

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Reading With Our Eyes Closed: Opacity and the Partiality of Knowledge in Literary Interpretation

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This article proposes a reading mode that privileges opacity, uncertainty, and sensory experience over interpretive mastery - a way of reading ‘with eyes closed.’ Challenging dominant modes of suspicious reading that seek to unveil hidden truths, it draws inspiration from Édouard Glissant and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to advocate for a non-totalizing engagement with literary texts. A close reading of Ya'akov Steinberg's short story *The Blind Woman* will demonstrate how reading, whether of a text or a place, can challenge epistemological hierarchies and value embodied, affective and folkloric knowledge. It suggests that reading with eyes closed allows for a different kind of knowledge to emerge – one that is attentive to place not only as setting, but as a lived, felt dimension. Centering blindness as a parable of reading, this article reimagines the role of literature as holding space for darkness.

We live in an era of ‘no secrets’ and intensified visibility, some might even call it total visibility. Images of torture, killings, and extreme suffering are instantly circulated on the internet and are thrust upon our eyes, solicited or not, and we already know that AI models, corporates and governments know more about us than we want to know about ourselves (Chouliaraki, 2006; Han, 2015; Harcourt, 2015; Zuboff, 2019). In their introduction to a special issue of the journal *Representations*, titled “The Way We Read Now,” Stephan Best and Sharon Markus write that “the assumption that domination can only do its work when veiled, now has a nostalgic, even utopian ring to it” (Best & Markus, 2009, p. 2). Indeed, the last decades in the study of literature were marked with the struggle between methods of symptomatic reading, aiming to expose and interpret hidden truths of the text, and methods of surface reading, focusing on the manifest texture.

Faced with the challenge of literary interpretation in our time, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick proposed a ‘reparative reading’, one that views the text not as a puzzle to be solved but as a source of unexpected experiences. In her critique of what she calls ‘paranoid reading’—this attempt to uncover hidden truth—Sedgwick emphasizes that often, exposure *does not* lead to knowledge or understanding, but rather denies other possibilities of experience and

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recognition. The reparative mode, on the other hand, tracks the interplay of emotions and bodily sensations during reading, adopting a more nuanced and ambivalent stance (Sedgwick, 2003).

Presenting the possibilities of ‘surface reading’ or ‘reparative reading’ teaches us that the ways we have become accustomed to reading in the age of suspicion are not exclusive. Primarily, it teaches us that the pursuit of uncovering truth is itself a kind of power practice, a monolithic centralizing framework which excludes important aspects inherent in the very experience of reading—not just in its conclusions—aspects of presence, touch, sensation, and attentive listening that might otherwise be missed. Indeed, the depth metaphysics of symptomatic reading, which focuses on ostensibly dark and hidden layers, privileges the dynamics of the penetrating gaze that seeks to see through disguises and repressions (Best & Markus, 2009; Felski, 2015). This is an oculocentric dynamic that reinforces classical fundamental conceptions that identify light and sight with knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, while positioning the absence of sight as a dark space of error and misunderstanding (Irigaray, 1985; Jay, 1993). In this article, I wish to reflect on modes of knowledge, sense of place, and reading text from within darkness, and through valuing darkness as a valid stance, without trying to dismiss it on the way to sight.

Literature has always been an art that works with and through the twofold movement of light and darkness, of revealing and manifesting on the one hand, and concealing and shrouding on the other hand. What is the place of darkness, of the unrevealed, in the way we read literature? Can darkness still be a meaningful power in our readings, within the reality where everything seems to be transparent, exposed, and accessible?

To explore the possibility of experiencing ‘lack of sight’ in our encounter with literature, I suggest the metaphor of ‘reading with our eyes closed’, reading, maybe, similarly to the way blind people read their surroundings, by awakening senses other than sight, touching textures, enhancing attention to sound and tones, and leaving space to the unknown. But unlike the blind, this is a reading that aims not to decipher or decode what we cannot see or visualize. Rather, this reading accepts the reality of dark areas, which are never meant to be revealed, arguing that it is the very idea of darkness that makes literature a necessary, essential art in this troubling era.

My proposal seeks to follow the thought of Édouard Glissant, the Caribbean thinker from Martinique, who speaks in praise of opacity, a concept that represents an acknowledgment of the partiality of knowledge, and the right not to be fully understood and explicit. “We demand the right to opacity,” writes Glissant (1997, p. 189). He sees opacity as an opportunity, insofar as we remain aware that we are in a state of partial knowledge. It is the ability to accept the right to be opaque, and a commitment to be willing not to fully understand, to acknowledge that we cannot attain complete knowledge.

“If we examine the process of ‘understanding’ people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency,” writes Glissant (1997, p. 190). Glissant identifies the obsession of ‘the old world’ with transparency, which originated in a desire for rational objectivity, universalism, and colonialism. Transparency through definition and clarifications ignores aspects that are difficult to grasp. Conversely, opacity promotes listening, a different sort of understanding: to stand in attention. For Glissant, literature is “a producer of opacity (. . .) The text passes from a dreamed-of transparency to the opacity produced in words” (1997, p. 115). Opacity accepts that everything that makes us cannot be understood completely.

I will illustrate this process through the story *The Blind Woman* by Ya’akov Steinberg, one of the most famous Hebrew stories from the early 20th century. Steinberg (1887–1947) was born in Biała Cerkiew, Ukraine, moved to Odessa, Ukraine at age fourteen, and then later to Warsaw, Poland. Both were centers for Hebrew literature at the turn of the century. In 1914, he immigrated to Palestine and settled in Tel Aviv. *The Blind Woman* was first published in Yiddish in 1912. It was later translated into Hebrew by Steinberg himself and appeared in the 1923 edition of his works. It tells the story of a woman who lives in darkness: Hannah, a blind woman trying to uncover the conditions of her life, which are hidden from her. Steinberg’s story holds a central place in the canon of modern Hebrew literature and has been the subject of extensive critical analysis. While existing interpretations often highlight its existential and gender-related themes, they tend to miss sensory and folkloric aspects.

Ostensibly, what could connect a thinker who sought to reject simplistic conceptions of creole hybridity and develop an anti-essentialist understanding of Caribbeanness, with a Hebrew writer from the early twentieth century whose stories are set in the Jewish towns of Eastern Europe? Beyond the interest that each of these distant figures had in the creative articulation of small, beleaguered languages—such as Creole or Hebrew—the unexpected, counter-intuitive connection I draw between them rests upon the very manner in which Glissant formulates the concept of relation, as a bond not founded on understanding and transparency, but in conditions of misunderstanding: “Relation struggles and states itself in opacity” (Glissant, 1997, p. 186). This is a minor position that demands mutual unintelligibility. Glissant critiques Western concepts of knowledge and the grip of linearity, which drive toward an arrowlike project of knowledge, toward discovery that manifests as domination. His insistence on making space for the unknown, for the “abysses of art” (Glissant, 1997, p. 137), may allow us to read Steinberg’s story in a new and compelling way. This is the opportunity I see in the relation I seek to create here: if we allow ourselves to remain in a state of partial knowledge, to read ‘with our eyes closed’, we may experience other modes of encounter with the story.

New readings of opacity

Since its articulation by Glissant as an ethical right and a critique of modern transparency economies, the concept of opacity has undergone radical updating and development in contemporary thought. Scholarly debates largely revolve around two main approaches: The first interprets Glissant's opacity as enabling a politics of transformative possibility, while the second criticizes the affirmational tendency of relational thought, demanding a radical refusal and negation that exposes the limits of Western epistemology itself (Jeyasingh, 2024).

The first approach interprets Glissant's opacity as generating potentialities that seek to create new worlds while respecting difference (see, for example, Burns, 2009; Hoving, 2002; Last, 2017). For Katherine McKittrick, opacity functions as a political tool, and she explicitly warns that treating opacity as "a badge of obscurity" risks political paralysis (McKittrick, 2022, p. 6). Reading opacity as a dynamic texture, she emphasizes the active process of oscillation between opacity and moments of clarity, in contrast to seeing it as merely darkness. Opacity, then, can be actively used to generate new clarities and connections. It is a political strategy of creative refusal: a way of living and reading that resists the reduction of Black life to transparent, knowable, and objectifiable forms, while inventing and reinventing knowledge (McKittrick, 2022, p. 5). Not far from McKittrick's take, Elizabeth De Freitas frames opacity as an errant, rhizomatic practice of relation, a willingness to move within a space of uncertainty that resists neoliberal governance and identity-based capture. Conceived in this way, opacity becomes a new ethics of participation that is open-ended, apositional, and non-extractive, cultivating alternative forms of experiencing art beyond surveillance, mastery, or representational clarity (De Freitas et al., 2022).

As opposed to these generative notions of opacity, scholars like Claire Colebrook or Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler take a negative approach to affirmative and relational appropriations of Glissant, implying that opacity preserves its inaccessibility against Western thought's grasp. For them, the aspiration to create new clarities through opacity risks reproducing colonial operations. Colebrook notes that even modified forms of relational thinking perpetuate the Western assumption that we can know, grasp, or transform the world, while precluding the viability of non-contributing, non-expressive, and non-relational life (2019, p. 189).

Pugh and Chandler's work implies that opacity is not a tool for generating new relations, but a mark of an abyss, an irresolvable void. Their 'Abyssal Thought' emerges from the foundational violence of the Middle Passage and the colonial project. Refusing the modern mechanisms of inclusion and representation, it insists on the irreducible inaccessibility of the world and of the other against attempts to solve, fix, or stabilize opacities (Pugh & Chandler, 2023). For these scholars, relational ontologies remain complicit in 'world-sustaining theory' by perpetuating the fundamental cuts and distinctions of modern ontological world-making (Colebrook, 2025). Their

critique thus positions itself as ‘world-destructive theory’ that suspends and disrupts the metaphysics of colonial modernity, with its demand for categorical clarity and ontological forms of world-making (Colebrook, 2025; Pugh, 2023). In this view, opacity cannot function as a generative tool for creating alternative relations or new clarities, as affirmational readings of Glissant suggest. Abyssal thought implies that it is “an irreducible, displacing space, whose arrhythmia desediments notions of obtainable origins, opposites and relation” (Pugh & Chandler, 2023, p. 33).

In light of Pugh and Chandler’s abyssal thought and their insistence on the fundamental and irreducible difficulty inherent in opacity, Kasia Mika-Bresolin proposes to expand and open up the concept, not to view it as an impasse but as an unfolding process of engaging with the text and the other, and negotiating the varied dimensions of opacity (Mika-Bresolin, 2024). Such a process, she argues, can foster an unmasterful reading that can undo the colonial structure of knowledge. Mika-Bresolin reminds us that for Glissant, the right to opacity “is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity” (Glissant, 1997, p. 190). What emerges is a dynamic model of opacity, which “inaugurates a different type of knowing, one which does not seek resolution nor longs for a full transparency of meaning or stability of past values and is open to the embodied (...) character of encountering difficulty” (Mika-Bresolin, 2024, p. 18).

My proposal of ‘reading with our eyes closed’ seeks, with Mika-Bresolin, to bridge the understanding of opacity as an opportunity that opens up new reading possibilities with the making of space for its existence as an abyss. Reading *The Blind Woman* reveals how Steinberg leads us to the edge of what can be known—an abyss—but invites us to experience unmasterful reading as a process, fumbling through darkness, one that unsettles the pursuit of full and transparent meaning through suspicious interpretations. It is a reading that works with rather than beyond the abyss, attending to embodied, affective, and sensory dimensions, holding space for darkness as a presence that resists deciphering and its totalizing grasp.

The story can thus be read as staging this mode of reading, depicting other ways to apprehend the conditions of life and reality. Through the figure of the blind—a symbolically charged character laden with meanings related to knowledge and understanding—Steinberg turns toward ‘minor’ forms of knowledge typically neglected in dominant epistemologies: the feminine, attentive listening, tactility, and folk wisdom. All of which acknowledge the partial nature of knowledge and understanding (Haraway, 1988; Sedgwick, 2003). The story offers a sharp critique of the illusions of decipherability, proposing instead an experience of the limits of understanding and alternative ways of experiencing and knowing, which are also alternative ways of reading. I read *The Blind Woman* as a parable of reading itself, one in which we as readers are invited to read ‘with our eyes closed’, and must navigate, like Hannah, through incomplete sensory data and intuitive affect rather than verbal knowledge.

The Blind Woman can be read as a tracing of other modes of spatial knowledge and the formation of a “sense of place.” Due to her blindness, Hannah navigates her surroundings non-visually, through touch, sound, and sensation. Her relation to space is shaped not by mastery or distance but by proximity and attentive presence. Steinberg uses darkness not merely as a narrative device to indicate Hannah’s disability, but as a means of disrupting dominant epistemologies that conflate sight with knowledge and knowledge with control. At the same time, he gestures toward neglected or suppressed ways of knowing—tactile, affective, and sensory—that emerge from lived experience in place (see Massey, 1994, p. 232). Darkness thus both limits the flow of conventional knowledge and amplifies alternative traditions of perceiving and relating to the environment. My reading positions the story as an epistemological critique of hegemonic conceptions of space in terms of possession, comprehension, and domination. Reading with eyes closed resists the stance of objective knowledge and instead affirms modes of local, fragmentary, and affective understanding.

Steinberg’s use of blindness engages with long-standing cultural and folkloric traditions that complicate the bonds between vision, power and knowledge (Foucault, 1995; Jay, 1993). The figure of the blind connects to traditions associated with the symbolic attributions of light and darkness (Bolt, 2013; Monbeck, 1973). In classical Platonic and Neo-Platonic conceptions, sight is linked to truth, wisdom, and power, while blindness signifies error, weakness, and ignorance. Yet classical myths also provide an inverted paradigm, where it is precisely the blind who are far-sighted and endowed with knowledge beyond physical sight, as embodied by the figure of Tiresias, the blind prophet from *Oedipus Rex* and other classical mythological works.

In Jewish tradition as well, blindness is not merely a physical disability, but a multifaceted symbol (Karp & Forman, 2023). The biblical Isaac indeed erred due to his blindness and blessed his younger son Jacob instead of his elder son Esau, yet this very error expressed the truth of God’s will. Thus, blindness may often suggest moral, spiritual, and epistemological depth. The figure of the blind beggar appearing in Hasidic tales, such as Rabbi Nachman of Breslov’s “The Seven Beggars” (Nachman of Breslov, Rebbe, 2005), presents blindness precisely as knowledge beyond the senses, and indeed as non-blindness, since it is looking that blinds and prevents access to divine truth. Blindness, then, also appears as a challenge to established models of knowledge, particularly visual knowledge identified with control, clarity, and objectivity.

Both classical and Jewish traditions obviously focus on the figure of a blind man. Hannah, as a blind woman, represents an unconventional entry into the theme of blindness; her femininity suggests that blindness will be represented differently. Through her character, Steinberg engages with both traditions of the blind person as a marginal figure detached from worldly knowledge and traditions of the blind person as possessing far-sighted divine knowledge.

His blind woman presents blindness as an experience that grants knowledge within recognition of its partiality and the space of error—a groping sensory experience that gives place and validity to darkness.

In the next section, I will outline the plot of *The Blind Woman* and the dominant interpretations it has received as a canonical Hebrew tale with a ‘twist ending’ that clarifies and resolves the mystery built throughout the narrative. I will also address further readings that focus on its composition, gender, and folkloric layers. Following Sedgwick, these can be described as ‘paranoid’ readings, which strive for a full and transparent unraveling of the story’s map of clues. In the subsequent sections, I will suggest that Steinberg critiques this mode of reading and, in fact, leads us to grope in the dark, together with the blind woman, and to read ‘with our eyes closed’.

The Blind Woman and the paranoid reader

The story follows a blind Jewish girl named Hannah, living in a small Jewish town in Eastern Europe. She is betrothed to a man she does not know. Hannah is told he is a wealthy thirty-year-old widower, a tobacco merchant, with no children, living in a large house on the edge of town. From the outset, it is implied that Hannah’s family exploits her blindness to hide key details about the man and her upcoming life. She soon finds out that, contrary to what she was initially told, he is a father of two. On the night of their wedding, Hannah discovers that her husband is much older than she was told. As she feels his beard and hears the heavy thud of his steps and his walking stick, she realizes that they also lied about his profession - he is not a tobacco merchant. From that moment on, the mystery of his occupation becomes the central puzzle Hannah tries to solve.

The narrative is closely tied to Hannah’s experience, slowly tracking the stages by which she uncovers the details of reality through her other senses, especially hearing and touch. When her pregnancy progresses, she moves into her husband’s home, understanding that it is isolated on the outskirts of the town. There, she lives with his two silent children from his first marriage, while she waits to give birth. She refrains from conversation with her silent husband, and tries to infer his profession from the circumstances.

The story sophisticatedly accompanies the way Hannah interprets the details of her life. Through careful attention, she begins to decipher clues. From the four-year-old child’s silence, she understands that no one interacts with him, as the house is far from the community. Due to the harsh winter and her pregnancy, she refrains from exploring the surroundings, but from the sound of the wind and the falling snow, she deduces that the wind is uninterrupted, except for a few objects in front of the house. Her inquiries cease when she gives birth to a daughter, whom she loves and cares for.

One day, her husband casually mentions that diphtheria is spreading in the town, and many babies are dying daily. Soon, her daughter contracts the disease, and Hannah notices her husband’s indifference to the child’s illness. While Hannah grows anxious and stops eating, her husband remains “at ease as always, and (...) his steps as measured and heavy as ever” (Steinberg, 1923).

She begins to harbor hatred for him and even calls him a “murderer.” She realizes her daughter will soon die, sitting by the baby’s crib and whispering, “May the gravedigger come. I won’t give him the baby. May he come” (Steinberg, 1923).

When she no longer hears her baby’s breath, she bursts into wails. As she grieves, she hears her husband moving in and out of the house, and soon discovers that the baby’s body has disappeared. When she rushes outside, for the first time since her arrival, she realizes she is standing in a large field. The final paragraph, often read as the climactic twist, reads as follows:

The blind woman bent her head and pricked her ear toward the field. It seemed to her that from far away, from the field, the sound of her husband’s steps was coming. She moved from her place and dragged herself toward the sound of those steps. For a moment she moved forward at a run, but she immediately tripped on something and fell to the earth. She picked herself up and started taking step after step, but her feet kept bumping into stones. Suddenly her whole body struck a large stone, and her fingers groped. A dreadful shriek burst from the blind woman’s throat: she realized that her feet stood in the cemetery. (Steinberg, 1923)

This story has become a classic in Hebrew literature studies. It is included in the list of required reading for the literature matriculation exam and is taught in schools as a ‘twist-ending story’, one in which the truth is revealed at the end, altering previous assumptions. The end of the story builds to a climax with a turning point that unravels the tangle, dissolves the tension, and gives new meaning to the entire narrative. However, a closer observation shows that this is not the type of story that unexpectedly overturns the reader’s expectations (like stories by O. Henry or Maupassant), but rather a detective-like ‘gothic’ mystery, of constant tension, clues and questions, and an attempt to “guess” the solution until the final moment clarifies what has happened (Peri, 1967, p. 12).

The story has received many interpretations, mainly as an existential plot about the discovery of the hidden truth of death. A tale of ‘everyman’ that reveals human fate, showing us that “birth and life are nothing but a brief sojourn before the end, and that death lurks for man within life itself and within the illusory experience of happiness,” and “the one existence is—nothingness” (Shaked, 1966, pp. 18, 19). A feminist reading interprets the blind woman as a symbol of “the condition of women.” According to Hannah Naveh, Hannah’s limitations, stemming from her blindness, reflect and embody aspects of the lives of women in a patriarchal world: the restriction of personal space to the private sphere, the lack of power and the need for guidance and direction, exclusion from the public sphere, and more (Naveh, 1995). These interpretations underscore existential and gendered resonances, yet they overlook sensory and folkloric dimensions.

It should be noted that the story is also embedded with folkloristic patterns from Jewish folk traditions, which Steinberg adapts ironically. Ziva Shamir argues that in Steinberg's work, Jewish folklore—with its intermingling of comic and tragic elements—undergoes defamiliarization that blurs its origins, strips away its humor, and casts a veil of melancholy over the Jewish shtetl. Steinberg maintains an allusive dialogue with oral traditions, folk customs, rituals, and non-canonical folk texts such as proverbs and folk songs (Shamir, 2001). For example, Shamir interprets the marriage of Hannah and her husband as an ironic adaptation of the macabre folk custom of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe, known as the 'Black Chuppah' ('black wedding', or 'plague wedding'): the marriage between disabled man and woman in a cemetery, in a modest ceremony, with the aim of stopping a plague that had struck the community (Shamir, 2001, p. 77).

In the magical practice of the "black wedding," the ceremony took place in a cemetery, based on the belief that the souls of those buried there—victims of the plague—would, in gratitude for the righteous act of marrying off a man and woman with no realistic prospects for marriage, intervene to halt the epidemic and redeem the community. According to Hanna Węgrzynek, the first documented case of a black wedding occurred in Berdichev, Ukraine in 1771. However, all known ethnographic, literary, journalistic, and iconographic records of such weddings date from the latter half of the nineteenth century and the second half of the twentieth, indicating that this practice was relatively widespread, particularly during outbreaks of cholera, typhus, and the Spanish flu (Węgrzynek, 2011, p. 58). In his work, Steinberg offers an unusual embodiment of the custom, expressing a sharp critique of it. First, the wedding does not merely take place in a cemetery; the bride is brought there to live, without her knowledge or consent. Second, and with bitter irony, not only does Hannah's marriage fail to stop the plague, but her infant daughter dies as a direct result of it.

Additional folkloric aspects emerge in Steinberg's dialogue with the Gothic tradition. Karen Grumberg, who has explored the influence of the Gothic on modern Hebrew literature, shows how, beginning in the late nineteenth century, Hebrew authors, including Steinberg, began incorporating Gothic elements and motifs to reexamine issues of power, violence, vulnerability, and victimhood in Jewish life (Grumberg, 2019, p. 3), and to express the dark side of Jewish Eastern Europe, particularly its marginalized figures (Grumberg, 2019, p. 76). The setting in the story—a dark domestic space in which Hannah is trapped due to her blindness, pregnancy, and the weather—echoes the Gothic principle identified by Paul Morrison: "Horror begins at home" (Morrison, 1991, p. 21). In light of Diane Long Hoeveler's observation that "the female gothic novel represents women as victims not only of gender politics but also of the social, economic, political, and religious constructs that limit or exclude them" (Long Hoeveler, 1998, p. xiii). Grumberg emphasizes Hannah's centrality within the home, as well as the defiant subjectivity of her expressive emotional presence, which rebels against her

relegation to a position of passive victimhood. Through the expression of emotion, hatred, and rage, Hannah resists both her own erasure and that of her infant daughter, and emerges as a feeling subject, thereby affirming her alternative narrative (Grumberg, 2019, p. 103).

Yet Hannah's strong personality is expressed not only through affective intensity, but above all through her investigative agency. Tali Latowitzki reads Hannah's blindness as a "machine of suspicion," a mechanism that protects her from falling prey to the danger of misplaced trust "precisely because of her impairment, Hannah is equipped with the pessimistic suspicion and interrogative mind (...) required in order to navigate her surroundings." Indeed, the ending confirms that she has been deceived and justifies her suspicions (Latowitzki, 2021, p. 271). From this perspective, the story lends itself to a symptomatic, suspicious reading, one grounded in distrust of benevolent or verbal messages.

Most interpretations highlight the complex composition of the story, with clues scattered throughout that are only fully understood in the final line. Since Steinberg limits the narrative to the blind woman's knowledge, what she "can hear, understand, feel, know, or do (...) - the reader must live, so to speak, through the entire experiential process that the blind woman undergoes, alongside her and through her perspective" (Peri, 1967, p. 29). The readers, immersed in the perspective of an interpreting character, discover the secret *with* the blind woman. "The story forces a careful, attentive, witty, patient, and selective reading process" (Mazor, 2012, p. 14), in other words: a 'paranoid' reading of a suspicious reader aiming to reveal a hidden truth.

In these terms of paranoid interpretation, the reading process is essentially constructed as taking us from darkness to light, from blindness to vision. In a way, it is an allegory about reading literature as a search for meaning, an arrowlike process with one direction, leading from opacity to transparency, from misunderstanding to understanding. In this approach to the process of reading, Steinberg uses blindness and ignorance to elevate sight and knowledge, guiding us subtly toward clarity. This expresses a profound trust in the power of interpretation to culminate in knowledge. But where does the interpretation lead us? What is this knowledge?

A different approach that takes inspiration from Glissant would emphasize the very process of reading an opaque surrounding, with the blind women, and refute this straightforward path by which meaning is produced, as Tara Elisabeth Jeyasingh puts it in her suggestion for 'opacitic reading'. In this kind of reading, "we not only read to receive information (...), but we as readers also 'assume a role in the text's creation' (Allar, 2015, p. 55), and thus play a role in how (the text) is understood and engaged" (Jeyasingh, 2024, p. 10). For Jeyasingh, opacitic reading allows readers to "not aspire towards transparent and perfect understanding of the written text and the author's intention, permitting us to 'grasp' and apply their ideas elsewhere, but instead reading becomes an opportunity" (Jeyasingh, 2024, p. 10) to experiment

with the making of meaning, oscillating (as suggested by McKittrick, 2022), between moments of opacity and clarity. In my reading, Steinberg's use of opacity lets us experience darkness as a mode of reading that challenges epistemological hierarchies and values embodied and affective knowledge. His story leads us to an abyss, bringing forth the opportunity for a different kind of knowledge to emerge, one that rejects the striving for transparency and holds a space for darkness as an essential dimension of our knowledge.

Fumbling through darkness

As noted, *The Blind Woman* has, over the years, come to be regarded in Hebrew literary criticism as a model of a well-crafted story that unfolds a process of revelation and exposure. However, the early reception of Steinberg's stories was more reserved, and their darkness provoked unease. In 1923, upon the publication of the Hebrew version of the story, David Shimoni, a prominent Hebrew critic of the pre-state *Yishuv* period, complained about the opacity of Steinberg's writing:

Perhaps the author harbors worthy intentions; perhaps he genuinely seeks to unveil something of the hidden and the concealed, and therefore he employs special modes of description and peculiar linguistic methods. Yet rather than illuminate, he merely darkens; rather than reveal, he conceals all the more. Can mysteries truly find their resolution and secrets unfold through discourse couched in obscure and mystifying prose? Does this not bring to mind the painter who displayed a black ink stain and called it 'The Exodus from Egypt,' and when pressed by the perplexed, earnestly explained that the sea was black, the Jews were black, the Egyptians likewise black, and moreover, that entire matter took place at night - should it be surprising, then, that the whole picture turned out as a black stain in which nothing can be understood? (Shimoni, 1923, p. 11)

Although Shimoni's initial impression was indeed negative—and rooted in a long-standing preference for transparency—his critique highlights the intuition that, for Steinberg, immersion in darkness is more essential and important than the pursuit of light. Contrary to the prevailing reading of the story, Steinberg does not uphold an ideal of revelation and truth-disclosure; rather, he inclines toward praising opacity and expresses a critical irony toward the mechanisms of knowledge and interpretation. Thus, rather than training readers for vigilant and suspicious reading aimed at achieving coveted knowledge of truth, it seems that Steinberg instead cultivates humility regarding the question of knowledge, rejecting any unwarranted confidence in exposure itself as the revelation of truth.

This is further suggested by the affinity of Steinberg's story with the principle explored in Edgar Allan Poe's celebrated tale, "The Purloined Letter," where it is the suspicious detective investigation that appears to prevent the inquiry from uncovering what lies openly on the surface (Best & Markus, 2009, p. 18), or, in the case of *The Blind Woman*, just outside the door.

I would like to consider the abundance of affective elements and semiotic and non-verbal expressions. The story can be seen as an exercise in fumbling through darkness, through not-knowing, or through partial knowledge. It seemingly guides us from opacity to transparency, step by step, only to confront us at the end with an Irreducible darkness. As such, it deals with the epistemological limits of our ability to know.

By placing the reader in the blind woman's shoes, Steinberg constructs a complex metaphor of the reading process as groping through thick darkness. He strips readers of any superiority in knowledge that might create an ironic distance between them and the blind woman, compelling them to experience the text as she experiences reality—listening to murmurs from a position of partial understanding. While traditional interpretations tend to view this process as one that culminates in the revelation of truth, where scattered clues finally coalesce, reading with eyes closed may propose a different approach. If we consider the story merely as a riddle awaiting its solution, then the process of solving this riddle is no more than a tool. But the story is not just about solving a riddle (the discovery that Hannah's husband is a gravedigger, and everything that follows). It is much more a story about sound, touch, rhythm and sensation. To read with eyes closed, therefore, means attending to our encounter with the text, treating the reading process as an embodied experience in its own right, rather than merely as a means to reach final conclusions.

Indeed, the story positions the reader as the sole partner in the blind woman's state of unknowing, a state that exacerbates her burden since no other character shares in it. Moreover, while the blind woman's experience is a sensory, tactile, and non-verbal process, the readers' experience is based entirely on language, creating an apparent tension and gap between us and her. However, the verbal nature itself has a more-than-representational capacity, moving beyond a purely semiotic register. As geographer Tom Roberts argues, "we are so used to reducing language to a vehicle for the communication of information" (Roberts, 2019, p. 645). He instead proposes non-representational approach in which meaning is generated not just through abstract symbols, but through embodied, experiential processes. Roberts suggests that words do not merely signify objects or ideas, but also act on us actively, creating feelings and having effects that cannot be reduced to simple representation. This aligns with the work of thinkers such as Kathleen Stewart and Tim Ingold. Stewart's work emphasizes that meaning often resides in the affective registers of the mundane, which operate beneath the level of conscious thought (Stewart, 2007). Ingold, for his part, focuses

on the dynamic process of “making,” where knowledge emerges from active engagement with materials rather than from abstract representations alone (Ingold, 2013). Thus, the sensory expressions, the sounds, temperatures, and textures are not just ‘representations’ of experiences. They actively shape our own sensory experience during the reading process, engage our minds and bodies so that we feel the story, with the blind woman, rather than understand it.

“Her new nightgown, which had not yet been in water, rustled softly;” “Not a dog barked. Only the watchman sounded measured knocking with two wooden staves;” “Silence. The silence was so great that the blind woman could hear the cawing of a crow that flapped its wings as it flew by;” “Now the ice began to melt, and all day long the sound of icicles falling from the roof was heard in the house;” “Every morning the birds chirped outside the window, and the bigger boy (...) babbled in front of the window all day;” “No wind blew. A drop of water from the roof fell on her face, and she shook herself” (Steinberg, 1923). A sensuous abundance fills the story: with temperatures, with bodily tremors, with sounds of rain, wind, crow screeches, silent snow, knocks on windows, footsteps, a baby’s breath, a child’s laughter, rod taps, heavy snoring, the dripping sound of thawing water falling from the roof. These are not mere pieces of information, as they are excessive in ways that go beyond the need to obtain information. As opposed to this sensuous abundance, there are no dialogues. The blind woman’s husband does not speak but almost only growls, and the sparse exchange of knowledge between the characters occurs as deception or as refusal to speak.

The opening itself reveals that verbal communication fails to aid understanding. Hannah’s mother persuades her to marry, and the story highlights her verbosity in contrast to her daughter’s silence: “The old woman began to speak copiously about the roomy house” and “The blind woman listened silently to her mother’s many words” (Steinberg, 1923). But soon the mother falls silent, and speech becomes obscure, internal, and whispered. And as the silence encroaches upon the possibility of conversation between the two, the affective and tactile elements intensify:

The mother stopped talking. The blind woman stood without moving, and only her hand groped the edge of the table from time to time. It was clear that the blind woman’s heart was raging within her, and she didn’t believe her mother’s words. The old woman didn’t say any more. She only removed the blind woman’s hand, which was still trembling, with great caution from the edge of the table, and her pursed lips whispered something—the dim whisper of a miserable mother. (Steinberg, 1923)

The silences, whispers, and inner turmoil prepare us from the outset that knowledge in this story will be established not through words and communication, but through the sensory realm. There is almost no

conversation between Hannah and her husband, too. When she asks him about the sounds she hears, he silences her immediately, “You don’t have to know. Sit at home - that’s enough!” (Steinberg, 1923). The story distinguishes between knowledge gained in the dark, through trial and error, through learning the environment and using the senses, and knowledge gained through speech and language. The latter, in fact, is deceiving. Hannah senses when she is being lied to. Silence, her recurring response to the collision between the verbal messages and her sensory experience, is accompanied by a dominant emotion, astonishment:

Her husband told her that his aunt had fallen sick that night and they had come to call him. The blind woman was silent, and only her big eyes were wide open, and her face expressed astonishment - that was the emotion that filled her heart so often. Hannah went to bed right away, covered herself with the warm bedclothes, but she wasn’t warm, and she trembled, trembled. (Steinberg, 1923)

Within the silence, the not-knowing does not cease to ‘speak’ and express itself. The wide-open eyes though unable to see, the trembling, the cold, the inability to warm up, all manifest both the lack of knowledge and the knowledge of that lack. Hannah knows that full understanding will remain out of reach. Her epistemic posture accepts partiality, recognizing bewilderment as intrinsic to her engagement with the world.

In her critique of paranoid readings, Sedgwick proposes to see suspicion as merely one type of epistemological practice among other, alternative practices. She emphasizes that paying attention to other modes of knowledge, or recognizing the partiality of knowledge, does not mean naïveté or denial of oppressive structures. Indeed, the story of the blind woman is also a story about oppression and subjugation, and as such almost automatically encourages a paranoid reading. Sedgwick warns that the consensus around paranoid hermeneutics “may, if it persists unquestioned, unintentionally impoverish the gene pool of literary-critical perspectives and skills” (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 128).

Ironically, there is something naïve in paranoid reading: its complete trust in the power of exposure. As Sedgwick notes, “paranoia places its faith in exposure” (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 130) and “is characterized by placing, in practice, an extraordinary stress on the efficacy of knowledge per se – knowledge in the form of exposure” (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 138). *The Blind Woman* demonstrates the inefficacy of exposure, casting an ironic light on this faith in knowledge: solving the mystery does not resolve the problem of knowledge, but rather deepens it. Hannah may discover important facts, but she had somehow sensed them beforehand, and while their revelation gives her (and us) some answers, it does not change her bleak situation, nor does it deepen her understanding of it.

We can therefore ‘suspect’ the very suspicious readings that identify with the paranoid position or view it as a realistic stance aimed at a heroic discovery. Indeed, Hannah too seeks suspiciously to uncover the missing knowledge about her husband’s occupation. Yet she knows well her oppression and subjugation, felt in the flesh, even before discovering the specific conditions of her life living in a cemetery. It is precisely her sensory, intuitive perception, which does not rely on suspicious investigative actions, that embodies her true knowledge. Such is her clear sense that her child would sicken and die, and her accusation that her husband is a murderer (most likely it was his work as a gravedigger handling the burial of plague victims that infected the child, making him effectively the ‘killer’ of his daughter).

A reparative reading might suggest that, beyond suspicion, there are alternative practices of encountering and knowing reality. This can manifest, for example, in the sustained attention to marginal details and their rich affective variety (sounds, breaths, footsteps, knocks, gusts of wind, etc.); in the way Steinberg fuses humorous folk traditions and a grim gothic tale, and his heightened stylistic investment in tactile experiences; in the emotional upwellings of the blind woman’s responses, which move across the entire emotional spectrum to express terror and fear, scorn and disgust, tenderness and gentleness, longing and terrible sorrow; and more (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 150).

The birth of Hannah’s daughter emerges in the story as a reparative force, where she nearly abandons her quest to uncover missing knowledge, choosing instead to rejoice in motherhood and embrace a newfound serenity and self-assurance. Her former attempts at deciphering give way to moments of tenderness, touch, and connection:

Until then the blind woman had spoken little, but after the day she rose from the birth bed she almost stopped speaking at all, except for tunes she hummed at the baby’s cradle. As soon as she sat by her daughter’s cradle, the two boys, her husband’s children, would rush over to her and stand at her side, one boy on either side. Hannah placed one hand on one boy’s shoulder and her other hand on the other boy’s head, and her mouth sang the songs she knew. (Steinberg, 1923)

Tellingly, this positive, connective dimension eschews—as does the rest of the story—verbal communication, relying instead on other forms of intimacy: unifying touch, singing, and maternal warmth. Though this idyllic vision proves fleeting and soon shatters, it emphasizes a crucial notion: that healing forces depend not on unveiling hidden secrets, but on renewed closeness to human emotion.

A place for the unknown

Blindness provides an opportunity to represent knowledge of the world through the movement of a body through space, through touches, sensations, textures, temperatures, sounds, and the feeling of air - these create affective intuitions arising from the body's positioning and movement in a given setting. In Hannah's reading world, the body is a living material entity engaged in absorption and interpretation, while remaining aware that the knowledge produced is partial and lacking, perhaps even mistaken.

When the cold riddled her flesh, the blind woman thought in her heart that the wind was so fierce because nothing could stop it, because their house stood in a field. For a moment Hannah (...) stood with the bundle of wood in her arms, listening to the whoosh of the wind in the field. The snow hit her in the face, and Hannah listened with attention to the swish of the snow falling at her feet and the whir of the wind bearing the snow and throwing it far away. It was clear to Hannah that an empty place extended all around the house, and with every puff of the wind, the blind woman inclined her head and listened: it seemed to her that something stood before their house and blocked the blowing of the wind. What was that thing? (Steinberg, 1923)

The story forces us to immerse ourselves, with Hannah, in the sensory richness (the cold, whoosh of the wind, the swish of the snow) intensified by lack of vision, to experience opacity—the “empty place” and the “blockade” in it—or the partiality of knowledge as we encounter reality. Later, the twist point, the revelation at the very end of the story, is also the moment when we realize our own lack of knowledge, where understanding encounters an irreducible opacity. Steinberg leads us to a place where further investigation is impossible. This place, ironically, is an encounter with a text: the gravestone, at the final lines of the story:

Suddenly her whole body struck a large stone, and her fingers groped. A dreadful shriek burst from the blind woman's throat: she realized that her feet stood in the cemetery. (Steinberg, 1923)

When Hannah's fingers touch the gravestone, it is not the first time she gropes a flat slate. Two other incidents precede this. When her mother persuades her to marry, “the blind woman groped at the table with her hand once or twice and asked with repressed anger: ‘How old is he?’” Later, in her husband's house, she stands beside his small son, who, unable to speak, knocks on the window:

She went to the window and stuck her ear against the glass. Silence. The silence was so great that the blind woman could hear the cawing of a crow that flapped its wings as it flew by. (...) The longer the blind woman stood, the more her mind pictured the change taking place outside: the first snow was falling without a sound. That the boy had knocked on the window—that was also a sign that snow was falling. Hannah wanted to ask her husband, but he wasn't in the house then. (Steinberg, 1923)

Touching blank slates, the table and the window, sets in motion a tactile inquiry, prompting conjectures tempered by a keen awareness of the limits of knowledge and the potential for error. This sensory search is driven by the desire for an authoritative 'text'—the mother's reply, the husband's confirmation—that might resolve the ambiguities. But only at the end of the story, when Hannah gropes the gravestone, does she encounter a smooth surface that bears a text.

As a blind young woman in an early 20th-century Eastern European Jewish town, Hannah is prevented from learning to read and write. However, the final scene of the story shows her *as a reader*, touching the gravestone with her groping fingers on the letters, a gesture echoing braille reading. It is at this moment that Hannah understands her situation, embodying the role of the reader who solves the riddle of the text. Yet, this moment is steeped in sharp irony towards language and reading. For the moment in which Hannah becomes a reader is also the moment in which she abandons language. Not only does the specific text on the tombstone remain unread, the words failing to function as language, but language itself is dismissed. In the last line, when the blind woman realizes she lives in the house of death, "a dreadful shriek" bursts from her throat. The moment of understanding, of solving the riddle and revealing the secret, is a withdrawal to the semiotic pre-verbal, where language retreats in the face of death. One kind of knowledge—verbal, rational, cultural, acquired, cumulative, reliant on learning, recognition, and understanding—recedes here in favor of another: a bodily, sensory, almost animal knowledge, one that does not depend on inherited tradition, that erases meaning and breaks through the bounds of interpretive language. The moment of revelation is, at once, a distinct experience of opacity.

When Glissant speaks for opacity in favor of transparency, he notes that "the verb *to grasp* contains the movement of hands that grab their surroundings and bring them back to themselves. A gesture of enclosure if not appropriation" (1997, p. 192). The groping of Hannah's hands—of our hands—on the gravestone is antithetical to grip and ownership. Groping is touch without possession. It signifies an understanding that knowledge is not one of our assets.

The moment Hannah gropes the gravestone and understands is also the moment she understands that she has not understood: that she has not grasped what has happened to her until now, and that she still does not

comprehend what remains to be understood. Language withdraws; the shriek replaces speech. Deep in the darkness, beneath verbal communication, lies the nonverbal persistent, unresolved. The retreat of language, Hannah's shriek and her faltering legs, attest to the encounter with an irreducible darkness. This is a moment of facing what Mika-Bresolin saw as the embodied difficulty of opacity, reflecting a recognition of the instability of knowledge, its partiality, and the impossibility of achieving full transparency of meaning and understanding (Mika-Bresolin, 2024). Such an encounter resists the grasping movement towards legibility, maintaining the known (the information Hannah gathers about her life) in dynamic tension with the opaque and the unknown.

To bridge the 'abyssal' ending of the story, where Hannah and we as readers are forced to renounce the attempt to command meaning, with an understanding of opacity as an opportunity for reading otherwise, is to align with Sedgwick's proposal for reparative reading. What is 'repaired' here is not Hannah's lived reality or her comprehension of it, but rather the capacity to experience reading as a groping process that accepts the limits of comprehension.

The parallel between Hannah and the readers portrays reading as an attempt to know, which leads to an irreducible darkness. Existentially, this is a moment of recognition of the irreversible presence of death, surrounding us as gravestones surround Hannah. But as a literary concept, it is a moment that presents reading with eyes closed as a possibility that better captures the state of knowledge in our lives—a moment in which literature fulfils its role as the keeper of opacity, the guardian of the dark.

Conclusion

Glissant's concept of opacity is typically understood in terms of postcolonial and other minoritized subjectivities. Moving beyond postcolonial frameworks, my reading examines opacity as a concept that can reshape literary engagement, creating space for darkness as a presence that resists decipherment. Following Sedgwick's proposal against paranoid readings, opacity and unintelligibility open possibilities for different experiences of the text. Though Steinberg, Glissant, and Sedgwick wrote from distinct positions, each deployed minor perspectives to disrupt established structures of understanding. Bringing them into conversation reveals their challenge to modes of reading that demand full comprehension and command.

Reading *The Blind Woman* with eyes closed offers a way to unsettle dominant hierarchies of knowledge and their reliance on visual mastery. Attending to blindness not merely as a theme but as a mode of reading allows for an encounter with forms of knowing that are tactile, affective, local, and rooted in sensory engagement with place. Through this lens, Steinberg's story becomes not just a narrative about blindness, but an epistemological intervention: it suggests a literary mode attuned to opacity, uncertainty, and

embodied experience. Reading with eyes closed, then, opens alternative ways of knowing, modes that accept darkness, and value what cannot be fully seen or possessed.

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