are not interested in visiting them anymore. Instead, they occasionally send them gifts (usually useless) to show they also think of them. Although most of the time, they are glad they do not have to visit or take care of them. "Wilma has binoculars, sent to her by her Alyson for viewing birds, though the birds she had managed to view were mainly starlings and the binoculars aren't of use to her any more. Her other daughter sends mostly slippers; Wilma has a glut of slippers. Her son sends postcards. He doesn't seem to grasp the fact that she can no longer read his handwriting" (250).

These useless gifts from Wilma's daughters and son indicate that they need a better relationship and to visit Wilma frequently. If they would, they would know she suffers from CBS and cannot see, let alone watch birds or read. They are not interested in keeping in touch with her, probably because of her age and maybe some guilt of being unable (or unwilling) to care for an old family member. Alternatively, perhaps because they put their own lives before their mother's. Wilma supports this statement by mentioning that her relatives are no longer interested in keeping in touch with her. However, Wilma does not seem excited to see them either.

Another gift from Alyson on the West Coast, who worries that she's not doing enough for Wilma. She would surely visit more frequently if it weren't for the teenaged twins with unspecified issues and the demands of her own career in a large international accounting firm. Wilma must call her later today to assure her that she herself is still alive, at which time the twins will be forced to say hello to her. How tedious they must find these calls, and why not? She finds them tedious herself. (Atwood 255)

The staff treats the elderly like children, forbidding them to do certain things and activities to protect them from the "outside world". Nevertheless, do they need to be protected? Wilma feels limited by these restrictions and prohibitions rather than protected by them (moreover, the staff cannot protect her when she needs it the most). In a certain sense, this could also be considered a disturbance of personal freedom. They forbid personal

computers; their access is restricted and controlled if connected to Ambrosia Manor's site (Atwood 259).

Snaith claims that it is hard to challenge biological (physical) limitations such as limited mobility or disabilities associated with old age and supports the approach that Atwood adopts in her fiction that they should be assigned a "means of movement beyond the realm of reality - the use of cyberspace". She also explains that "moving beyond the fantasy realm of science fiction, information technology offers a viable solution to those who suffer from mobility and/or disability" (125).

For those who are in deep old age, who are weak, frail, or disabled, the body is not only a masking device which conceals and distorts the self which others interact with; in addition, the lack of mobility and functioning capacity may make the body seem like a prison. One potential avenue of escape is the new modes of disembodiment and re-embodiment which are becoming possible through developments in information technology. In virtual reality, it is possible for disabled people to enter a simulated environment. (Featherstone and Wernick 11)

Escaping into the virtual (internet world) can create a new, utopian world for older people where they are not limited by anything. Glenda Laws argues that our place in society changes materially and metaphorically throughout our lives. The places we live or work during our lives are age-graded and associated with particular places and homes. Snaith adds that places such as retirement homes (or retirement communities) are intentionally contrived places deliberately constructed based on social practices (90-91).

These practices and socially determined boundaries deem retirement homes as public institutions. Therefore, it is unacceptable to express (for example) any sexuality or sexual desire in these institutions. This is why there stands a tendency for the elderly to create an escape into virtual worlds of cyberspace, which, as Snaith confirms, offers an ideal potential where the elderly can explore and express their fantasies (including sexual ones). However, by being considered a public institution, Ambrosia Manor still needs to limit access to these cyberspaces (124).

Restrictions on the use of technical devices and the internet cause older people to disconnect from current events in the world around them outside Ambrosia Manor. By regulating the content and websites they can visit, Ambrosia Manor staff are removing their abilities and opportunities to develop, discover new things, and understand the world around them - because it is their only way to have up-to-date and objective information about current events. These limitations create a closed social bubble that is difficult to get out of when older people do not have access to resources.

Staff claim that they restrict access to the internet to prevent seniors from accessing sexual content (and therefore from expressing any sexual desires) and to avoid financial scams (Atwood 253). However, it may also be to keep seniors cut off from the outside world, as this is the only way to prevent them from complaining or disagreeing with how things work at Ambrosia Manor. Either way, this restriction can be considered, to some extent, a limitation of freedom, especially if the elderly are not physically or mentally indisposed to the point of being considered incapable.

Restricting and limiting seniors' activities (and possibly influencing them) is largely influenced by stereotypical views of seniors and their lives. As mentioned above, seniors are seen as not independent or unable to make crucial decisions because they may develop illnesses in old age that can negatively affect their abilities. However, this view cannot and should not be generalised to this age group. It does not mean that, if someone reaches 80, they should be banned from accessing the internet. Why should older people not be able to watch sexual content or express sexual desires? The expression of sexuality after a certain age can be a big taboo even in today's society. It is not just a question of whether or not a person is able or unable to perform these activities at a given age.

On the other hand, not everyone who would like to express themselves (including sexual tendencies) in cyberspace has the opportunity. Nevertheless, it is not just because of the restrictions imposed by Ambrosia Manor. Atwood argues that cyberspace is not always available to those who would like it. Wilma cannot create her cybernetic utopian world not only because of her limited access to online material but also because of biological barriers beyond her control – her deteriorating eyesight (29).

This can be very frustrating for some people. In Wilma's case, the inability to communicate via the internet outside Ambrosia Manor with "real" people and to adapt to the

modern world or understand the younger generation causes a great division between them. These generations need to understand each other, and even if both sides try to understand each other, there are still many differences and different beliefs that will never be universally accepted by either side.

Language is not the only aspect that mirrors the inter-generational misunderstanding, or precisely, inter-generational conflict. The elderly have strong opinions about the youth, or a generation of young, probably based on their experience and alternatively, based on their feeling of superiority over others, in terms of age, when the oldest means the wisest. They think they know everything better than others (especially the young ones), are more experienced and are the only right ones and others should treat them with respect. On the other hand, these opinions do not give room to the younger ones' different opinions, solutions or ideas, which can be more eye-opening and innovative. There are countless examples of these opinions in "Torching the Dusties", especially Tobias'. He argues that young people are lazy, do not want to work and should find jobs to benefit society. If there are no jobs for them, they should create some. He also claims they only use what the older generations have made or provided and are not contributing anything to society. He says they are all socialists (communists) because they also take everything others worked for.

He ignores the fact that only a minimum of jobs are available for the younger generation, and it is the generation of now "old people" who are responsible for this situation. Tobias argues that young people manipulate digital technology, hack the internet, and have access to all Ambrosia Manor's accounts to gradually disconnect them (Atwood 281).

Tobias is an exact example of the metaphorical blindness and rejection to adapt to the younger generation when he cannot let go of his prejudices and opinions of the young and, instead of insulting them, tries to understand them.

Wilma, however, does not entirely share these sceptical opinions on the youth with Tobias. She completely understands and agrees that the young generation has to deal not only with socioeconomic problems, such as a lack of jobs or a lack of places to live but also with environmental problems and "destroying the planet". She believes that the older generation is responsible for these problems and the crisis and that they have destroyed the conditions for life for the younger generation with their greed. However, it was not on purpose though.

She claims that now is when the old generation should step aside and give way to the younger ones.

The metaphorical blindness of the old adults who are not willing to understand and accept the ways of living of the younger generations is ignorance. The ignorance of what comes after them, the ignorance of accepting change, the ignorance of the environment, the ignorance of the world changing. Their only concern is to keep their money, comfort and status level high, and they do not care about anything else. They want to rely on someone always to protect them. They want satisfaction, respect and admiration. On the other hand, they mostly do not realise that their actions have affected the younger generations negatively, and they are the ones to blame. Instead of accepting responsibility or even thinking of their actions' impacts, they insult the youth and evaluate their behaviour as irrational, greedy or unreasonable.

The representatives of the young generations created the movement called "Our Turn", and they aim to get rid of the old very drastically - set retirement homes across the state on fire to "clear" the society. "The "Our Turn" is a movement, it is international, it appears aimed at clearing away what one of the demonstrators refers to as "the parasitic dead wood at the top" and another one terms "the dustballs under the bed" (Atwood 274). As Snaith explains, this is almost cannibalistic desperation to get the world rid of the economic and financial drain caused by the elderly (122). The younger generation seeks to "collect the remnants of the net worth – the legacy, the leftovers, the remains" (Atwood 238).

As the dystopian narrative suggests, the intergenerational conflict between "Our Turn" and the elderly residents of the country's care homes is driven by a need to allocate a finite number of resources. Sparkling a political debate on functionality and the usefulness of the aged population, Wilma listens to a number of experts and members of the public on the radio as they consider the future of the elderly. (Snaith 122)

Wilma claims that this process has its origins in history and that this is how it used to work: "this turn of affairs is not without precedent in history, and in many societies ... the elderly used to bow out gracefully to make room for young mouths by walking into the snow or being carried up mountainsides and left there" (Atwood 275).

The ignorance towards society or social events is also portrayed in the other inhabitants of the Ambrosia Manor. When the "Our Turn" movement members start occupying Ambrosia, the lives of its inhabitants are certainly endangered. However, the inhabitants of the retirement home seem not to entirely understand the risks involved with the demonstrating people, even though the results of other demonstrations across the state are pretty clear (according to media, especially radio statements) – burning down the retirement houses and killing its inhabitants. Perhaps, more than the elderly do not understand them, they are "not seeing them" on purpose. They think that something like this can never happen to them because they are protected. Therefore, they are not paying much attention to the events happening around them, and they blithely continue living their lives without worrying that something might happen to them. When Wilma hears the news, she is unconcerned because she thinks these terrible things happen only to poor people, not the rich ones in Ambrosia Manor.

Wilma listens harder - on the outskirts of Chicago, an old-age home has been set on fire by a mob wearing baby masks; and a second one near Savannah, Georgia, and a third one in Akron, Ohio. One of the homes was state-run, but the other two were private institutions with their own security, and the inhabitants of them, some of whom were fried to crisp, were not poor. ... "Do you think they're dangerous?" says Wilma. "Not here," says Tobias. "But in other countries they are burning things down. This group. They say they are international. They say millions are rising up." "Oh, they're always burning things down in other countries," Wilma says lightly. If I live that long, she hears herself saying to her former dentist. It's the same throwaway tone: None of this can possibly ever happen to me. Idiot, she tells herself. Wishful thinking. But she simply can't bring herself to feel threatened, or not by the foolishness outside the gates. (Atwood 257, 276)

As the situation "behind the gates" gets more serious, the inhabitants, except Wilma and Tobias, still seem to show no concern. Their other friends, Jo-Anne and Noreen, still show no interest in paying attention to the situation or possibly saving their lives. The ever-increasing tension is interspersed with descriptions of what the citizens of Ambrosia Manor are doing as they are cut off from all services (cooking staff or cleaners); they discuss what they will eat or how they can entertain themselves, complaining that they did not pay for the retirement home without service, rather than to plan how to deal with the situation.

They are not willing to leave their comfort, even in danger. However, it is not like the others in Ambrosia Manor, who are not aware that they are in danger; they are aware of it but do not seem to be bothered by it.

The following excerpt shows they are very concerned by the fire, but their coping mechanism is to forget, ignore and pretend that nothing is happening. They do not want to think negatively; they are in a positive mood.

What's happening outside?" she says into a gap left in the web of compliments that's been spinning itself among the others. "At the main gate?" "Oh," says Noreen gaily, "we were trying to forget all that!" "Yes," says Jo-Anne. "It's too depressing. We're living for the moment, aren't we, Tobias?" "Wine, women, and song!" Noreen announces. "Bring on the belly dancers!" Both of them cackle. Surprisingly, Tobias does not laugh. Instead he takes Wilma's hand; she feels dry, warm, boney fingers enclosing hers. "More are gathering. The situation is more grave than we at first apprehended, dear lady," he says. "It would be unwise to underestimate it." "Oh, we weren't underestimating it," says Jo-Anne, striving to keep her conversational soap bubbles in the air. "We were just ignoring it!" (Atwood 267-268)

Unlike them, Wilma and Tobias are very worried and start thinking about how to get out of Ambrosia Manor. Wilma is suddenly aware that her life is at stake. It manifests itself in the fact that she suddenly ignores the hallucinations, which she used to have quite often at the beginning and could be said to perceive them. The little people appear to her, but she has

no time for them as she tries to escape Ambrosia Manor. "She locates the phone in her peripheral vision, ignores the ten or twelve little people who are skating on the kitchen counter in long fur-bordered velvet cloaks and silver muffs, and picks it up" (Atwood 276).

The reason why Wilma ignores the hallucinations may be, for instance, that she does not perceive them as essential in the situation and focuses on how to escape and survive. She does not have time to dwell on it and observe what the little people are doing. Wilma knows that the hallucinations are not going anywhere and that she will be able to devote her time to them later. By deliberately ignoring these hallucinations, she becomes aware of her current situation and tries to overcome it in some way.

Wilma and Tobias eventually stopped ignoring what was going on around them; metaphorically speaking, they stopped being blind to the life-threatening situation at Ambrosia Manor and managed to, unlike the others, escape from the nursing home. However, they stopped being metaphorically blind to save their lives, but their opinions or attitudes towards society did not change.

As Snaith claims, Wilma's visual limitations are projected in the real limitations to see the societal problems of all of us. "Our understanding of the issues, much like Wilma's understanding, is limited. Therefore, Wilma's failing sight becomes analogous to our limitations and ability to "see" the potential failures of society in life outside of fiction. Writ large, the limitations of Wilma's own sensory experience is a reminder that we should not restrict our understanding of gerontology and intersectional groups more broadly" (Snaith 122).

Snaith addresses the issue as connected to the current world outside fiction. The intersectional issues and problems between generations are still very actual, possibly said, globally, regardless of the nation or the country. These may be the result of rapid development not only of digital technologies but also of the rapid development of society and social issues that the world is dealing with (122). One of the intergenerational issues that resonates in society is the topic of the environment. The younger generation blames the elderly for destroying the standard of living and for causing environmental problems such as global warming or the deterioration of living conditions (air and water pollution, natural disasters). Young people argue that, for instance, regulating or limiting the use of fossil fuels or the production of plastics could have prevented the current problems that the younger

generation faces today. This example is one of the reasons why intergenerational conflict still increases. One should always be open to solving these issues as much as possible and, most importantly, not be the one creating them. To be ignorant is the worst of all.

Kawasaki states in his text that the story echoes the reality of ²present-day Canadian society, where the income gap between the elderly and the young generation is increasingly widening (83). Based on the report, Goodman claims that the average disposable income of Canadians between 50-54 years is 64% higher than the income of people 25-29 years old (Goodman, Age, Not Gender).

This fact proves that the intergenerational gap and its related issues exist and is a huge problem in today's society.

As the end of "Torching the Dusties" suggests, Wilma might have overcome her ignorance even slightly. As previously mentioned, patients suffering from Charles Bonnet Syndrome experience the loss of clear vision, which is substituted by blurry or partial sight. At the end of the story, Wilma can still see the little people – CBS hallucinations; however, she claims to see. "The flames have taken over now, they're so bright. Even gazing directly, she can see them. Blended with them, flickering and soaring, are the little people, their red garments glowing from within, scarlet, orange, yellow, gold. They're swirling upward, they're so joyful! They meet and embrace, they part; it's an airy dance. Look. Look! They're singing!" (Atwood 286).

But what does she see? Are these hallucinations? As Kawasaki claims, sometimes the descriptions of her CBS hallucinations overlap with descriptions of the participants of the "Our Turn" movement; however, Wilma can usually distinguish them. Nevertheless, the final scene presents the inability to identify who exactly she describes.

Wilma's hallucinatory vision is intersected with reality for the first and the last time: she sees the flames in Ambrosia Manor buildings and the little people at once ... Seeing simultaneously the visible reality and visual hallucinations, she is now participating in the deadly game. The combined vision of two kinds, perceptive and hallucinatory, indicate a drastic change in the established novelistic order. The framework of the story that CBS sets, Wilma retaining perfect insight into her

syndrome and distinguishing hallucinations from reality, can no longer hold itself.
(Kawasaki 86,87)

Therefore, the ending is open to arbitrary and varied interpretations. One possibility could be that Wilma has stopped seeing the hallucinations associated with CBS syndrome and is seeing metaphorically and physically, giving her hope for a new life. Generally speaking, this could suggest the positive outcome in overcoming the "blindness" and starting to see things and be open to understanding (and possibly) accepting what is happening around us.

Another possibility is that the hallucinations have disappeared because she is currently fighting for her life, so she is much more focused on the danger around her, all the options of escape and fear of death, and her brain and body are focused on trying to survive and thus not producing hallucinations and imaginings of little people. In short, this may imply that in saving her life, her brain does not have time to produce "irrelevant" hallucinations but to focus on and encourage the remaining bit of sight and vision (though remarkably blurry) for her escape from Ambrosia Manor.

As pointed out earlier, the main female protagonist Wilma suffers from Charles Bonnet syndrome that limits her vision: her vision is blurred, accompanied by hallucinations of little people in costumes. Generally, it is impossible to say whether CBS affects more males or females, just as it is impossible to say what causes it. From the gender point of view, therefore, it is possible to say that it affects people regardless of their gender. Charles Bonnet Syndrome can occur in the elderly with age-related eye macular degeneration. However, the Charles Bonnet Syndrome Foundation website states, "Initial clinical studies indeed suggested that CBS was a more common occurrence in women than men. However, in recent times, this belief has been called into question. The current view is that there are no gender differences in CBS susceptibility. As a function of age, CBS risk would seem to make women more prone to Bonnet syndrome as women tend to live longer than men" (Charles Bonnet Syndrome Foundation). However, the clinical studies supporting this point need to be traced.

The question is whether Wilma feels that society threatens her differently as a woman suffering from Charles Bonnet Syndrome. The answer could be clearer. On the one hand, she thinks that society treats her differently as a woman; on the other hand, it is not because of

her blindness and hallucinations but rather because of her age, of which blindness (CBS) is a part. So the important thing is how older women are perceived and treated by society and their peers, additionally, how they are perceived by themselves.

As Krause mentions, even though Wilma is strong-willed and the most independent figure of all the characters in "Torching the Dusties", she remains hindered by her age as she slowly goes blind (23). "For some (elderly) the deterioration suffered is largely physical, and if they have keen minds, their deterioration and dependency evoke anxiety about the loss of dignity and identity" (Waxman 137).

Krause also claims Wilma is, by her disability, forced to endure the loss of identity, which causes her to lose her status and power in the social hierarchy (24). Browne states that Wilma's perception of her role in society depends on her definitions and conceptualisations of the world around her (88).

Because she defines reality as thriving in youth, it is no wonder that she sees herself as fading away and lacking any meaning in her life. We can see that Wilma is suffering from what de Beauvoir notes as being the "older woman's tragedy" in which she realizes that she is useless (de Beauvoir 633) and must therefore compensate for her inaction and overcome her lack of existence by feeding on the company of others" (Krause 24).

The physical fading out is portrayed in the scene when she catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror and realises that she does not appear as young as she remembers. She compares herself to her old mother, and it is challenging for her to grasp the new appearance and identity and understand that this is her life now (Snaith 123). "As we gradually move into old age, argues de Beauvoir (315), and realise we have become the other version of ourselves, the self and the body are already at odds with one another. Thus, the physical ageing body becomes a personal dystopia, creating a radically disharmonious relationship as the "Self grows and develops, whilst the body increasingly lets it down" (Biggs 36).

As Snaith claims, Wilma's disability discourages her "as she battles against the need to maintain the lifestyle that is as normal as possible and commensurate with her sense of self" (123). Snaith also expresses that transitioning to old age is difficult, as age is usually seen as alien or foreign species (123). This claim asks, "Can I have become a different being while I still remain myself?" (de Beauvoir 315).

The need to maintain her previous lifestyle (or what she considers normal lifestyle) is marked in her determination and desire for independence. The determination to do things on her own, the distrust when Tobias told her things – she would rather see (and experience) herself. The ability to function on her own, not to be dependent on anyone or to be a burden. These aims might originate in the rejection of gender and social roles of the elderly attributed especially to women or the denial of her current social position and status: the aged woman.

These aims may also arise from a desire to distance themselves from political efforts to suppress women in society. These efforts include gender inequalities in education and income, unequal representation of women and men in certain jobs, and historically, the denial of fundamental human rights for women.

Wilma comes into direct contact with the social status of women and prejudices and stereotypes against women through conversations with her friend Tobias. Before, she may not have noticed her social status so much, but since Tobias's comments addressed women in a good or misogynistic sense, she comes into contact with them almost daily. Tobias directs his negative comments primarily towards women. He belittles their position as wives and lovers, questions their intelligence, and promotes the notion of women being inferior to men. These views may partly stem from his upbringing in a society that holds similar beliefs. However, they may also be influenced by his own experiences with women who he treated with such disrespect.

"According to Tobias, it was more difficult to seduce a stupid woman than an intelligent one because stupid women could not understand innuendo or even connect cause with effect. The fact that a pricey dinner ought to be followed, as the night the day, by the compliant opening of their peerless legs was lost on them" (Atwood 243). Wilma disagrees with Tobias and has her own opinion on the matter, although she does not publicly show her disagreement. "Wilma has not considered it tactful, to suggest to him that the blank stares and cluelessness might well have been acting on the part of these beauties, who would not be averse to a free meal if all it cost them was a widening of their huge, dumb, heavily fringed eyes" (Atwood 243). Wilma does not want to confront him, and she barely responds to him. Wilma does not want to cause trouble by explaining and contradicting Tobias when she knows that Tobias is not quite right, or rather; he is looking at the whole situation from

the opposite angle - from a relatively misogynistic point of view, which is rather offensive to women.

"I should have known you back then," Tobias says to Wilma ... Wilma parses this in silence: is he saying that she's intelligent, and therefore a quick lay? Or would have been then. Does he realize that a more easily offended woman might take this as an insult? No, he does not realize. It's meant to be a gallantry. He can't help it, poor man, being partly Hungarian in origin, he claims; so Wilma lets him prattle on, divine breasts here, marble thighs there, and doesn't comment crisply on his redundancies - as she might once have done - when he relates the same seduction over and over. We have to be kind to one another in here, she tells herself. We're all we have left. (Atwood 244)

Wilma's attitude proves that she may have tendencies and desires to return to her normal life, not to be physically dependent, but on the other hand, it shows that Wilma does not have such a desire to step out of female stereotypes because it is more comfortable for her to stay in them. She has probably been assigned certain social and gender roles all her life, so why would she leave her comfort zone? Therefore, she would rather pass over Tobias's misogynistic remarks and comments than confront him and risk losing her only real friend at Ambrosia Manor.

The hierarchization or, more specifically, the position of women in the (patriarchal) society is also partly projected into her hallucinations of the little people. "Perhaps in response to her frustration, a phalanx of little men forms up the windowsill. No women this time, it's more like a march-past. The society of the tiny folk is socially conservative: they don't let women into their marches. Their clothing is still green, but a darker green, not so festive" (Atwood 252).

According to Snaith the transition to old age is a feminist issue. Based on Simone de Beauvoir's dictum, "One Is not Born but Rather Becomes a Woman", she claims that for a woman, it is important to undergo more than one act of "becoming a woman" in their lifetime. "Unlike men, for whom the transition to old age is more often represented as a continuous

process, old age for women is marked by a disruption to the reproductive process, a "rupture" that is followed by an assumed decline in sexual desire" (Snaith 119).

Sexual desire, or sexuality, is important in "Torching the Dusties". According to Snaith, Margaret Atwood successfully managed to invert the role of asexual elderly women within the whole narrative and challenges the stereotypical roles that society expects these women to fulfil (128). Linda Gannon claims the stereotypical image of woman in Western culture has two forms: the grandmotherly matron and the irritable, depressed crone (112). "Both images presuppose the absence of sexuality: the grandmother has fulfilled her role in the form of maternity and does not desire sex without a meaningful (reproductive) end, and the crone has and will continue to be sexually dissatisfied. This dual image is not applied to men of the same age: whereas women lose their sexuality and femininity as they grow older, men are still perceived as sexually active beings" (Gannon 112). On the other hand, the traditional and cultural stereotype of sexuality of ageing man is, according to Gannon, that the man should be continuous, possible and potent. This is a form of arrogance that comes from a patriarchal society and cultural interest in sexual activity (113). According to de Beauvoir, women are stripped of their femininity (in terms of cultural misconceptions of menopause and confusion between fertility and potency) "whereas men grow old gradually" (*The Second Sex*, 587).

Atwood explains why she inverts the roles and focuses in her fiction on the sexual image of women: "The majority of dystopias – Orwell's included - have been written by men, and the point of view has been male. When women have appeared in them, they have been with either sexless automatons or rebels who've defied the sex rules of the regime" (Atwood 2004, 514).

In *Stone Mattress*, we see a dual challenge to the dystopian oppressors in the openness of older females about their sexual desires, dreams and fantasies. Although there is no sexual activity in the physical sense in the stories of *Stone Mattress*, Atwood's acknowledgement of sexual desire amongst the older generation plays an important part in rewriting the gerontological narrative. Whereas more often than not in both literature and life in North America, female sexual desire is invisible and

extinguished, within Atwood's "wicked" tales, it is normalised, present, and rendered unexceptional through repetition. (Snaith 129)

In "Torching the Dusties", Tobias' sexuality and sexual desires correspond to Gannot's previous claim that older men are still perceived as sexually active and full of sexual desire. Tobias reveals that he has been married many times; however, he got cheated on, as he explains, "it would be hard to respect a woman who wasn't desired by other men" (Atwood 247). Tobias also experiences sexual dreams, which he shares openly with Wilma. "I had such a dream!" says Tobias. "Purple. Maroon. It was very sexual, with music." His dreams are frequently very sexual, with music" (Atwood 248).

Tobias' sexual desire is also manifested in the prohibition of the use of computers in Ambrosia Manor. Tobias explains that as access to computers is limited and controlled, some "crafty lechers" have cellphones and watch online porn on their cellphones. Tobias says he is not the one to do so, but Wilma does not believe him. "He claims he himself doesn't bother with the tawdry and inelegant cellphone porn because the women on view are too tiny. ... Wilma does not entirely believe this tale of abstinence, though maybe he's not lying: he just might find his own invented sagas more erotic than anything a mere phone can come up with, and they have added virtue of starring him" (Atwood 260).

Women in "Torching the Dusties" are also portrayed as full of sexual desire, illustrated by flirtation. The first example is when Tobias describes Hungarian women: "They never know when it's game over, in love, life or death. They flirt with the undertaker, they flirt with the guy shovelling the dirt onto their coffin. They never give up" (Atwood 265). Wilma's sexual desire can be understood as her jealousy when she sees Noreen and Jo-Anne flirting with Tobias: "they are displaying impressive flirting skills. If they had feather fans, they'd be hitting Tobias with them, if bouquets they'd be tossing him a rosebud, if they had ankles they'd be flashing them. As it is, they're simpering. Wilma longs to tell them to act their age, but what would it be like if they did?" (266).

Jealousy awakens feelings inside her, not necessarily on a sexual level, the physical one, but rather emotional. She longs for attention, care and appreciation. "Is she jealous, does she want Tobias all to herself? Not all of him, no; she wouldn't go so far. She has no desire

to roll around in the metaphorical hay with him, because she has no desire. Or not much. But she wants his attention. Or rather she wants him to want her attention" (Atwood 266).

"Age and sexuality are recognised as not being mutually inclusive of one another, and Wilma admits to still having some desire left in her yet. Sexual energies that ought to be suppressed and act as a transgressive force are allowed to circulate freely within the text, and although no sexual intimacies take place, it is not a restriction of the elderly body" (Snaith 130).

Taking all these factors into account, the blindness and gender in "Torching the Dusties" are both connected with old age. The physical blindness represented by Charles Bonnet Syndrome affects the elderly and causes partial vision loss and hallucinations. For Wilma, as a main character, it is, to a great extent, limiting; however, not as much as her own age and stereotypes connected with elderly people. The gender stereotypes are applied similarly to the elderly, rather than they would disadvantage blind people in general. Gender issues related to ageing are mostly presented as the social role of older women, the loss of sexual desire, or the status of women in society.

It is evident that gender stereotypes are present; however, it seems that they are, in the majority, not overcome. The gender stereotype, which seems to be inverted, is the ability to express sexual desire while being an older woman.

Except for blindness as a visual impairment (in "Torching the Dusties" presented by Charles Bonnet Syndrome), the theme of metaphorical blindness is portrayed in the story. The metaphorical blindness represents the ignorance of the youth toward the elderly, the ignorance of older people towards the claims and requests of the younger generation and, in general, the ignorance towards social, economic and environmental issues. The Charles Bonnet syndrome represents blindness towards the outer world by which Atwood brings attention to serious societal problems and how older men and women are treated by current society and younger generations.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis is to present and analyze the portrayal and perception of blind people. It examines whether blind people are subject to stereotypes and prejudices, and whether they are affected by gender stereotypes. Additionally, the connection and interplay between these stereotypes are explored, along with the significance of the relationship between blindness, gender and sexuality in specific literary works. The literary works analyzed are the short stories "Blind Man" by British writer David Herbert Lawrence and "Torching the Dusties" by Canadian writer Margaret Atwood.

The analysis identifies several key findings. One of the findings is that the main characters in the literary works are subject to stereotypes and prejudices against blind people, regardless of their gender. These stereotypes are based on the traditional conception of blindness as something perceived negatively in the history of a cultural society, outside of social, cultural and also (to some extent) convex human norms. Blind people are expected to behave in certain ways, which further reinforces these stereotypes.

The main characters, Maurice Pervin and Wilma, have to deal with these stereotypes and prejudices against blind people in the stories. However, they refute these stereotypical patterns and ideas and do not view blindness as a disadvantage, but rather as an integral part of their lives that enriches them. While their blindness may make them weaker in some instances, neither character deliberately supports and lives out these stereotypes. The stereotypes are only applied to them by society and the people around them.

In addition to prejudice against blind people, the characters also face gender-based stereotypes, such as social roles, status in society, or certain gender-based expectations society has of a given gender. Blindness and gender stereotypes are very closely intertwined and influence the characterisation and behaviour of the main characters to a very large extent.

Both characters overcome these stereotypes in different ways, whether it is by stepping out of their comfort zone, overcoming certain social and gender constructs of society, or understanding themselves within their own identity and their imperfection or disability. This understanding can lead to a change in society's established ideas.

Despite blindness being perceived in literary, historical and cultural contexts as unnatural or limiting in society, these two works are empowering in overcoming and perceiving blindness, regardless of the gender of the characters.

In conclusion, society perceives blindness as unacceptable, and certain stereotypical norms affect the characters. The characters also have to cope with their position in society, which is given based on their gender. However, both blind men and women are affected equally by stereotypes. By overcoming the prejudice against blind people, the main characters also overcome gendered ideas about the status and roles of men and women. Despite blindness being perceived in literary, historical and cultural contexts as unnatural or limiting in society, these two works are empowering in overcoming and perceiving blindness, regardless of the gender of the characters.

Footnotes

¹Macular Degeneration (MD): a disease or medical condition of the eye that affects (mostly) central vision and causes blurry sight or loss of vision. Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP) is a set of hereditary disorders defined by gradual loss of peripheral vision, often leading to irreversible loss of central vision and blindness.

²The "present-day Canadian society" is around 2014-2016, when "Torching the Dusties" and related texts were published.

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