

A Critical Analysis of The Country of the Blind

By :H.G Wells

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دراسة تحليلية نقدية لمدينة العميان لويلز

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المستخلص

يرصد الكاتب في قصته الصراع القائم بين ما في نفس الإنسان من مبادئ وبين ما هو مُتعارف عليه، وللتوضيح أكثر حول الفكرة التي يريد الكاتب إيصالها تم تفكيك الرواية إلى عناصرها الأساسية وتحليلها . تتسم رواية بلد العميان بعدد من الخصائص والسمات الفنية، بناء على ما ورد عن مجموعة من الباحثين في قراءة تحليلية لها، يُذكر منها ما يأتي:

تضمن الرواية العديد من الرموز والدلالات. بروز عنصر الإثارة والتشويق في الرواية. دقة الوصف وجماليته.

Abstract

In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. Even someone with limited abilities or opportunities is dominant over, and considered special by, those who have even fewer abilities and opportunities; the value of any ability depends on its prevalence.

The conflict in the story is between Nunez (protagonist) and the blind men (antagonists). We can see throughout the novel how Nunez tries again and again to prove to the men that he is not crazy. This is an example of Man vs. Society.

Wells described “The Country of the Blind” as an “exploration fantasy, and one of his best”, it is the best known of the almost one hundred short stories written by the English author H. G. Wells (1866–1946). It was first published in the April 1904 issue of The Strand Magazine, and subsequently in book form in The Country

of the Blind and Other Stories (1911). Wells later revised the story, and an expanded version with a different ending appeared in 1939.

The Country of the Blind revolves around a man, Nuñez, who is barely described. This lack of description allows for him to take on the character of an 'everyman' in readers' imaginations. He fell off a mountain and chanced upon the Country of the Blind, a place that he has heard that was only a legend. These inhabitants were cut off from the rest of the world by an earthquake. In living with the blind, Nuñez finds out that his character may be wrong in a society that doesn't even know the word, "see." These people can still live out effectively with the help of their other heightened senses.

Nuñez, having no way of leaving the place, serves these people— learning to live with his sight that they considered a disability. After some time, he falls in love and has gained permission to marry his beloved but only if he is willing to abandon his eyes. Choosing between the love of his life and his sight, he chooses the latter and decides to do everything he can to leave the Country of the Blind.

When Nunez first encounters the village, he finds a valley, cut off from the rest of the world on all sides. Unknown to Nunez, he has discovered the fabled "Country of the Blind". The valley had been a haven for settlers fleeing the tyranny of Spanish rulers, until an earthquake reshaped the surrounding mountains, cutting the valley off forever from future explorers. The isolated community prospered over the years, despite a disease that struck them early on, rendering all newborns blind. As the blindness slowly spread over

many generations, the people's remaining senses sharpened, and by the time the last sighted villager had died, the community had fully adapted to life without sight. ...

He remembers hearing tales about it from his youth. He recalls a proverb from earlier in life, that "In the Country of the Blind the One-Eyed Man is King," (Wells, 1904) this belief limits his own inclusion into the group. Believing he is exceptional actually makes Nunez an outsider by his own design. Rather than accepting their different way of life as essential to their own livelihood, Nunez instead believes that he can become a king among what he considers outsiders. In this sense, the villagers are 'outside' of the influences of Christianized cities like Bogota.

Nunez is an outsider in the eyes of the villagers and in the hands of the author. By fashioning his protagonist as an everyman, the most obvious qualities of his appearance are spared so that readers can more thoroughly imagine the limits of the world that Wells has manifested for them. In this same way, Nunez is treated as another by the villagers first by way of his perception. This is an essential gesture on Wells' behalf. When Nunez first gestures to the villagers to greet them, they do not return his gesticulation. At this point, the main character utters to himself, . Before even interacting with them, Nunez has deemed the individuals that comprise the peaceful territory 'fools' and thereby he imposes his own standards of social expectation upon them in advance.

Nunez thus is as much a product of the relatively urbane life he had lived prior to venturing to the land of the blind as the villagers are a product of their own disability. For each, their inability to recognize the beneficial traits of the other limit growth. Though Nunez idealistically believes that he should be king of the blind, this precept is the very thing that prevents his acceptance. Likewise, the villagers' unwillingness to imagine an ability that they cannot grasp within their logic prevents their betterment.

Nunez's belief that the villagers need to be ruled by a sighted person prove that he is unequipped to rule them or even participate in normal society. After having adapted to the disability that came to eventually affect all of the members of the village, there is no need for sight. Even more than this, claims about sight are entirely lost on members of the group.

All of his attempts to prove to the villagers that he can be more useful than their most adept blind citizens actually make him appear to be even more clueless.

When he first encounters the countryside village, Nunez believes that he will not only integrate; he is certain that he will become the king of the remote area. Instead, Nunez finds himself continually marginalized throughout the work. His benefit of sight is believed to be a false claim. In society today, oftentimes when individuals assert their own exceptionalism, such a claim is met with doubt and dismay. Wells similarly portrays the small village as having this

reaction. Such doubt, however, can actually negatively impact the society in question.

Upon discovering that everyone is blind, Nunez begins reciting to himself the proverb, “In the Country of the Blind, the One-Eyed Man is King”. He believes that he can teach and rule them, but the villagers have no concept of sight, and do not understand his attempts to explain this fifth sense to them. Frustrated, Nunez becomes angry, but the villagers calm him, and he reluctantly submits to their way of life, as returning to the outside world seems impossible

He learns that the people have skills that he does not and that his presence is thought by the high priestess to be an infection that must be destroyed. Nunez is assigned to work for a villager named Yacob. He becomes attracted to Yacob’s youngest daughter, Medina-saroté, and the pair soon fall in love. After winning her confidence, Nunez tries to explain sight to Medina-saroté, but she dismisses it as his imagination. When Nunez asks for her hand in marriage, he is turned down by the village elders on account of his “unstable” obsession with “sight”. The village doctor suggests that Nunez’s eyes be removed, claiming that they are diseased and are “greatly distended”, and because of this “his brain is in a state of constant irritation and distraction”. Nunez reluctantly consents to the procedure because of his love for Medina-saroté.

After he unsuccessfully tries to impose his way of living, and his power, on a group of blind people living in a remote mountain village, he has to make the decision whether he bows to their

customs completely by sacrificing his vision or whether he prefers to move on and fight for his individual survival alone. But at sunrise on the day of the operation, while all the villagers are asleep, he sets off for the mountains without provisions or equipment, hoping to make his way back to the outside world.

Nuñez was being criticized for having eyes. He stumbled on his steps and even as he tried to explain the wonders of the world that can be seen with the eyes, he could not be understood. He watched these people go on about their everyday lives using only their four senses and he was amazed with how much they have been able to adapt to being blind. In this story a social issue that can be identified is stereotyping. This can be seen in the character of Nuñez, who thinks that because townspeople are blind, that they have a hard time going about their day.

Nuñez's sight was very important to him. This can be considered as a blindness as he could not understand the people of the country and how they are able to live and function effectively even without their sight and he still stumbled in his step even with it. Also, because of his sight, he was given the choice to undergo surgery to remove them to be able to marry the girl he loves. Even the girl he wants to marry would like him to lose his sight and the country men think that his sight is his blindness. His sight makes him unappreciative of the way of living the blind have created to suit their needs and now he was questioning everything they did

because of the things he was able to see. "See" a word the blind do not even know the meaning of, they then laugh at him

Nunez represents the bold, somewhat narrow-minded self-assured patriarchal authority of the Western world and, yet, Wells also fashions him to grow through some form of self-awareness. It is an early example of the ideas that Orwell would summarise as "nationalist". Whoever has the power, has the storytelling

According to George Orwell

Nationalism is inseparable from the desire for power. The abiding purpose of every nationalist is to secure more power and more prestige, not for himself but for the nation or other unit in which he has chosen to sink his own individuality. Even more than this, Nunez is a symptom of that larger society about which the people of the Country know nothing. Thus, he appears to them wild. His insistence on his ability to see makes him seem as an individual who has a mental affliction.

In Western traditions, 'seeing is believing' yet for the people that Nunez encounters, seeing is without meaning. One villager reports that Nunez "talks unmeaning words" (Wells, 1904) when he discusses seeing. As such, his innate physical ability appears to the villagers as a farcical impossibility. In this same way, Nunez's rationalism is first called into question for readers. Rather than appearing as a knowledgeable individual among the ignorant, Wells leads his readers to a single important question: what is the difference between believing and seeing?

The cold rationalism that Nunez relies upon is unfamiliar to the villagers and, in time, this makes the character unfamiliar to himself. Instead of becoming more assured about his own abilities, Nunez instead realizes how his expectations about how daily life should operate (waking and working during the day, for instance) are largely predicated on his own judgments and preconceptions. After unsuccessfully deploying a number of clever tactics in order to convince the villagers of the benefits of sight, Nunez eventually becomes dejected at the thought. Add to this the presence of Medina-Saroté and Nunez's stark rational view is seriously challenged. Rather than adhering only to the rational human traits that he has exhibited throughout the story, the potential for love seems to cloud Nunez's judgment. Or, to think of this another way: Nunez's judgment is first tested by the love that he accepts.

Societies that force assimilation bankrupt their populations of individualism. Assimilation into a country can come naturally for some populations. When there are already values posited in terms of interiority and exteriority, for Nunez, his marginalisation is one that grows with his own social discord. His inability to assimilate underscored throughout his failed efforts to convince villagers of his worth.

Assimilation can thus prevent society from acquiring some of its most accurate and thorough critics. The blind people featured in Wells' story are left without any of the revelations about sight that

Nunez could have elucidated. It is suggested, however, that they have regularly ignored and banished others that were critical. The same marginalization through which Nunez first understood the villagers became the primary method through which they learned to understand him. In contemporary society, this kind of action is routinely replicated. Assimilation into a region cannot come from the foreclosed behaviors and ideologies of new populations. Instead, these beliefs and new ideas need to be integrated into society in order to assure its highest level of functioning.

Believing that the villagers are outmoded in their beliefs, Nunez seeks to return to his home of Bogota. In terms of human characteristics, while Nunez's narrow-minded self-assuredness is challenged in Wells' story, the rationalism he clings to is only debatably virtuous. Nunez thus seeks to forget the valley at the story's close and thus reassert his own self-worth. False assumptions can cloud judgment and prevent opportunities from ever being realized. This is the central issue that plagues Nunez throughout the story. There are barriers that the character faces which are, for the most part, entirely of his own construction. False assumptions thus take the form of the preconceptions with which Nunez first encountered the villagers. Nunez's belief that he should be the king of the blind seriously limits his inclusion into the group. Even more than this, however, assumptions like these prevented the group from being able to imagine or even tolerate the claims that Nunez makes throughout "The Country of the Blind".

Nunez's false assumptions prevent his ability to 'see' the villagers for their most beneficial traits. In the same way, the villagers' preconceptions fail to adequately take into account the claims of an outsider. Whereas Nunez's assistance could greatly benefit the practices of the culture he faces in "The Country of the Blind" this much is never fully accounted for. Instead, the villagers seek to blind Nunez as well through surgery and thus prevent change from occurring. This decision limits the opportunities for the villagers as well as Nunez.

Jodie R. Gaudet of Georgetown University has suggested that Wells may not be intending to describe a valley that tangibly exists, but rather a hallucination brought on by Nunez's concussion caused by his fall. The idea that the entire story takes place in the imagination of the main character is given some weight by Wells's style of writing; the many ellipses inserted throughout the text – "the passing of time coterminous with an absence of recognition" – may be suggesting that Nunez is drifting in and out of consciousness as he dreams of the country of the blind.

Well's story depicts a "reversed" relationship between the sightedness and blindness. In the country of the blind where blind populations make their living, Nunez is the "other" and his otherness is defined by his ability to see. Unlike many other stories in which the sighted individuals define and constitute the otherness of the blind individuals, Well reveals a story whose plot consists of constitution of otherness not by the sighted but by the blind

people. In addition to the deconstructive act he accomplished about the reversal of “the sighted” and “the blind”, once more he deconstructs literature as his story cannot finish with an absolute, proper ending.

In this regard, Nunez represents the “enlightened” individual, whilst the blind people represent the ones who believe in and make living on the basis of “myths”. In the blind society whose social contracts are established on the basis of myths, the words such as “seeing”, “sight” and “looking” don’t exist. These words are unknown to the blind people and they do not correspond to particular signs or referents, they are not even interested in new perspectives.

Nunez's blindness in H.G. Wells’ story is the result of his social conditioning and, to a large extent, his own hubris. Refusing to see what he cannot comprehend, Nunez prevents himself from relating with the villagers. In a similar fashion, the villagers are deaf to Nunez's claims and this prevents him from being able to give them any of the benefits of sight which could make their lives easier. Though both the villagers and Nunez are guilty of both not hearing or seeing one another, both of these enacted sets of behaviors prove detrimental primarily to their own respective wishes.

Wells makes the blindness of his protagonist something of a faint echo. Early in the work, the author details of the people from the Country of the Blind that “Intonation had long replaced expression

with them, and touches gesture” (Wells, 1904). This is a special declaration that carries on throughout the work. Later, for example, the narrator notes that each time Nunez repeats his claim (that he should be king), he does so “[d]uring the meditations he repeated very frequently and always with a profounder note of derision” (Wells, 1904). Thus, somewhat ambiguously, Nunez has adopted one of the practices of the people without necessarily realizing it. Instead of paying close attention to intonation in a society that cannot see, however, Nunez instead only realizes the differences between himself and the villagers.

The villagers' deafness is likewise at first confusing for readers. With inability reinforced greatly by their disability, the villagers refuse to hear what they cannot themselves accept. While imagining sight is surely no easy task, blind populations living within established societies are aware of their handicap. Refusing to understand Nunez's ability, then, only reinforces the beliefs by which the villagers have lived throughout their entire lives. It is thus clear to see that, in addition to being physically blind, they allow themselves to become deaf.

They refuse to acknowledge another way of determining an individual's path. Instead of attempting to understand what he claims, the villagers are more likely to believe he is mad. Nunez's blindness is as significant as the villagers' deafness. Not allowing himself to directly relate to the villagers, the protagonist of the story allows himself to become blind, if not by way of surgical means.

"The Country of the Blind" is focusing on sight and blindness and brings up the theme of prejudice versus learning. The disadvantage of blindness could be replaced by ignorance, cultural difference, skin colour or social class. Wells does not offer an alternative to the Imperial view. He does not permit the possibility that Nunez could have learned the ways of the sightless and understood their particular version of wisdom or that they could have found a use for his particular talents. The sightless community are obdurate and Nunez is forced to run away or face radical mutilation

In terms of a deconstructive approach on "literary blindness". The blind people in the story actually know how to read; they don't see but concretize, they substitute the act of seeing by smelling and hearing. Besides, they have medical experts and scientists who diagnose Nunez's sightedness as a mental disorder. They're neither self-forgetting nor self-ignorant; they know very well about their descendants and they constitute their language in a way that it would enable the continuation of the life style based on blindness. They don't tend to forget; contrarily their discourses and utterances constantly remind them about themselves.

H. G. Wells uses ethnocentrism as a strong device in the short story 'The Country of the Blind' to generate the central conflict and to convey the theme: . The conflict of ethnocentrism commences as soon as Nunez and the three blind men meet. Then, he was taken to the elders. Again, the citizens portray him as an undeveloped being, 'A wild man- using words', 'His mind has hardly formed yet.

He has only the beginnings of speech' for he speaks using words such as 'see' and 'sight' which they have never heard before and those words doesn't exist in their culture nor country. Series of conflicts follow afterwards, Nunez tripping over for he cannot see in complete darkness, Nunez trying to paint a picture of the real world with words but resulting the elders misunderstanding him and the citizens calling him 'Bogota' for he keeps saying that is the place where he came from. Every action Nunez takes results as a dilemma for him. Even after he is humiliated, he still doesn't accept the thoughts and beliefs of the blind people.

In modern society, pressure weighs heavily on individuals to assimilate. If one is cast as an outsider, the negative consequences that this person can endure are potentially fatal. From one view, once an individual becomes recognized as an outsider, it is difficult to re-inscribe a different social character within them. Through assimilation, however, a good deal of individuality can be lost. Among these, some of the most meritorious traits can be forsaken in order to achieve individual acceptance. In "The Country of the Blind," H.G. Wells makes a paralyzing comparison between this observation and the events that surround Nunez's impending surgery.

Nunez, on the other hand, is a complete outsider to the villagers and, as such, is unfit to marry Medina-Saroté. She herself believes that Nunez should give up his sight so as to become more like her

and those with whom she is most comfortable. Her family members and elders within the village forbid their union unless Nunez is willing to undergo surgery that will make him, like the rest of the village, blind. This is the exact moment wherein Wells' story takes a drastic turn.

The Country of the Blind presents two interwoven themes: A critique of the arrogant colonial practices of 19th century Europeans and a social comment on the Victorian attitude to disability. Both themes highlight the transition from one world of experience to another which would have been unsettling for the Victorian reader. The first, demonstrates the European proclivity for judging other cultures in terms of the skills, knowledge and attributes that they consider necessary for a successful existence. Finding the other lacking, they assume superiority and assert that the other must be inferior and changed for its own good. When Nunez enters the village as a conqueror, he confidently expects the afflicted people to bow before his self-evident superiority. However, instead he is "a clumsy and useless stranger among his subjects" (Wells: 134). The second is a social comment on the Victorian attitude to disability. It shows that disability is only a disadvantage when the environment is designed by the disablers who again assume that they are superior and that the disabled are flawed. "his brain is in a state of constant irritation and destruction" (Wells: 142).

Nunez and Medina-Saroté, love takes on a drastic appearance. For Nunez, Medina-Saroté becomes the motivating factor in his decision to stay and potentially undergo surgery. This, however, could have been greatly affected by the social norms that were extant in the village. The unrequitedness that permeates the conclusion of "The Country of the Blind" underscores the differences in values between the two cultures and the impossibility of Nunez and Medina-Saroté's companionship.

Though he initially believes that he will be able to subject himself to surgery for the sake of Medina-Saroté, Nunez develops doubts. Rather than commit to such a life-changing event completely, he finally leaves the village when the day for his surgery arrives. In this way, it is clear for Wells' readers that the actions of the individual are only comprehensible in terms of the worldview fashioned by one's own culture. Medina-Saroté, who very well could have asked that Nunez not undergo the surgery, instead insists upon the action. In this way, it is clear that Nunez would only be appreciated if he were to completely give up his own preconceptions, beliefs, and likes.

Medina-Saroté and Nunez never could have committed to one another. This realization is the turning point of the story because it forces Nunez to make the decision that has been lingering on the reader's mind throughout the course of the short story. Namely: to leave.

In the original version of the story, Nunez climbs high into the surrounding mountains until night falls, and he rests, weak with cuts and bruises, but happy that he has escaped the valley. His fate is not revealed. In the revised and expanded 1939 version, Nunez sees from a distance that there is about to be a rock slide. He attempts to warn the villagers, but again they scoff at his “imagined” sight. He flees the valley during the slide, taking Medina-saroté with him.

Different versions for endings of the story disallow one to complement this psychoanalytical allegory with further interpretations. In one version, Nunez tries to escape and dies eventually. In a different one published in 1939, he manages to escape with Medina-sarote after a disastrous event which destroys the whole country, and they live happily ever after.

All in all, the story represents the sighted and the blind both of whom know how to read.

His eventual departure is something of an inevitability when considering Nunez's faulty assumptions. Important to note, all of Nunez's beliefs about the way in which society should function are predicated on his own experiences within society and culture. As such, there are few ways for him to genuinely relate to the blind villagers. Even his strong feelings for Medina-Saroté are based on his pre-existing ideas, as when Wells describes her as “a girl, with eyelids less red and sunken than the others” (1904). Thus, even his expectations of beauty after having spent time among the locals are unaffected by their own values. In the village, eyelashes are

considered a malignancy. Even by the end of the story, however, Nunez fails to acknowledge the veracity of their claims within their own society.

In the preface to the 1939 edition Wells explains why he decided to rewrite the ending to this story. It has been changed because there is a change in the atmosphere of life about us. In 1904 the stress is upon the spiritual isolation of those who see more keenly than their fellows and the tragedy of their incommunicable appreciation of life ... In the later story vision becomes something altogether more tragic; it is no longer a story of disregarded loveliness and release; the visionary sees destruction sweeping down upon the whole blind world he has come to endure and even to love; he sees it plain, and he can do nothing to save it from its fate

In what A. Langley Searles writing in *The Wellsian* has called a “tack-on love interest”, Nunez and Medina-saroté marry and have four children together, all of whom can see. Though happy in her new life, she looks back nostalgically to her time in the valley, and steadfastly refuses to be treated for her blindness. She reveals why in a conversation with the narrator’s wife.

Told as a third-person narrative, the story centres on the accidental discovery of a latter-day utopia by a mountaineer climbing a fictitious mountain in Ecuador, all the inhabitants of which are blind, and his discomfiture at discovering that far from being considered an asset, his sense of sight is regarded as an affliction.

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