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Blindness in Media: Addition and Subtraction

Disabled individuals have previously been and are still being excluded from society through either direct or indirect means. Bringing them into the mainstream, or redefining what the mainstream is, be it in reality or fiction, is a process that begins with awareness and acknowledgment of the issues. While the innerworkings of fictional material may not be as important of an issue as how to acclimate disabled individuals to a public scene or how to provide them with means to contribute to a workplace, but every aspect of how disabled individuals are represented in society must be reviewed if true progress is to be made. With that being said, fiction has a mixed history with portraying disabled individuals.

Throughout the years, movies, television and literature have attempted, struggled with and, in some instances, completely failed at portraying disabilities and disabled individuals in accurate and respectful ways. One of the disabilities that the media has tried their hand at the most is blindness. This may be because blindness is a disability that is easier than others for an able-bodied person to understand or even simulate. Closing one's eyes or just being in the dark, and one will feel like they understand what it must be like to be blind. Because of the greater experience that blindness has in the media, patterns and writing tropes involving blindness have become very prominent and easily recognizable. These patterns and tropes, when analyzed closely, reveals a less than ideal, but peculiar treatment of blind individuals. To clarify, not all examples of these tropes nor the tropes themselves are done out of negative intentions. Additionally, these tropes and patterns are not always negative by definition either, and blind

characters who fulfill these archetypes are sometimes well-written and prove to be worthy examples of how to write a blind character. This essay will define, analyze, and deconstruct several examples of blind characters in various movies, television shows and pieces of literature, identify three main tropes that they fall under, and reflect on whether the existence of these characters is respectful to the blind community or not.

One specific trope that can be very challenging to be respectful with is the “Blind Mistake” character. As the name sounds, this refers to a blind character who, because of their blindness, finds themselves making errors regarding their surroundings, such as mistaking people for other people, mistaking objects for different ones and so on. This is mainly done for comedic effect at the expense of either the blind individual themselves or the people surrounding them. The trope is generally pushed to an exaggerated degree in order to further enhance the comedic effect, which causes the trope to portray blind individuals as absent-minded and even borderline delusional, such as in an episode of *The Simpsons* with the line “this isn’t a saxophone, it’s an umbrella!” The trope has such a firm place in American culture that there is an entire fictional character whose sole purpose is to embody this trope: Mr. Magoo, an elderly man whose lack of vision gets him up to all sorts of wacky hijinks.



1 Blinkin's lack of awareness in Robin Hood is taken to extremes for comedic purposes.
https://allthetropes.org/wiki/Blind_Mistake

This is possibly the most prominent archetype of blind characters in the media, and it is definitely the most harmful. It portrays blind individuals as accident prone, and the preference for “Blind Mistake” characters to be one of the elderly also doesn’t help, implying that, by being blind, they are decrepit. While this may just be so that the exaggerated antics can be handwaved away, the negative implication is still present. Even in instances of the trope that are completely nonsensical and not meant to be negative in the slightest, such as the character Blinkin from *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* who can catch an arrow but thinks a statue with no arms is a person, these feelings still seep their way into the audience’s mind. The trope paints the blind as foreigners in their own environment, out-of-place aliens that do not understand where they are or what is going on. It also primes the able-bodied audience to respond to a blind individual with

comedic disbelief, instead of the respect and acknowledgement that most humans are owed. As a whole, the “Blind Mistake” trope is a very questionable way to write a blind character into a piece of media that is better off being forgotten.

Another trope found involving blind characters is the “Blind Seer.” This trope has been around for a lot longer than the “Blind Mistake”, and is not as offensive, at least not directly. The “Blind Seer” refers to a character that has no physical sight, but, through fantastical abilities, can see beyond the present moment and into the future. It is an archetype that has roots far back into history, such as from The Bible in the form of Ahijah, or even Tiresias from the *Odyssey*. In fact, the trope is present in various different religions and mythologies, so it stands to reason that it would also appear in modern entertainment. Another recent example would be Neo from the third *Matrix* movie; being blinded does little to hamper The One and his abilities. When compared to the “Blind Mistake” trope, it is not directly apparent that the “Blind Seer” is a harmful archetype or not. Considering one specific example makes the answer slightly more definite, but only slightly. In Norse mythology, Odin is said to have given up one of his eyes in order to gain wisdom, and it is this trade of the physical for the metaphysical that makes an interesting difference. While not all instances of the trope frame the seer’s abilities like this, instead considering blindness just an additional detail, those that do unintentionally reveal a preference for the medical model of disability, a model that views disability as a disease or affliction that needs to be cured or treated, effectively ignoring the human being attached to the disability.

Some instances of the trope take it even further by saying that the seer’s blindness was because of the curse of knowledge or punishment for the seer’s hubris. Whichever option is taken, blindness is seen as a debilitating condition or an affliction that would rather be avoided.

This may be done to emphasize the importance of the information that the seer has gained, but it could also accomplish the inverse, which is to say that just by knowing something, the seer was cursed with the horrible torture that is being blind. The previously mentioned Tiresias had his vision taken as punishment for either stumbling upon a bathing Athena or siding with Zeus in an argument with Hera. The reasons for the blindness being inflicted vary with whichever story is being told, but a similarity between the two is that the punishment cannot be undone, so, in recompense from a guilty Zeus or Athena, Tiresias was given the gift of divination. The fact that the senses of sight and prophecy can be considered closely equal enough to justify this exchange, shows how much the Greek storytellers of the time considered blindness to be a curse except for when an ability of equal worth, prognostication in this case, is given in return to create an equal exchange. A similar event takes place in the Bible, specifically in chapter 14 of the Book of Kings, when the previously mentioned Ahijah, now blind, was still able to recognize Jeroboam's wife even when she was disguised. Of course, Ahijah was able to do this through God's miraculous intervention, letting Ahijah know who the woman was before even meeting her. This further reinforces the equal value of sight with foresight; a holy miracle can make the blind be a part of the story. However, some instances take a different approach by saying that the seers are not blind, but see too much.

The comic book series *The Sandman* describes a blind seer character as having "travelled far beyond blindness, that indeed, he can do nothing but see." The trope rarely takes this form, such as with Old Mother Dismass in the *Discworld* series of books who is described as having a "detached retina in her second sight." This version of the "Blind Seer" could be compared to how audiograms are used to only measure certain ranges of one's hearing and nothing else; there may be sensations that the individual can hear and see, but they are not sensations that one deals

with in daily life, so they are deemed to be irregular. The main difference between irregular sights and irregular sounds is that the sights, being glimpses into the future, are considered to have more worth than higher or lower pitched sounds. This may be done out of a desire to make the character into a type of superhero for the blind demographic. There is supposed to be a superhero for every type of person, and the “Blind Seer” may be the attempts to make a blind superhero.

The last trope or pattern to be analyzed is the “Blind Weaponmaster”. This type of character is one that is a master at combat either despite or because of their lack of sight. The most iconic incarnation of this trope is Daredevil, the Marvel superhero who was blinded as a child and subsequently trained by another blind individual to use his other senses to make up for his blindness, and even surpass able-bodied individuals. This latter characteristic was also found in the “Blind Seer”, but it is far more prominent in the “Blind Weaponmaster”. Some characters in this trope, like Daredevil, use only the physical characteristics of their surroundings and their opponents in order to excel at combat. Others, however, rely on metaphysical or magical means. Kenshi from the *Mortal Kombat* series of video games uses telekinesis to fight his foes, Chirrut Îmwe, from *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* uses the Force and Toph Beifong from *Avatar: The Last Airbender* uses the vibrations sent through the ground to sense her opponents. A key aspect of this trope, both magical and otherwise, is the mastery of the character’s chosen art, not just the combat.



2 Chirrut from *Rogue One* in the midst of battle. <https://www.mycast.io/talent/chirrut-imwe>

The previously mentioned Chirrut, pictured above, has honed his abilities with the Force so much that he can go so far as to say, “I am one with the Force, and the Force is with me.” This could possibly be a simple encouraging mantra, but his skills speak for themselves. Kenshi has mastered combining his telekinetic abilities with sword-based combat, and Toph is said to be the greatest user of earthbending, what allows her to “see” with the earth. In other words, these characters and their skills are supposed to be so good at what they have chosen to study that they are able to use that magical force, or, in more realistic cases, their other senses, to replace the sight that they have lost. As with the “Blind Seer”, these characters are usually described as being more capable than able-bodied individuals, but some exceptions. While seers are typically able to see everything with next to no limitations except for the character’s own motivation, the masters are sometimes given limitations along with their abilities. “Blind Weaponmasters” are sometimes written to be villains, serving to humble or teach the protagonist to expand their

repertoire, and it is their blindness that regularly plays a big role in the context of the showdown, even being the root of the villains' defeat. The trope's existence implies that, on a surface level, blind individuals can forge their own path in society. The previously mentioned superhero framing of blind characters is still present here; the characters do not need to have society adapt to them, they are strong enough to adapt to society, but only until they can't. Toph Beifong is able to express both of these aspects through her character. Again, she is the strongest warrior in her way of fighting, so much so that she can "see" with her abilities. However, she is so adept at what she does, that those around her sometimes forget that she is blind. Instances where somebody throws her something only for it to hit her in the head, or somebody trying to show her what is written on a piece of paper show that, for as amazing as her abilities are, Toph is still blind, and there are parts of that experience that no aspect of her abilities will be able to replace.

The "Blind Weaponmaster" trope is arguably the least offensive of the three discussed, but it is not free of any negative implications. The idealization of the blind individual being able to hold their own or even surpass those with vision can be interpreted as a form of fictional inspiration porn, which is the objectification of disabled individuals in order to inspire an able-bodied audience. When the trope crosses the line into inspiration porn, it is then imploring real blind individuals to dig deep within themselves in order to make it in a mainstream society, instead of the society providing ways for the blind to contribute. For clarity's sake, this trope does have more good intentions than the first two, and can produce some characters that, despite their abilities, can adequately capture the blind experience, such as Toph and certain versions of Daredevil. However, some iterations of the trope can still have little details that can be harmful to the blind community.

As a whole, blindness trends, patterns and tropes are a mixed bag. They can be offensive by making fun of a blind individual's lack of awareness and portraying them as absentminded klutzes, imply that their state of being is a curse or the short end of a bad deal, and even classify their blindness as a limitation and weakness. However, certain aspects of certain tropes can be seen as ideal ways for blind individuals to be involved in certain pieces of media, inspiration porn aside. For the most part, blindness in the media has become a sort of trope in itself, with blind characters sometimes being seen by the audience as an archetype even though they are just a person who happens to be blind. To summarize, blindness has become a major part of the media, even sometimes being considered a vital plot point or character aspect, but only sometimes is it done in a respectful and tasteful way.

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