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| Lesson Title: ‘On her Blindness’ by Adam Thorpe |

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| Links  In its exploration of the difficulty of talking honestly about physical decline, Thorpe’s poem has an obvious parallel with U.A. Fanthorpe’s ‘A Minor Role’, while their contrasting use of the first person perspective results in very different poems. |

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| **Key Words:**  Sop – slang for  Locked in – This is usually used to describe a condition called ‘locked in syndrome’ in which the suffer cannot hear, see or speak and is therefore locked in their own body. In this poem it implies the son represses his emotions. He is ‘locked’ in because he cannot express his true feelings. |

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| **Context**  The title of the poem is an adaptation of a famous sonnet by John Milton, ‘On His Blindness’, written in 1655 after the poet’s loss of sight became complete. In it, Milton initially has an annoyed tone about his condition and how it limits his ability to serve God, but the poem ends with a resolve to bear his loss patiently for, ‘They also serve who only stand and wait.’  Thorpe’s poem is partly a rebuff (a disagreement with) of Milton’s stoicism, of those who ‘like a Roman’ put up with affliction without complaint.   |  | | --- | | **On His Blindness** | |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | | WHEN I consider how my light is spent |  | | E're half my days, in this dark world and wide, |  | | And that one Talent which is death to hide, |  | | Lodg'd with me useless, though my Soul more bent |  | | To serve therewith my Maker, and present | *5* | | My true account, least he returning chide, |  | | Doth God exact day-labour, light deny'd, |  | | I fondly ask; But patience to prevent |  | | That murmur, soon replies, God doth not need |  | | Either man's work or his own gifts, who best | *10* | | Bear his milde yoak, they serve him best, his State |  | | Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed |  | | And post o're Land and Ocean without rest: |  | | They also serve who only stand and waite. |  | |

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| **Poetic methods**  Caesuras and enjambments  Plain language (avoids detailed visual or figurative imagery given the theme)  Dialogue  Disorienting enjambment |

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| **Summary and notes**  The sense of sight is often dominant in poetry, so here the poet’s exploration of his mother’s loss of sight takes the reader into unusual territory. Thorpe conveys the impact on his mother through detail which convinces us as coming from direct experience: his mother’s difficulty with eating, her dodgem-like awkwardness, and the long list of things she did while pretending she could still see. All these give us a moving insight into the ‘living hell’ she is trying to cope with. They also remind us that she has become the observed instead of the observing, a shift which has the potential for humiliation, though the narrator stresses she ‘kept her dignity’.  The language of the poem is largely plain, conversational, with comparatively little figurative language. One simile – ‘as blank as stone’ – feels applicable to the poem’s spare style. The only splash of colour comes at the end in the description of autumn leaf-fall: ‘golden’, ‘ablaze’, ‘royal’ are all reminders of the riches the mother has lost.  The mother’s predicament is also conveyed through Thorpe’s repeated use of enjambment, not just across lines but across stanzas. This breaking of units of sense across the white space between stanzas has a disorientating effect, making it harder for the reader to negotiate the poem’s meaning.  As in U.A. Fanthorpe’s ‘A Minor Role’, dialogue plays a significant part. The second line contains the statement ‘One shouldn’t say it’, and this division between what can and can’t be said runs through the whole poem. The one time the mother is honest about her situation, the narrator is unable to respond with similar candour. Most of the time she pretends she can see, that she’s doing okay. Even when close to death she maintains the fiction: ‘it’s lovely out there.’ The last line suggests that, even after death, she is still subject to the comforting fiction which likes to imagine the dead watching over us. Part of the poem’s power lies in both the narrator’s acknowledgement of the  lies we tell ourselves in the face of frailty and ageing, and his regret at ‘looking the wrong way’. |

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| **Questions:**  The first stanza contains the phrase ‘to be honest’. How does the poet develop ideas of honesty and pretence throughout the poem?  Who is lying or pretending in the poem? How does this relate to the idea of seeing/not seeing?  When does the poet use colour in the poem? What is the effect?  Eighteen of the twenty-three stanzas are enjambed, breaking across units of sense. How does this effect how you read the poem? How might this dramatise the subject matter? |

‘On Her Blindness’ by Adam Thorpe

M[y mother could not bear being blind,  
to be honest. One shouldn’t say it.](https://genius.com/Adam-thorpe-on-her-blindness-annotated#note-15458032)  
  
[One should hide the fact that catastrophic  
handicaps are hell; one tends to hear,  
  
publicly from those who bear it  
like a Roman, or somehow find joy  
  
in the fight.](https://genius.com/Adam-thorpe-on-her-blindness-annotated#note-15458043) [She turned to me, once,  
in a Paris restaurant, still not finding  
  
the food on the plate with her fork,  
or not so that it stayed on (try it  
  
in a pitch-black room) and whispered,  
“It’s living hell, to be honest Adam.](https://genius.com/Adam-thorpe-on-her-blindness-annotated#note-15458094)  
  
[If I gave up hope of a cure, I’d bump  
myself off.” I don’t recall what I replied,  
  
but it must have been the usual sop,  
inadequate: the locked-in son.](https://genius.com/Adam-thorpe-on-her-blindness-annotated#note-15458120)  
  
[She kept her dignity, though, even when  
bumping into walls like a dodgem; her sense  
  
of direction did not improve, when cast  
inward. “No built-in compass,” as my father  
  
joked](https://genius.com/Adam-thorpe-on-her-blindness-annotated#note-15458193). [Instead, she pretended to  
ignore the void, or laughed it off.  
  
Or saw things she couldn’t see  
and smiled, as when the kids would offer  
  
the latest drawing, or show her their new toy](https://genius.com/Adam-thorpe-on-her-blindness-annotated#note-15458248)  
[– so we’d forget, at times, that the long,  
  
slow slide had finished in a vision  
as blank as stone.](https://genius.com/Adam-thorpe-on-her-blindness-annotated#note-15458267) [For instance, she’d continued  
  
to drive the old Lanchester  
long after it was safe  
  
down the Berkshire lanes. She’d visit exhibitions,  
admire films, sink into television  
  
while looking the wrong way.](https://genius.com/Adam-thorpe-on-her-blindness-annotated#note-15458297)  
Her last week alive (a fortnight back)  
  
was golden weather, of course,  
the autumn trees around the hospital  
  
ablaze with colour, the ground royal  
with leaf-fall. I told her this, forgetting,  
  
as she sat too weak to move, staring  
at nothing. “Oh yes, I know,” she said,  
  
“it’s lovely out there.” [Dying has made her  
no more sightless, but now she can’t  
  
pretend. Her eyelids were closed  
in the coffin; it was up to us to believe  
  
she was watching, somewhere, in the end.](https://genius.com/Adam-thorpe-on-her-blindness-annotated#note-15458401)