

“Pity the blind”? Hidden stories of empowerment and inclusion in John Everett Millais’ *The Blind Girl* (1856)

Professor Graeme Douglas Head of the Disability, Inclusion and Special Needs department at University of Birmingham gives his specialist take on John Everett Millais’s *The Blind Girl*. He reflects on what this painting can teach us about vision impairment in the Victorian period and in today’s society too.

Professor Graeme Douglas

Collection: Birmingham Museum and Gallery

I first saw Millais’s *The Blind Girl* (Fig. 1) in the 1980s when I moved to Birmingham as an undergraduate. Exploring my new city, I visited the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery out of curiosity. I wasn’t studying art, and never have. Nevertheless, Millais’s painting affected me and not in an altogether positive way. About thirty years later I now research and teach in the area of special educational needs and disability, and by coincidence my particular interest is in the area of vision impairment. I was recently preparing an inaugural lecture and decided to revisit this picture as a way of introducing my topic – which explored the relationship between vision impairment, disability and education.¹ It is through this lens of applied social science that I consider Millais’ painting again.

The Blind Girl was painted by Millais between 1854 and 1856. It is part of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery’s wonderful collection of pre-Raphaelite art. It depicts two girls, presumed to be sisters, resting by the road side. In the background there is a village flanked by dark rain clouds with a double rainbow arching overhead. The older sister has a music box on her lap and a sheet around her neck captioned ‘Pity the Blind’.

As a social scientist researching vision impairment, there are so many angles I could take when considering this painting. For example, Winchelsea, the pretty village in the background, was visited several times by John Wesley the evangelical preacher and a founder of the Methodist movement, including in 1790 when he gave his last outdoor sermon.² By then he was in his late 80s and his health was failing. He gave this last sermon sitting down; his vision was probably failing also, as a year earlier he wrote ‘my eyes were so dim that no glasses would help me’.³ The relationship between disability and ageing is a complex and important one – in 21st century UK, the majority of people with vision impairment are over the age of 70.

Nevertheless, the subject of the painting is a blind girl, which links more directly to my interest in understanding how education and other social structures can best support young people with vision impairment. In the field of vision impairment education (and broader fields of special educational needs and disability studies), debates around how we conceptualise the difficulties (or successes) young people have in accessing a positive education are common. This is clearly illustrated by the distinction between so-called ‘individual’ and ‘social’ models of disability: should we focus our analysis of education on the individual person – for example, on their vision impairment, needs, skills or abilities – or focus our analysis on social structures – for example, on the quality of teaching, the accessibility of the school building, the attitudes of teachers and peers?

When I first saw Millais’ painting, my interpretation and emotional response was overwhelmed by an individually-focused analysis of the situation. The painting depicts a quintessentially beautiful English landscape. It presents opulent colours that are common after rain: the green seems greener, with bright sunshine against dark clouded backdrop enhancing the sharpness of the contrast. Everything is heightened and ‘super-charged’: the double rainbow, the butterfly, the rich auburn hair of the girl. Perhaps this overwhelming visual scene can lead to an interpretation which focusses only upon what the blind girl *cannot* do (often referred to as a ‘deficit model’ in the field of disability studies). It’s a hopeless situation: what can be done, when the poor girl is denied such beauty? Art Critic Jonathon Jones sums it up neatly: ‘There is something amazingly crass about it. Few other paintings dare to say, in such a frank way: wouldn’t it be terrible to be blind?’.⁴

Nevertheless, this deficit model of blindness starts to give way to a less egocentric (or ‘vision-centric’) interpretation of the blind girl. I consider her as having agency and experiences of her own. These may be different to mine but they are just as valuable; just as human. Jones goes on to note that Millais ‘makes you see your own seeing – and makes you think about perception itself’.⁵ Liberated from just the visual interpretation, we can appreciate more: the touch of grass; warm sunshine on the face; a slight breeze; the smell of fresh air; the sound of birds or perhaps the rain. The presence of the music box on the girl’s lap perhaps symbolises these other senses, drawing us beyond the individually-focused interpretation into the interpersonal and social. After all, there are two people in the picture – two sisters who seem close. Perhaps the younger, sighted, sister is offering a description of what she can see. The clasping of the hands implies reassurance. Perhaps it is the older, blind, sister who is protecting the younger sister under the shawl. Maybe there is a practical exchange between the two sisters about the journey ahead.

To gain a fuller understanding of the life and experiences of the blind girl, it is crucial to consider the educational and social structures beyond the senses and the individual. How is she included or

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excluded in the world she inhabits? The sign around the girl's neck is poignant here: *'Pity the blind'*. Millais is no doubt using it as a signal that the girl is blind rather than just meditating with her eyes closed. But it also signals some political points. The girls are presented as poor – the dresses are dirty and worn, and the sign confirms this. Even so, the blind girl's musical talents may mean that she is a significant earner in the family. By today's standards, the girls would be of school age and some concerns about the education of blind children did exist at the time Millais was painting. For example, an early charitable foundation, the Catholic Blind Institute was founded in Liverpool in 1841 a few years before the painting was completed. New College Worcester opened soon after in 1866 as *'Worcester College for the Blind Sons of Gentlemen'* (although the blind girl would not be welcome at that school for at least two reasons). Nevertheless, it was not until the 20th Century that education for blind people became more standardised with the adoption of braille for literacy education.

While vision impairment offers an important case, these issues of social justice and inclusion reach far beyond blindness – for example in relation to broader areas of disability, race, gender, sexuality and poverty. When the painting was created it was a time of social change and questioning. Millais appeared to be one of those questioning voices and this can be explored through the stories of those involved in the creation of this painting: Matilda Proudfoot, the model in the painting; Effie Millais (nee Gray), Millais's wife; and Millais's friend John Leech.

Matilda Proudfoot was not blind herself, but she was poor. Perhaps seeking greater authenticity, Matilda was recruited by the artist's wife (Effie) from a local School of Industry in Perth, which supported poor and orphaned children. More specifically, the School of Industry was set up in 1843 for 'the receiving of training of fatherless and motherless or destitute girls, or of those who through poverty, neglect, or any other cause are left without proper guardianship or are in danger of contamination from association with vice or crime'.⁶ Effie Millais described Matilda as coming from a 'miserable home'.⁷

Effie was the original model for the blind girl painting. However, she found being seated outdoors boring and painful and caused 'dreadful suffering'.⁸ She also noted it was difficult to find models from pauper schools as most were too ugly.⁹ Millais later scratched out the face on the painting and replaced it with Matilda's. From this summary, it is tempting to dislike Effie – she seems patronising and indulged (and, like all of us, a product of her time and context). In fact, Effie is a far more impressive person and is the subject of much analysis. Millais met Effie in 1853, just before he started the painting. Effie was travelling in Scotland with her then husband, John Ruskin. Millais had been commissioned to paint his now famous portrait of Ruskin standing beside Glenfinlas

Falls. However, Millais became deeply infatuated with Effie as evidenced in various portraits undertaken at that time.

Ruskin and Effie's marriage was annulled in 1854, on the grounds of his impotency: for Effie, the marriage had been unhappy and oppressive. Effie and Millais married in 1855 and the union caused a scandal, with Effie suffering social isolation as a result. Nevertheless, this second marriage was clearly liberating. She influenced Millais' art (e.g. finding him models), and effectively managed his career. She was intelligent and outspoken.

Millais was very good friends with John Leech and Leech would have been aware of the developing relationship between Effie and Millais. He was a Victorian illustrator and caricaturist and famously illustrated some editions of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843) – a novel also concerned with poverty, social justice and, to some extent, disability. Leech, too, produced many humorous and satirical illustrations for *Punch* magazine. A notable example is *Substance and Shadow Cartoon, No. 1* (1843, Fig. 2). The 'cartoon' contrasts the self-aggrandising images of politicians in the newly-built Palace of Westminster with the poor and sometimes disabled people they represent. This appears to be the first time the word 'cartoon' had ever been used in this way – so the link between disability, poverty, exclusion and social justice is the subject of world's first ever 'cartoon'.¹⁰

I was originally drawn to Millais's picture because of its arresting presentation of nature and the trite contrast with the life of a blind girl. My professional life has been concerned with educational and social inclusion of people with vision impairment and this prompted me to often revisit and re-evaluate this remarkable picture. Indeed, the picture is a powerful mechanism to force the viewer to consider what it might mean to be blind or have reduced vision. I use it in my teaching and to challenge and push my own understanding of disability. The painting tests our understandings of the senses; it reveals our prejudices and simplifications; and even makes us consider practical aspects of vision impairment. It forces us to think about how inclusive we are towards those with vision impairment and how this has changed over time. By looking beyond the painting at the characters who helped make it, we also appreciate that inclusion is a much bigger and broader endeavour. It seeks to empower those who are excluded on any basis, including disability, poverty, gender or race.

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Images

Fig. 1 John Everett Millais, *The Blind Girl*, 1856, oil on canvas, 80.8 x 53.4cm, © Birmingham Museums Trust.

Fig. 2 John Leech, *Substance and Shadow*, drawing, 17.7 x 24.3 cm, in *Punch* (15 July 1843), p. 23

¹ Graeme Douglas, 'Pity the Blind'? An analysis of vision impairment, disability and education. Inaugural lecture, College of Social Sciences, University of Birmingham (13 April 2018). <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/education/news/2018/04/pity-the-blind.aspx> [accessed 10/10/19]

² J Hight, *Britain's Tree Story*, *The National Trust* (2011).

³ Wikipedia, *John Wesley* (2018), see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Wesley [accessed 10/10/19]

⁴ Jonathan Jones, *Mawkish masterpieces*. *The Guardian* (25th September 2007)

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ J Pennington, *Who is the model in Millais' Blind Girl?* Quora blog (2018), <https://www.quora.com/Who-is-the-model-in-Millais-Blind-Girl> [accessed 10/10/19]

⁷ L Williams, *The Look of Little Girls: John Everett Millais and the Victorian Art Market* in Claudia Nelson and Lynne Vallone (Eds) *The Girl's Own: Cultural Histories of the Anglo-American Girl, 1830-1915*. (Georgia UP, 1994), 135.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ E. I. Harris and S. R. Scott, *A gallery of her own: an annotated bibliography of women in Victorian painting* (Garland Publishing, 1997), 283.

¹⁰ D. Thomas, *History of the Cartoon: Punch Cartoon Library* (N.D), see <https://web.archive.org/web/20071111013518/http://www.punch.co.uk/cartoonhistory.html> [accessed 10/10/19]