

IN THE COUNTRY OF THE BLIND, THE TWO-EYED MAN MUST HAVE HIS EYES  
REMOVED: DISABLING UTOPIA IN H.G. WELLS'S  
"THE COUNTRY OF THE BLIND"

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## ABSTRACT

Utopian literature's success is predicated on its ability to communicate its vision across spatial, temporal, cultural, and interpersonal boundaries. In H.G. Wells's short story "The Country of the Blind" (1904), protagonist Nuñez stumbles upon a seemingly peaceful and prosperous rural utopia but for the fact its members have been congenitally blind for generations. The tale features a society that seems to be a utopia for its blind inhabitants but proves to be a dystopia for the sighted outsider. Ultimately anti-utopian, "The Country of the Blind" erases disability by positioning its blind citizens as the normate. Because of their differences, Nuñez and the blind villagers are unable to engage in what Fatima Vieira terms the "speculative discourse" (7) typically associated with the utopian journey.

This paper examines how the characters' respective cultural and embodied positions act as limitations, especially in the absence of social understandings of disability and normalcy in the blind community. This representation of disability provides insight into the evolution of late Victorian understandings of disability and its place in society. In this paper, I take a critical disability studies approach to examine the representation of blind characters who do not and can not comprehend blindness and are, as a result, limited by what David Bolt terms *ocularnormativism*. I explore the intersection of genre, narrative, and disability, expanding Mark Bérubé's concept of *disabled narrative* to discuss how Wells's text is prevented from achieving the goals implied by its genre and narrative framework by its construction of disability. I argue that Wells's tale demonstrates a surprisingly complex awareness of the role of disability in late Victorian society, anticipating social, medical, moral, and even cultural models of disability.

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In the Country of the Blind, the Two-Eyed Man Must Have His Eyes Removed: Disabling  
Utopia in H.G. Wells's "The Country of the Blind"

"In the Country of the Blind, the One-Eyed man is King." This is the proverb that Nuñez, the protagonist of H.G. Wells's short story "The Country of the Blind," repeats to himself like a mantra as he realizes that a mountaineering accident has left him trapped in an isolated valley populated by a community of people who have been congenitally blind for fifteen generations. Nuñez's "expectation of wonder and reverence at his origin and his gifts" (407) and his imperialist impulse to impose his own improvements on their simple lifestyle are quickly curbed by the villagers' inability to conceptualize the meaning of sight and by Nuñez's difficulty functioning in a society and space tailored to the needs of the blind.<sup>1</sup> He is not made king but conversely finds himself in a subservient position—only able to be accepted as a full member of the society and marry a girl from the community if he agrees to have his eyes surgically removed. Ultimately, Nuñez cannot bring himself to go through with the procedure and instead attempts to escape from the valley. The story ends on an ambiguous note as Nuñez, exhausted from his climb, lays still (and presumably dies) under the beautiful sky as sunset fades into night. First published in 1904 during the last years of the Victorian era, "The Country of the Blind" is considered by prominent Wells scholars to be one of Wells's finest short stories.<sup>2</sup> Typically read as a critique of imperialism<sup>3</sup> after being "lionized for a century as a parable about personal freedom and self-determination" (Thompson "Wells's 'The Country of the Blind'" 35)<sup>4</sup> the tale appears at first to be the journey of a utopian traveller who visits a seemingly idyllic, isolated community. However, this utopia (Greek for *no-place*) becomes a dystopia (*bad place*) when Nuñez is not fully welcomed into the blind society without surgically altering himself.

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<sup>1</sup> David Bolt discusses the problems with the term *blind*, as many common expressions use the term in contexts having nothing to do with actual visual impairment (*Metanarratives of Blindness* 18). Due to the importance of these associations in the literary context, Bolt uses *blind* when referring to literary constructions of blindness, but uses "people who have visual impairments" when referring to visually impaired individuals outside of the texts being studied (17)—a practice which I will adopt in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> See Patrick Parrinder and Richard Hauer Costa.

<sup>3</sup> See Terry Thompson, Mercedes Peñalba García, and Patrick Parrinder.

<sup>4</sup> See also J.R. Hammond and Frank McConnell.

While some disability scholars have interrogated the story's use of blindness, none have yet considered the role of genre and narrative in the text's construction of disability, with many other critics only discussing the metaphorical significance of blindness or ignoring the role of disability altogether. However, Wells's construction of disability is inextricably linked to his construction of genre, which complicates generally held conceptions of the boundaries between concepts of utopia, dystopia, and anti-utopia.<sup>5</sup> The text is initially constructed and effectively functions as a utopia for the blind characters—therefore acting as a dystopia as it disables the sighted Nuñez—but ultimately proving to be an anti-utopia in terms of Wells's intentions and in its failure to provide a hopeful message for the betterment of society. Wells uses the perceived dichotomy of blind and sighted experiences alongside the metaphorical implications of blindness identified by Bolt as the basis for Nuñez's dystopic experience and the utopian contentment of the blind villagers. Additionally, Wells's satirical anti-utopian critique of close-minded attitudes is predicated on his construction of the blind community as Other, exclusive, and both incomprehensible and uncomprehending. The prominence of blindness in the tale is also at odds with the ocularcentrism of the oral narrative form, creating an additional site of tension in the text that has remained unaddressed by critics. Therefore, taking a literary disability studies perspective, I will examine the intersection of narrative form, genre, and disability in "The Country of the Blind," using Mark Bérubé's concept of *disabled narrative* to argue that Wells's metaphorical and literal representation of blindness disables both the oral-style narrative form and the utopian genre of the text, resulting in a work that is unable to complete a successful utopian transfer of ideas, preventing both the realization of the utopian structure and the fulfillment of the functionality of the oral narrative form. Wells's disabled text points to moral, social, medical, and ultimately cultural models of disability long before these models were recognized or understood as part of the complex ways societies have historically regarded disability, demonstrating the complex ways late-Victorians were approaching disability—as an increasingly medicalized issue that was also becoming a social responsibility, but also as something that could be potentially be "solved" by new scientific concepts including eugenics.

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<sup>5</sup> My use of the terms *dystopia*, *utopia*, and *anti-utopia* throughout this paper acknowledges and reflects Wells's overlapping application of these modes, which I discuss further on page 16.

## "The Country of the Blind" as Utopia

Thompson's reading of Nuñez as failed imperialist akin to Lucifer in the Garden of Eden, "a grasping man who falls from the sky and seeks to destroy a quiet mountain utopia[, . . .] compelled by pride to ruin it" (35) does not sufficiently account for Nuñez's desire to marry and settle in the valley or for his failure to do any real damage to the community; however, the connection to the Garden of Eden—the original utopia—stands. Many of the structural and other conventions of Wells's text conform to Fátima Vieira's account of the characteristics of utopian literature as traced from the genre established by Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* with roots stretching back to Plato's *Republic*, branching out to include many other authors such as Aldous Huxley, Samuel Butler, and Edward Bellamy. Similarly, Nathaniel Robert Walker and K.V. Bailey's observations on the representation of nature in Victorian utopias suggest Wells's story falls into the category of arcadian utopia—a rural utopia that depicts humankind's ideal relationship with nature as one in which "whole landscapes should be brought to their divinely mandated status as orderly and productive gardens" like Eden (Walker 78). However, all is not well in Wells's Eden. Although the narrative contains the structural elements of utopian literature and the idyllic setting that invokes Arcady, a pervasive tension in the text stems from the social conflicts arising with the sighted newcomer's arrival, suggesting that this utopia might be closer to a *dystopia*.

Dystopia and utopia are not mutually exclusive: one person's utopia may be another's worst nightmare. Keith Booker identifies the principal element of dystopia as defamiliarization, by which the author removes the social issues being criticized from their original context and places them in a new setting where their flaws are more easily exposed (3). Booker also argues that dystopian literature does not necessarily constitute a separate genre from utopia but is characterized instead by "a particular kind of oppositional and critical energy or spirit" (3). Limiting his definition of dystopian literature to "works that rely on a dialogue with utopian idealism as an important element of their social criticism" (3), Booker provides a nuanced understanding of utopia as something that can exist simultaneously *with* dystopia, challenging their implied opposition. This depiction certainly applies to Wells's representation of an idyllic environment and society set apart from the rest of the world, wherein the inhabitants experience no impairment despite their lack of vision—a community which is nonetheless fundamentally flawed in its incapacity and unwillingness to accommodate individuals of differing ability.



Although many scholars identify utopian qualities of "The Country of the Blind"—for example, Parrinder identifies it as an "ironic utopia" ("Wells's Cancelled Endings" 71)—Werner von Koppenfels and Mercedes Peñalba García offer two of the few analyses of the text that take a genre perspective of its utopianism. Discussing the predominance of "the metaphorical dimension" (156) of blindness in several works of dystopian literature, von Koppenfels identifies "The Country of the Blind" as a work of Menippean satire, which critiques attitudes and ideas rather than individuals, using central characters as "personae or mouthpieces for mental attitudes, posing as individual characters" (von Koppenfels 156). To von Koppenfels, blindness serves as an ideal metaphor in the story's attack on "the powers of obscurantism" (156) and its critique of close-minded social attitudes evident in the villagers' refusal to consider Nuñez's perspective. Peñalba García also acknowledges the tale's heterotopian nature, which depicts "the wandering of an outsider into a closed valley or strange land" (480), and identifies "[t]he Menippean turn of perspective" as what changes "the 'Happy Valley' into its own antithesis, or ironic utopia" (482). Peñalba García primarily considers how "Wells fictionalized the historical contexts of imperialism and colonialism, and satirized the ethos that underlay the European sense of superiority to others" (476) by using the binary of sight and blindness to "reverse definitions of supremacy and subordination, vision and obscurantism" (482). She regards the story as "a negation of the original proverb about the country of the blind, with echoes of Plato's Parable of the Cave, as well as a rewriting of the archetypal myth of a remote pastoral eu-topia" (476).

Although von Koppenfels and Peñalba García's explorations of the text's anti-utopian nature confirm the importance of considering genre when studying "The Country of the Blind," both scholars focus on the metaphorical significance of blindness rather than its more literal implications as a literary representation of disability. The intersection of genre and disability is the primary site of tension in the text, stemming from the supposed mutual exclusivity of disability and utopia and of the embodied experiences of the blind and sighted characters, complicating the utopian categorization. Understanding this tension is crucial to unpack Wells's construction of disability beyond its more obvious application as a metaphorical indication of the villagers' suppression of new ideas. The lack of scholarship on the intersection of genre and disability in "The Country of the Blind" is an important omission, especially considering the significant impact Wells had on the evolution of utopian and anti-utopian genres and the prominence of disability in his narrative. Ria Cheyne suggests that this lacuna is due to a lack of

overlap between literary genre studies and literary disability studies. Cheyne identifies "The Country of the Blind" and other utopian works by Wells as precursors to modern science fiction and reflects on science fiction's "rich history of disability representations" (91), which would merit further study. She asserts that the absence of disability in science fiction often distinguishes "a more advanced society" (92) from less advanced others. As such, Wells's story is intriguing because it seems, at least at first, to distinguish this society of blind individuals as—if not more advanced—then more peaceful, effective, and just than the imperialistic world beyond. However, the harmony of the blind society is marred by the fact that its citizens are inflexible in their understanding of the world and unwilling to accommodate difference. The breakdown of the blind community's utopian appearance has important implications as it exists at the intersection of disability and genre, suggesting (among other things) that a society marked by blindness cannot represent an ideal society.

Since utopian and anti-utopian authors are explicitly concerned with provoking consideration of alternate social realities to expose flaws or sites for improvement within their own societies, reading blindness in the text as more than metaphor and examining its function in the text's genre also provide insight into late Victorian understandings of disability and its place in society. Wells's use of the anti-utopian mode to depict a disabled utopia, his representation of the blind characters as evolutionarily and socially inferior, and his belief in "social as well as biological evolution" and "the perfectibility of mankind" through eugenics (Le Guin 397) create tension between social and cultural models of disability and what Bolt terms *ocularnormativism*—"the mass or institutionalized endorsement of visual necessity" (5). Although his text, as I demonstrate below, clearly reveals a nuanced picture of the increasingly complex ways late Victorian society understood and dealt with disability, Wells elsewhere explains that the story's ending, in which "the visionary dies, a worthless outcast," emphasizes "the spiritual isolation of those who see more keenly than their fellow and the tragedy of their incommunicable appreciation of life" (qtd in Searles 417-418). Therefore, the embodied reality of the blind villagers was not Wells's concern, and although we can analyze the reality of their position today, Wells's own disregard for the effects of his careless and negative portrayal of blindness on the very real community of people with visual impairment reflects the attitude of many others of his time—and even of today—an attitude which perpetuates the breakdown in communication and further Others the blind community in his tale.

## **Disability in the Country of the Blind**

More recently, disability studies readings of "The Country of the Blind" have identified how the tale dehumanizes blind characters, perpetuating stereotypes of malevolence and contagion ascribed to blind characters and furthering the perceived divide between people who have visual impairments and those who do not. David Bolt also argues that Wells participates in an overarching metanarrative of blindness found in many popular texts, contributing to harmful stereotypes and conceptions of people with visual impairments. Scholars have also explored how Wells's tale invokes the social and medical models of disability (Bolt, Tyrrell) and how it reflects changing Victorian perceptions of and approaches to disability in terms of its treatment by social and medical institutions (Esmail & Keep). Wells participates in what Bolt describes as "the ocularnormative antithesis," which suggests "that normalcy depends on visual perception, that any deviation from the primacy of vision is abnormal" (69), thus constructing blind people as fundamentally different from sighted individuals—reflecting late-Victorian attitudes towards people with visual impairments.

Bolt identifies the dehumanization of the blind characters in Wells's descriptions of their senses, noting especially that the villagers "are ascribed a sense of smell that is evocative of animalization" (73) as they can "distinguish individual differences as readily as a dog can" (Wells 408). Bolt argues that such "animalizing and thus dehumanizing" descriptions "of extraordinary senses" imply that "the blind belong to a lower evolutionary order than do the sighted—a eugenic notion" (74). Bolt contends that "cultural representations of extraordinary senses" like Wells's blind community "with their ever more sensitive ears and fingertips" (407) and noses represents inaccurate portrayals of the reality of people with visual impairments (who experience no such heightening of other senses with the reduction of vision). Additionally, Bolt suggests that these depictions "serve, at best, to render magical the talent and achievements of people who have visual impairments and, at worst, to justify the ascription of various animallike characteristics" (67). Although the inaccuracy of Wells's portrayal of blindness is undeniable, Bolt's argument that Wells's comparison between the villagers' heightened senses and animals' senses is derogatory is perhaps speciesist. Having a sense of smell equivalent to that of a dog is objectively a *good* thing, given the effectiveness of the animal's sense and the way their abilities maximize their potential to succeed in their environment. In this sense (no pun intended), the blind characters are evolutionarily *superior* to Nuñez, especially if we reject the ocularnormative

notion that individuals without visual impairments must necessarily be better and more effective than individuals with visual impairments, no matter the acuity of their other senses.

Nonetheless, the ocularnormative antithesis remains an issue with Wells's construction of this "race of blind men" (Wells 402) as separate—not just distinct in culture, appearance, or ability from the people of Nuñez's world, but different in *essence* from the humans beyond their valley. Bolt identifies Wells's "subhuman assumptions beneath the superhuman allusions" (73) in Nuñez's marvelling at the Country of the Blind's citizens' ability to function perfectly (which should be unsurprising given the fact that their environment had been tailored to their needs). This reaction from Nuñez does dehumanize and misrepresent the capabilities of the blind characters, and while they are descended from humans and act as such, Nuñez clearly does not view them as humans on the same basis as he is, complaining that "you cannot even fight happily with creatures who stand upon a different mental basis to yourself" (409) and crying out in frustration "you don't understand, [. . .] you are blind and I can see" (410). To Nuñez, the blind citizens are "creatures" who think differently than he does, and Wells's narrator confirms that they are different both in their way of thinking and in appearance, as "much of their imagination had shrivelled with their eyes" (407), and their "closed eyelids" were "sunken and red" (411). The blind community conceives of themselves as the superior race, just as Nuñez believes *himself* to be their better. Indeed, Nuñez's potential marriage to Medina-Saroté is stymied by the blind citizens' perception of him "as a being apart, an idiot, incompetent thing below the permissible level of a man," making "the young men [. . .] angry at the idea of corrupting the race" (412). These conceptions—the blind believing themselves to be so different that intermarriage with Nuñez would taint their community and Nuñez's belief in the irreconcilable distinctness of their "mental basis"—promote the wrongful assumption that people with visual impairments do think differently and are, if human, at least a fundamentally different and substandard variety.

The blind characters' eugenic and racially-charged objections to Nuñez's marriage to one of their own—even an inferior one whose "long eyelashes [. . .] were considered a grave disfigurement" (411)—perpetuated against the apparently blameless Nuñez is yet another instance of the ocularnormative antithesis in the text. In Wells's characterization, the blind villagers are malicious and wrong for failing to accurately perceive and accept Nuñez's supposedly superior merits despite his differences—yet ironically, people with visual

impairments would be chronically underestimated and Othered in this same way in Nuñez's society of origin. As Bolt observes, Wells misrepresents the blind as malevolent (93), also evident in the "hypersexual" (77) description of the blind community's "groping" (Wells 138) hands as they meet Nuñez, revealing "the underpinning anxiety [. . .] that to connect with [the blind] is to become as one with the blind" (Bolt 79). This "motif of contagious blindness" (81) recurs when the blind leaders require that Nuñez undergo eye removal surgery to be fully accepted into the community. Wells's text rewrites the narrative of people with and without visual impairments, suggesting fundamental differences where none exist, undermining the commonalities of the human experience and painting the two as both antithetical and incommunicable to one another. As I later discuss, its participation in the ocularnormative antithesis is only part of the ocularnormativity of Wells's text, and the dehumanization and apparent evolutionary inferiority of the blind characters reveals the fear, distrust, and misunderstandings directed at people who had visual impairments in late-Victorian society.

The Country of the Blind, for all its pastoral beauty and social harmony, was never supposed to be a utopia for the blind, nor did Wells intend to create any sort of disabled utopia. Instead, the community proves to be simply a recreation of the society beyond with the norms redefined, an anti-utopia that offers no hope or ideas to help create a society that is more accommodating and inclusive of people with disabilities. Bolt asserts that although "many scholars defend the Wellsian classic on the grounds that it reverses the tradition of a blind person in a sighted world" (84), this viewpoint problematically constructs blind and sighted characters "as though antithetical to one another" (84). This belief is simply not true of people with and without visual impairments in the real world, misrepresenting this relationship and Othering people with visual impairments. Wells suggests that the Country of the Blind cannot be a true utopia if the villagers do not acknowledge the "primacy of vision" (Bolt 73) and the superiority of those without visual impairment. This study of the overlap between genre and disability reveals both the realities of society at the time and the flaws that Wells sought to expose to his contemporary readers, in contrast to the way we might view the narrative today.

### **Narrative and Disability**

The type and structure of the narrative also contributes to the story's construction of genre and disability. In "Disability and Narrative," Mark Bérubé uses the term *disabled narrative* to

describe self-aware texts that feature characters who, due to cognitive disability, would be unable to represent themselves in the narrative or understand their place in the narrative. I extend the concept to characters with other disabilities who are also unable to understand their place in the narrative—in this case, characters who are blind and cannot conceptualize sight. I maintain that the blind villagers are limited by the ocularnormativism present in the utopian genre, the narrative, and the form of the text itself. The form of Wells's text is markedly ocularnormative, told from the perspective of the outside world where sight is expected and taken for granted. As a result, the narrative's representation of the inhabitants of the Country of the Blind is coloured (to use an ocularcentric descriptor) by the assumed supremacy of sight as a sense and of individuals without visual impairment. The story's narrative form therefore privileges the sighted world and places the blind characters in a narrative in which they would theoretically be unable to comprehend their role or represent themselves. Because the blind villagers are unaware of the supposed disadvantage that Wells presents on their behalf, they exemplify how Bérubé's concept of *disabled narrative* can be extended to consider how the presence of characters with non-cognitive disabilities can also disable narrative and even genre by preventing the realization of what could have been a true utopia.

I argue that "The Country of the Blind" fits the definition of a disabled narrative based on the two key features that Bérubé identifies: a disabled narrative must possess "textual self-awareness" (572) and must feature one or more disabled characters who, due to their disability, are unable to understand their place in the narrative or to theoretically "represent themselves" (573). Essentially, a self-aware text "reveals itself as being to some degree aware of its mechanical operations" (572). Bérubé argues that self-aware texts acknowledge in some way that they are a narrative with similar imaginative and generative capacity as the human minds that create them. As a result, a narrative that exhibits textual self-awareness implies that it is "to some degree willing—so to speak—to revisit and revise the rules of its operating system" (572).

Wells's short story demonstrates textual self-reflexivity in its construction as part of the oral narrative tradition and via interjections from the narrator. "The Country of the Blind" begins with the unnamed storyteller's dramatic introduction to "that mysterious mountain valley, cut off from all the world of men, the Country of the Blind" (401). The narrator explains the mythical origin story of the remote valley, which "[l]ong years ago [. . .] lay so far open to the world that men might come at last through frightful gorges and over an icy pass into its equable meadows,

and thither indeed men came, a family or so of Peruvian half-breeds fleeing the lust and tyranny of an evil Spanish ruler" (401). The narrative's rich, evocative diction and elaborate syntax construct the gripping tale of a dramatic conflict between a fearsome ruler and a group of humble citizens who become trapped when a series of apocalyptic events strike the land and "cut off the Country of the Blind for ever from the exploring feet of men" (401). The story of the single outside survivor of this event "begot a legend that lingers along the length of the Cordilleras of the Andes to this day" (401). The narrator suggests that the story's main plot originates from the story told by "one of these early settlers" (401), establishing itself as part of an oral tradition stretching back to that long-ago time.

At this point in the story, however, the narrator interjects their own imaginative perspective on the characters of the myth, emphasizing the oral quality of the narrative:

I figure this dim-eyed young mountaineer, sunburnt, gaunt, and anxious, hat brim clutched feverishly [ . . . ] telling this story to some keen-eyed, attentive priest before the great convulsion; I can picture him presently seeking to return with pious and infallible remedies [ . . . ] But the rest of his story of mischances is lost to me, save that I know of his evil death after several years. (401)

This is the only instance of first-person narration in the story, although the narrator also makes their personal views known when they assert that "Pointer's narrative is the best" (402) of the dozens written about Nuñez's disappearance in the Andes. These narrative interjections all occur while establishing the background of the Country of the Blind, while the narrator is setting the backdrop for their story. Although the narrator focalizes through Nuñez after the character's introduction, the first-person interjections in the third-person expository section significantly impact how readers will perceive the narrative as a whole. Despite the focalization through Nuñez's character, the account is clearly not his own but that of a more distant storyteller.

Without these personal narratorial interjections, readers could assume that the text is intended to be a written narrative despite the oral elements. After all, many tales from the oral tradition, such as fairytales and folk tales, have been collected and written down, with the written form retaining many formulaic elements of the original oral structure of the tales—such as the invocation *Once upon a time*. In "The Country of the Blind," however, these interjections from the narrator are personal and individual, expressing the way that this narrator constructs the character in their own imagination. These additions to the tale individualize it, implying it is

written as told at a single moment in time by one individual who is aware of the way his or her narration impacts listeners' comprehension.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the interjected remarks suggest the narrator also understands their power over the characters in the narrative—that the narrator's imagination paints them and brings them to life. It is the narrator who constructs their identities and chooses how they are represented. This text *is* the narrative, and the narrator's self-awareness constitutes textual self-awareness.

### **Narrative Functionality**

I argue that Wells's tale is meant to be read as an oral narrative, constructed as part of the oral history of those who live in the Andes. It is true that textual self-reflexivity is also found in written narratives; however, this is not the case for Wells's text. Beyond the reasons outlined above, Wells's introduction to the 1911 edition of *The Country of the Blind and Other Stories* clearly states the author's emphasis on the oral purpose of his tales. Wells asserts that his "conception of the art of the short story" has "only this essential, that it should take from fifteen to fifty minutes to read aloud" (viii). This is the only hard rule in his definition: that the short story can be spoken aloud in under an hour. Wells further explains that he dislikes having to anthologize his work, preferring that the stories should be "expensively printed alone" (viii) and left lying about innocuously for curious people to find rather than sequestered "in gentlemen's studies" (ix), suggesting that their purpose more closely aligns with that of the oral tradition: told aloud to anyone around to hear it, not relegated to the bookshelves of academics to be perused in silence.

Although Wells's introduction is paratextual evidence, "The Country of the Blind" itself contains additional suggestions that it is intended to represent an oral narrative beyond the narratorial interjections. Its structure is easy to follow as an oral narrative, retelling the original tale of the "family or so of Peruvian half-breeds" (401) becoming trapped in the valley and slowly going blind over the course of generations, then following the chronology of the events of Nuñez's ill-fated mountaineering expedition. In two instances the narrator emphasizes that "the story [the escaped villager] told begot a legend that lingers along the length of the Cordilleras of

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<sup>6</sup> Although personal interjections like this were more common in earlier Victorian fiction, Wells's tale is not participating in the same tradition. His text lacks the awareness that consumers of the tale are reading it, while earlier authors often explicitly referred to their readers as such.



the Andes to this day" (401), the second time mentioning that the story "developed into the legend of a race of blind men somewhere 'over there' that one may still *hear* to-day" (401, my emphasis). The narrator strongly implies that this is the newest installment of that same legend, and that the reader is currently *hearing* this tale, just as one might still hear the original legend of the Country of the Blind.

Although the narrator acknowledges that "the story of [Nuñez's] accident has been written a dozen times" (402), they distinguish their tale from these numerous written accounts by first relaying what Pointer says about how Nuñez fell then deviating from Pointer's tale in dramatic fashion. The narrator explains that "he [Pointer] tells how the little party worked their difficult [. . .] way" (402) up the mountain, "how presently they found Nuñez had gone from them" (402), how they found tracks in the morning where he had fallen during the night, and how they ultimately abandoned their expedition and "Pointer was called away to war before he could make a second attack" (403). The narrator's account of Pointer's work resembles a succinct verbal summary, which he caps off with by explaining, "to this day Parascotopetl lifts an unconquered crest, and Pointer's shelter crumbles unvisited amidst the snows" (403). This is followed on a new line by this dramatic assertion: "And the man who fell survived." The placement of this last line signals to the reader that a dramatic pause is necessary. It is not merely the start of a new paragraph, but stands alone as the next paragraph is indented directly below it. The placement of this line constitutes strong evidence for the intended orality of this story. Using such a technique in the layout of the written tale does not have as much effect on the silent reader as it does on the one reading aloud, indicating that the speaker must pause and allowing them time to comprehend and intone the line with all the gravitas it implies. The style of narrative suggests that the narrator is not a textual scholar evaluating narratives of Nuñez's disappearance—they have already done that and decided that "Pointer's narrative is the best" (402). Rather, the narrator uses the established story and builds it into their oral tale to lend it credence and to shock their listeners when they reveal that there is more to the stories that listeners may have already heard.

While the story remains conscious of its narrativity and the potential effects of its narration, it shows no signs of being conscious that it is in reality a written rather than an oral narrative—a glaring gap in its self-understanding has significant implications for its narrative functionality. By narrative functionality, I refer to the text's efficacy in accomplishing the

implied goals and meeting the contextual expectations of its narrative form. Implicitly constructed as an oral tale, its contextual expectations and implied goals align with those of the oral storytelling tradition, which I propose include at least the following expectations: that the tale represents the narration of a particular storyteller at a single moment in time, that it is being told orally to a limited group of individuals, and that it could then contribute to the community's culture by providing a lesson or moral. Evidently, because the text is written down and published, none of the expectations of the narrative form are fulfilled, and the implied goals of the oral tradition are compromised by the fact that the text does not meet the contextual expectations of the oral tradition. The textual self-awareness of "The Country of the Blind" is therefore undermined by the fact that it exists permanently and fixedly as a written and published narrative and yet indicates no knowledge of this fact. Therein lies what I term its "textual ignorance," the critical gap in the textual self-awareness that is also a site of narrative disability, compromising the text's narrative functionality and misrepresenting its purpose.

In terms of the narrative representation of disabled characters, textual self-awareness implies that these characters should theoretically be able to grasp their position in the narrative. As he conceives of narrative disability, Bérubé applies it to characters with cognitive disabilities who have difficulty grasping notions of "temporality and causality" (573), explaining that "mindlessness [. . .] speaks to the conditions of possibility of narrative itself" (571). The key point is that "the mindless" characters constitute "a form of human embodiment that cannot narrate itself but can only be narrated [. . .] they haunt all narrators with the possibility that perhaps the narrators too, someday, will be unable to tell a coherent story" (572). Critically, Bérubé does *not* suggest "that all the characters in a narrative should in principle be able to narrate themselves and that any narrative involving characters who cannot narrate themselves is somehow exploitative" (572), but rather emphasizes the importance of drawing attention to the fact that "there will always be among us people who cannot represent themselves and must be represented" (572) and, by extension, encourages us to think critically about how these portrayals are constructed and whether they truly reflect the communities they claim to represent.

I maintain that, although they do not have cognitive disabilities, the blind villagers could not represent themselves in this narrative in multiple ways. Bérubé indicates that the underlying principle of his concept lies in whether characters "can in principle represent themselves" as opposed to those who could not because they are unable to "understand certain categories of

mind" required to "understand narrative" (573). First, although the blind characters do understand the concept of narrative, the form of Wells's narrative, a recollection written down, would be fully inaccessible to them. They would be unable to theoretically represent themselves because vision is not something they can conceptualize, so the idea of writing, which relies on sight both in its creation and interpretation in reading, is also beyond the realm of their understanding. Thus, in their own way, they lack the "categories of mind"—understanding of vision and its application—that would be necessary to understand this particular narrative. The text's construction as an oral tale is a cruel twist—the story would be accessible to the blind characters, at least in terms of its existence as a narrative, had it not been written down.

However, even if the inhabitants of the Country of the Blind had access to the tale in oral form, they still would be unable to comprehend the narrative. In addition to drawing attention to the oral narrative form of the tale, the narrator's interjections also exemplify another common feature of the text—the invocation of visual imagination. The narrator "can picture" the "dim-eyed young mountaineer" attempting to obtain the "pious and infallible remedies" with which to save his people (Wells 401). As is common in many oral narratives in an ocularcentric society, the narrator calls upon their audience to picture the events as they happen, providing vivid visual descriptions so that the tale gains a new dimension. Although they could have evoked sensations, scents, sounds, and tastes, the narrator focuses on the visual aspects of the tale, perhaps to provoke even more horror in listeners at the idea of losing their sight, further aligning the audience with the protagonist's horror and misgivings when presented with the "cure" for his vision. Von Koppenfels correctly identifies that the blindness of the villagers is also associated with a loss of imaginative capacity: "the blind people do not lack the light of reason, but their reason, too, has non-human and inhuman qualities: it is strictly partial and functional, and any act of nonconformity is inconceivable to them. The light they have lost, without ever missing it, is the light of the imagination" (163). However, I take issue with von Koppenfels's assertion that the apparent inability of Wells's blind characters to understand nonconformity to their reasoning is "inhuman." The blind villagers all share the same means of perception and their world lacks nothing in terms of functionality and fulfillment; why then should they believe the disruptive and inconceivable ramblings of a single outsider? The imaginations of the blind elders are limited only in their inability to imagine sight and visual images. Their reason is not "non-human;" it is the reason of a non-sighted human who has never dwelt within an ocularcentric society. As a

result, the appeal to imagine this new and different sense and to call to mind visual appearances would of course be meaningless to them.

The text's frequent use of visual descriptions and references to sight would also render much of the rest of the narrative incomprehensible to the blind villagers. The narrative is built on visual connections, describing the mountains and glaciers of Nuñez's mountaineering trip in contrast with visual qualities of the pastoral arcadian valley, from the "parti-coloured" dwellings "in a continuous row on [. . .] a central street of astonishing cleanness" (Wells 404) to the "wall and channel that ran about the valley, near where the latter spouted out its surplus contents into the deeps of the gorge" (404). The story is focalized through Nuñez, who "had an eye for all beautiful things" (407), and accordingly emphasizes the visual aspect of his tale. By choosing to focalize through Nuñez, the narrator further limits the narrative representation of the blind villagers and privileges the ocularnormative worldview of Nuñez's home society. The text consequently presents the world from the perspective of the sighted outsiders, creating a land that would be completely alien to the blind villagers who understand their home as a finite space, ending "at the end of the rocks where the llamas grazed" (409), covered by the "cavernous roof of the universe, from which the dew and the avalanches fell" (409). The idea of stars and a sky above is meaningless and horrifying to them because these things are intangible to their senses, unable to be touched, heard, smelled, or felt. Their sky is described as an "exquisitely smooth" "cavern roof" (409), comprehensibly defining the bounds of their world. The oral narrative of a man coming "[o]ut of the world. Over mountains and glaciers" (405) is to them the story of a man who "come[s] into the world" from "out of the rocks" (405). The text's narrative is not one that fits the worldview of the inhabitants of the Country of the Blind.

Due to its visually descriptive language, predication on visual connections, invocation of visual imagination, and sighted worldview, Wells's text is markedly ocularcentric. Wells constructs a narrative that would be completely inaccessible to the vast majority of the characters it portrays, drawing attention to the ocularnormativism of the world beyond the valley from which the story is being told. Even the accessibility of the oral narrative form has been disabled, written down, limiting the fluidity and flexibility of the oral form by codifying it and effectively fossilizing it. The representation of the blind characters within the narrative mirrors the experience of Nuñez in the Country of the Blind: they are trapped in a text and narrative that would be as inaccessible to them as their country was to Nuñez. As a printed text, the tale

assumes that its readers are also sighted, that all its ocularnormative structures are available to them, and that they will understand Nuñez's embodied experience. However, this results in the exclusion of the embodied experiences of the blind villagers, widening the gap in understanding between sighted and blind and further Othering the blind in favour of perpetuating ocularnormativism. The disabled narrative of the blind characters prevents productive cultural and social exchange between Nuñez and the villagers and between sighted reader and blind character, ultimately disabling the utopian vision of the text as well.

### **Anti-Utopia, Dystopia, and Disability**

The ability of utopian literature to propose a new and better society is predicated on its ability to communicate its ideals, to share suggestions for social betterment with the ultimate goal of improving life in the visitor's society of origin. Wells's disabled utopia, though it offers some insight into how society impacts accessibility, clearly does not present a true utopia.

Paradoxically, literary dystopias share a common goal with utopian works despite their contrasting approach. Indeed, Vieira argues that the despair that often characterizes dystopian fiction must not overwhelm its capacity to demonstrate that this dark future is not inevitable: "Dystopias that leave no room for hope do in fact fail in their mission" (17). Wells does, as Peñalba García observes, employ "two opposite structural principles" (477) in his work to express concerns about society and ideas for its improvement: "the utopian-dystopian mode and the anti-utopian mode" (477). Anti-utopia "shares its strategies and its narrative artifices" with utopia (Vieira 16), but is devoid of the hope that prevails in the utopian-dystopian mode. Anti-utopia criticizes "the utopian spirit itself" (16) alongside the underlying ideologies of contemporary society. John Huntington explains, "at the core of the anti-utopia is not simply an ideal or a nightmare, but an awareness of conflict" not present in utopia and dystopia, extending "to the powerful and disturbing ambivalences that come from perceiving simultaneous yet conflicting goods" (124). Thus, Wells's text is more than just a dystopia for Nuñez. As a whole, it is an anti-utopia that draws attention to the "deeply opposed values" supposedly existing between sighted and blind, disabled and non-disabled, and it is these perceived differences that cause the breakdown of the utopia.

The anti-utopian nature of Wells's text is inextricably linked to its construction of disability, especially considering Wells's engagement with perspectives born of the scientific

revolution, including eugenics. During the turn of the century, which Wells referred to as "the age of confusion" (Claeys 107), his novels were distinctly dystopian, influenced by socialism and eugenics and including characteristics of the late Victorian utopia-turned-dystopia motif, such as "ecological catastrophe," "arcadian elements," and "yearning for primitivism, the simpler life" (Claeys 112). Wells's writing reflects the social and political changes of the late-Victorian era, and Keith Booker and Gregory Claeys identify a discernible shift from dystopian to utopian in Wells's work following his publication of *A Modern Utopia* in 1905. Socialist perspectives and scientific advancement, notably Darwin's theory of evolution, shaped Wells's writing and informed his vision of the future and of how society might be improved. Booker describes Wells's *A Modern Utopia* as "represent[ing] a sort of summa of the utopian fictions of the past" (63), incorporating the knowledge of the potential of modern technology "with the social ideals as old as Plato's *New Republic* and an idealization of the scientific spirit reminiscent of Bacon's *New Atlantis*" (63). In fact, Booker hails the novel as the "last of the great classical utopias, thus marking an historical turn away from utopianism and toward the darker vision of the modern dystopias" (64). Published in 1904, "The Country of the Blind" falls at the very end of Wells's dystopian period and can be considered anti-utopian in its unresolved ending and implied dismissal of utopian ideals that might suggest that Nuñez could resolve the communication barriers and be happy in the Country of the Blind. Wells's representation of blindness both creates and dismantles its utopian vision when the mutual unintelligibility of the blind and sighted embodied experiences become apparent, and the end of the tale offers no hope for reconciling this fundamental disconnect.

The presence of disability in the text is the first hint that what seems to be a beautiful pastoral Arcady might actually be a dystopia, introducing a sense of unease that destabilizes the apparent utopia as the blind villagers' curiosity at Nuñez's sudden appearance in their isolated valley becomes infantilization and dismissal. They cannot, for example, understand his babbling about sight and his origin in a city over the mountains. A small child bites Nunez's hand, exclaiming "'Bogota!' [. . .] mockingly" (406), and the elders of the community dismiss Nunez's attempted explanations of his journey and his ability to see. Even after five days in the community, the self-proclaimed "King of the Blind" (408) was "still incognito, as a clumsy and useless stranger among his subjects" (408). The people of the beautiful and fertile valley are peaceful and not unkind to Nuñez, but his utter helplessness in this new environment and

inability to communicate his sightedness is very unsettling both to Nuñez and the sighted reader, who are unaccustomed to considering vision to be at all disadvantageous. Wells implies that this supposed utopia cannot be so wonderful if an apparently superior being is repressed and made to function under adverse conditions that fail to account for his remarkable ability. Barbara Korte argues that the erasure of disability is a key aspect of utopian fiction and that "the widespread absence of illness and pain [. . .] is the mark of the 'better' place they depict" (295). Although it ultimately proves to be an anti-utopia criticizing a spirit of close-mindedness and suppression of innovation that Wells identified in his own society, "The Country of the Blind" still advances a utopian vision that erases disability in the sense that blindness is not a disabling condition for the citizens.<sup>7</sup> The presence of blindness is nonetheless a key part of its anti-utopian vision: this is an ideal society, but only for the blind.

Wells structures his text as a utopia and subsequently subverts genre expectations by creating this disabled utopia that is paradoxically inaccessible and even disabling to the supposedly abled Nuñez. "The Country of the Blind" follows the general narrative structure set out in Thomas More's original literary utopia, explained by Vieira as

[t]he journey (by sea, land or air) of a man or woman to an unknown place (an island, a country or a continent); once there, the utopian traveller is usually offered a guided tour of the society, and given an explanation of its social, political, economic, and religious organization; this journey typically implies the return of the utopian traveller to his or her own country, in order to be able to take back the message that there are better ways of organizing society. (7)

Indeed, Nuñez arrives in an isolated country from beyond the mountains, and although his arrival is somewhat chaotic, the blind villagers are welcoming and friendly: "the eldest of the blind men," for instance, "explained to [Nuñez] life and philosophy and religion" (407). Despite the community's initial hospitality, difficulty communicating emerges due to their differing abilities:

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<sup>7</sup> Wells's revised version of "The Country of the Blind" published in 1939 is, however, quite literally a different story. Wells changed the ending of the tale: instead of dying on the mountainside, the fleeing Nuñez spots an impending avalanche threatening to crush the village. Rather than continue his flight, Nuñez attempts to warn the inhabitants but succeeds in convincing only Medina-Sarote to escape with him, thus leaving the rest of the villagers to their fate. The disability studies implications of Medina-Sarote's subsequent refusal to get surgery to fix her eyesight following their return to "civilization" are fascinating yet too numerous to address in this paper.

Nuñez is arrogant and believes himself superior because of his sight, and the villagers are content and capable in their blindness, feeling no lack that might indicate that they are missing the sense Nuñez claims to possess.

Nuñez gradually comes to understand the society and its effectiveness, but his reliance on sight prevents him from finding it as idyllic as do its inhabitants. Although he gains a sort of happiness as he grows close to Medina-Saroté, his full acceptance into her society is predicated on his agreeing to have his eyes, perceived as "irritant bodies," surgically removed to make him "perfectly sane, and an admirable citizen" (413). Wells implies that this cannot be a utopia if a supposedly physically superior person must undergo such drastic interventions in order to be included. However, this idea can be extended to people with any kind of physical difference that might be excluded from the community, as in this case where blindness is the normate<sup>8</sup> position. The embodied experiences of the blind villagers and the sighted Nuñez are so vastly different as to make them incommunicable, with this fundamental disconnect ultimately making the text an anti-utopia. According to Vieira, the intent of a literary utopia is to create a believable imaginary society that can be the site of "speculative discourse on a non-existent social organization which is better than the real society" (7). The key element here is the "speculative discourse"—the absence of which makes "The Country of the Blind" anti-utopian. The anti-utopian nature of the text does not arise from the idea that, as von Koppenfels suggests, the blind characters are not "fully human" without the sense of sight and are thus unwilling to accept other ways of understanding the world (164). Rather, it originates from the fundamental inability of sighted and blind to communicate from different cultural and embodied positions, especially in the absence of previously constructed social understandings of disability and normalcy.<sup>9</sup> The utopia is disabled by differences in perception, which points to a bigger question—how can humans create a society that is flexible and inclusive of physical and mental difference when embodied experience is subject to such significant communication barriers?

I argue that Wells successfully creates a utopia for his blind characters—a utopian vision without vision—but by rendering the utopia a dystopia for individuals without visual impairment

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<sup>8</sup> *Normate*, a term from Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies*, refers to the (realistically, small) section of the population who fit the imagined profile of what society considers to be normal.

<sup>9</sup> For further explanation of social constructions of normalcy, see Lennard Davis's *Enforcing Normalcy*.



and an anti-utopia in terms of its application of the ocularnormative antithesis as preventing the necessary transfer of ideals and hope for the future, the text (though unintentionally) highlights the importance of inclusivity and accessibility. As Peter Firchow asserts, "dystopias still retain traces of their utopian origin. Indeed dystopias may once have been widely accepted as utopias" (4). Wells's *Country of the Blind* remains a utopia for its inhabitants, but distrust of the newcomer's explanation of his own needs and way of experiencing the world confines it to the category of anti-utopia in terms of whether it can (or should) should serve as a model for the utopian traveller's society of origin. The villagers' inability to conceptualize sight also disables the utopia, resulting in the villagers' refusal to accept somatic difference. They do not see themselves as different; they do not understand that there is a world beyond their own. Although the narrative places them in an arcadian utopia, the blind inhabitants of the valley would not comprehend this way of viewing their home; for them it is all there is, and differences in ability do not exist.

### **Disability Models and Victorian Conceptions of Disability**

Disability was an increasingly prevalent and contentious topic in the Victorian era, and this reality manifests itself in Wells's text in numerous ways. Jennifer Esmail and Christopher Keep discuss "*The Country of the Blind*" as a text which "plays upon many aspects of the Victorian preoccupation with the nature of ability and its relationship to contemporary discourses of citizenship, education, health, and aesthetics" (46). They emphasize the increasing public presence of people with disabilities in the Victorian era, both in terms of public figures such as deaf-blind celebrity Laura Bridgman and in terms of literary representation (46). This growing public awareness of disability was accompanied by "cultural, governmental, and medical discourses" that, in addition to developing laws and policies pertaining to the treatment of disability in society, also "helped to redefine the very meaning of ability, putting the body and its faculties at the very heart of a new bio-politics" (46). Esmail and Keep highlight Wells's short story as an indication of "the degree to which the emergent definitions of what constituted an able-bodied man or woman were already being questioned and contested in the period" (46). This is reflected in the tension between Wells's treatment of blindness and the modern disability studies frame as he and society as a whole were grappling with changing perceptions of disability. Once considered a more fluid category of being that encompassed people experiencing

things like finite periods of illness, infirmity due to old age, and various mental conditions, people could easily move in and out of a state of disability throughout their lives.

Following the evolution of public understanding and approach to disability in the Victorian era, the advent of the idea that disability was something that could be addressed via medical and social interventions placed people with disabilities in a category separate from the rest of society, Othering them and further inhibiting communication and connection between blind and sighted. Maren Tova Linett observes that "Victorian novels tended to depict blindness as something that either ruins one's life or ends one's text" (55), whereas Wells's late Victorian text rejects this tendency, instead "demonstrat[ing] an interest in exploring life *with* blindness" (55). Additionally, I contend that Wells's text questions wider social assumptions on the nature of disability, encouraging readers to examine the effect of this growing debate about disability on the individuals at the heart of this debate and subject to the scrutiny of men like Wells.

Examining narrative structure and genre in terms of their theoretical accessibility to the disabled characters, and considering disabled characters' potential ability or inability to represent themselves encourages readers to consider the perspective of the inhabitants of the Country of the Blind and the real utopian possibilities that still exist in the initial representation of their peaceful and effective community. Ultimately, the disabled narrative and genre of Wells's text draws attention to how disability was constructed and understood in late-Victorian society. By creating a society of people uniformly affected by what is conventionally regarded as a significant disability but who are not practically impaired by it, Wells's tale illustrates the function of society in causing difference to be disabling. Indeed, Bolt notes that "The Country of the Blind" was influential in the creation of the radical British social model of disability, which proposes that "disability can be avoided through some kind of social reform" (29), as is evident in the way Wells's blind characters were unhindered by their lack of sight and thrived in their daily lives because of their carefully conceived community.

However, Wells's disabled narrative also points to the medical model and the increasing medicalization of disability in late Victorian society. Both Bolt and Brenda Tyrrell identify instances in the text which invoke the medical model of disability, with Bolt noting that "the supposed malevolence [of the blind] is medicalized" (93) when Nuñez agrees to have his eyes surgically removed. Although this representation certainly contributes to the metanarrative of "malevolence" of blind people that Bolt identifies, in Wells's text this incident also indicates a

growing awareness of what we now term the medical model of disability, which Michael M. Chemers defines as a model that "understands disability as disease, with all that implies: weakness, contagion, and need of a cure" (qtd in Tyrrell 220). Tyrrell identifies the terms of epidemic and disease used to describe the original community of settlers' gradual blinding as exemplifying this model and observes that Nuñez is subject to the assumptions of the medical model when—"in order to be with his unsighted beloved, he must consent to be blinded—'cured' of his vision" (220). By placing a person without a disability as the object of medical scrutiny—a place normally occupied by an individual with a disability—Wells's text therefore evokes the dark side of the medical model, which has no concern for whether the patient wants a "cure" and whether medical intervention will improve the patient's quality of life beyond making them conform better to the *normate* standard. Notably, Nuñez ultimately refuses to undergo the supposed cure, choosing instead to keep his vision and forego full acceptance into the community and marriage to Medina-Sarote. His choice implies that although some medical interventions can make someone with different abilities seem more acceptable or relatable to normate society, they are not necessarily in the best interest of the individual—and refusal to accept such treatment may result in further alienation and Othering. Victorian medicalization of disability, then, tended to *over-pathologize* disability, constructing disabilities as problems that needed to be "fixed" and people with disabilities as perpetual patients; incomplete and abnormal unless brought back to the normate standard by whatever medical means necessary, regardless of whether intervention was actually desired or beneficial.

Wells's text also implicates the moral model of disability, which asserts that disability is a form of punishment inflicted on individuals because of some moral failing or sin (Retief and Letšosa 2), by constructing the model as an antiquated understanding of disability that should be rejected in current thought. Wells's narrator acknowledges and subsequently rejects this model in the initial description of how the citizens of the utopian valley came to be blind. The narrator explains that "in those days [. . .] men did not think of germs and infections, but of sins, and it seemed to [one inhabitant] that the reason of this affliction must lie in the negligence of these priestless immigrants to set up a shrine," provoking the man to leave to seek "pious and infallible remedies against that trouble" (401). The narrator implies that the man's reasoning was faulty and that this way of seeing the blindness afflicting his community belongs "in those days" (401). This complete dismissal of the moral model of disability evinces an important shift in the perception

of disability, where the prevailing opinion for centuries had been that disability was visited upon individuals or their family members because of their sinful actions. "The Country of the Blind" clearly acknowledges that this is not the view of members of a rational modern society, especially not in this era, preoccupied as they were with reason and logic amid the scientific revolution. Unlike their predecessors, the late-Victorians were not bound by religious ways of viewing the world and were enlightened by a growing awareness of disease and its transmission. Science had freed them from this outdated way of understanding disability, and it was now being addressed as a medical and social issue.

Wells's text challenges late Victorian understandings of disability by reversing the social experiences of non-disabled and disabled. By creating a supposedly utopian society that privileges the blind and by using a sighted narrator focalizing the narrative through Nuñez, Wells's (presumably) sighted reader is forced to consider the embodied experience of people with disabilities in a world that is unable to comprehend their difference. The cultural barriers that arise as the citizens of the Country of the Blind and Nuñez struggle to communicate their respective sense-based cultural customs and fundamentally different understandings of the world also evokes the cultural model of disability.<sup>10</sup> Nuñez enters the world of the blind with all the prejudices and preconceptions inherent in his own cultural context. He is shocked when he has difficulty functioning and is disabled by the inhabitants' reluctance to restructure their routines to accommodate things like his need for light. Their treatment of him reflects the regard with which his society of origin might treat them, allowing the reader to confront current cultural marginalization of disability by considering what might happen should they become the ones excluded by difference.

In its invocation and subsequent disabling of the utopian structure, Wells's text still contains a nearly utopian message of hope (albeit unintentionally, and perhaps only to modern readers), indicating that what this almost-utopia could contribute to society is lost in the challenges of intercultural and interabled communication. Via a representation of disability that places the reader in the perspective of a character with a non-normative body, "The Country of the Blind" demonstrates an understanding of how social structures contribute to making an individual less able, in addition to drawing attention to the problems with medicalizing and

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<sup>10</sup> See Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell.

moralizing disability. Wells's text shows a remarkable prescience through its awareness of the impact of cultural understandings of disability on disabled individuals and attempts to communicate these effects to the reader, anticipating the moral, social, and medical models of disability. By reversing the experiences of non-disabled and disabled, the tale evokes the dystopian reality of disabled persons living in what seems to be a utopia for the normate—but ends up just being a world more suited to normate abilities. However, the blatant ocularnormativism of Wells's narrative reflects a more general—to rework Bolt's term—normativism of ability in late-Victorian society, and the disabled narrative of "The Country of the Blind" ultimately effectively represents the experience of individuals with disabilities at the turn of the century: either unable to represent themselves in the public discourse on disability due to physical or mental limitations, or prevented from doing so by a discourse that seems determined to talk over them, imposing its own idea of what they need and creating its own narrative of their experience.

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