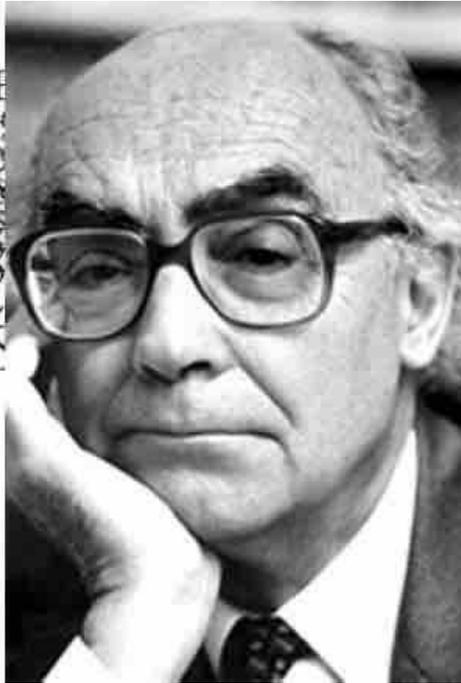
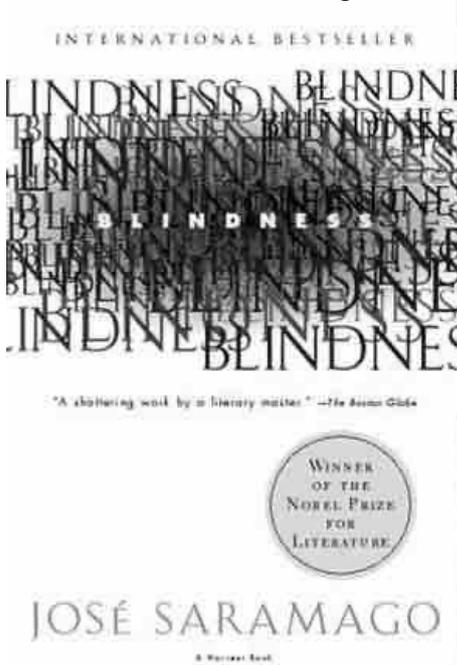


The Relevance of Saramago's Novel Blindness



An unexplained plague of "white blindness" sweeps the unnamed country. Initial attempts to hastily quarantine the blind in an abandoned mental hospital fail to contain the spread. What they succeed at is immediately creating the easy "us versus them" divide between the helpless newly blind and the terrified seeing. **Before we know, we are immersed in the horrifying surreal world of hopelessness, filth, violence, and hate, where the true enemy is not their affliction but people themselves**, which we can see through the eyes of the only person who appears immune to blindness.

"Perhaps only in a world of the blind will things be what they truly are."

As the blindness epidemic spreads, we see the disintegration of society just like we witnessed the destruction of humanity in the quarantine area. Excrement covers sidewalks, dogs munch on human corpses, the blind rot in the stores after futile attempts to find food. Even the saints in the churches are blinded. The world is a bleak picture of desolation and destruction.

We don't know why it happened - whether it's a test, a warning, or a punishment. Instead, we get a nagging haunting feeling that **the real blindness was there all along** - the blindness towards the others, the blindness towards our real selves, and the physical blindness served as a way to unveil it. **What was always there but went unseen before because it used to be easy to shrug off.** Fear. "Us against them" attitude. Greed. Contempt. Hatred. Selfishness. Love of power. Cowardice. Apathy. Isolation. Filth. Rape. Murder. Theft. Ignorance. Indifference. Blaming the victim. **It was all already there, and blindness amplified it. And, as society decays and falls apart, the question of what it means to be human comes up.**

"I don't think we did go blind, I think we are blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see."

Things that made us human are gone. Faces don't matter. Names don't matter. Homes don't matter. Possessions don't matter. Shame and modesty are gone. Medicine is useless. Government is useless. Morals seem obsolete. Empathy is gone. Is anything left? Anything inside us?

"The difficult thing isn't living with other people, it's understanding them."

The vestiges of humanity are the only rays of hope in this bleak world. The girl with the dark glasses taking care of the boy with the squint. The man with the eye patch and his love. And the doctor's wife, the only one who retained her sight. **Why? Was it because she was the most human? Or maybe she remained human because she retained her sight? Who knows?** She is quiet and caring, leading the blind, washing the raped women, weeping over the dead but killing if she must. She sticks by her morals even if she is forced to violate them. She is the guiding light and the quiet hero in this world of darkness whiteness, keeping her charges from degradation without expecting anything in return.

"If we cannot live entirely like human beings, at least let us do everything in our power not to live entirely like animals."

The style of this book may not be for everyone (disclaimer: I loved it!). The pages are filled margin to margin with solid wall of text. There are no dialogue marks, and the seemingly mundane bits of everyday speech are separated only by capital letters.

"The advantage enjoyed by these blind men was what might be called the illusion of light. In fact, it made no difference to them whether it was day or night, the first light of dawn or the evening twilight, the silent hours of early morning or the bustling din of noon, these blind people were for ever surrounded by a resplendent whiteness, like the sun shining through mist. For the latter, blindness did not mean being plunged into banal darkness, but living inside a luminous halo."

We have all experienced blindness. Not that long ago I woke up in the middle of the night. There was no reassuring red glow of the digital clock by my bed nor the diffused yellow light from the streetlight making slat patterns across my floor. The dark was ink vat black, not gray or any other color on the spectrum, dark soul black.

My eyes ached from holding them open so wide trying to capture any stray light that could reassure me that the wonderful array of cones and rods in my eyes were still functioning. Any creak or thump took on so much more significance giving my active imagination ample incentive to flash an array of possible horrible scenarios. My heart rate climbs. I wondered if I've went blind. I think about the room full of books that will have no more significance to me than a pile of bricks or cement blocks, something I held reverence for that is now less than useless. I lay there in various stages of disbelief and reassurances until a sliver of light announced the dawn and my eyes, my beautiful eyes, luxuriated in those first rays of a new day. I could see.

The Blind Eyes Looked Fine.

This book is about such an epidemic. An epidemic that spares no one. It begins with a man going blind while sitting in his car at a traffic light. He is brought to an ophthalmologist and his trip to see the doctor spreads this contagion at the speed of a prairie fire. The ophthalmologist is in the midst of researching this baffling disease when he goes blind as well. The government on the verge of panic rounds up all those infected in an attempt to contain the spread of the disease. The wife of the eye doctor packs his suitcase and even though she can still see packs her own clothes as well. When the government people come to get him she goes with him. They are taken to a vacant mental hospital. At first there are only a handful of people and then there are hundreds of people crammed into this facility. Soldiers are left to guard them and feed them. As more soldiers go blind fears become reality and in one such moment of desperation the soldiers fire into the crowd of blind people. The soldiers retreat and the blind are left with dead bodies to bury and spilled food to collect.

"Their hunger, however, had the strength only to take them three steps forward, reason intervened and warned them that for anybody imprudent enough to advance there was danger lurking in those lifeless bodies, above all, in that blood, who could tell what vapors, what emanations, what poisonous miasmas might not already be oozing forth from the open wounds of the corpses. They're dead, they can't do any harm, someone remarked, the intention was to reassure himself and others, but his words made matters worse, it was true that these blind internees were dead, that they could not move, see, could neither stir nor breath, but who can say that this white blindness is not some spiritual malaise, and if we assume this to be the case then the spirits of those blind casualties have never been as free as they are now, released from their bodies, and therefore free to do whatever they like, above all, to do evil, which as everyone knows, has always been the easiest thing to do."

Jose Saramago by keeping the wife of the doctor immune to the disease gives himself a conduit to describe events. Without her the novel would have been difficult to write and would have been more difficult for us to read. We need vision and if we don't have it ourselves we certainly need someone to provide it for us. There are lots of great themes in the novel, exploring the human condition and how we fail ourselves; and yet, eventually overcome the most severe circumstances. The text is a block of words with few paragraph breaks or markers to help us keep track of who is talking. This certainly adds to the difficulty of reading the novel, but I must counsel you to persevere. You will come away from the novel knowing you have experienced something, a grand vision of the disintegration of civilization and certainly you will reevaluate what is most important in your life. This is a novel that does what a great novel is supposed to do; it reveals what we keep hidden from ourselves.

This book is so frightening and so... *realistic*. Blindness is not an alien concept like monsters and ghosts, neither are contagious diseases. So imagine a disease that prompted sudden blindness; that spread from one person to another quicker than the common cold. This book feels like a story that could happen.

. The book focuses on the life of a few "patients" locked and guarded into a mental institution, among who lives the only person immune to blindness. The loss of sight reduces people to their primal instincts (good or bad) and soon we are witnesses of some unimaginable horrors in the fight for food/supremacy/life and to the demise of all social and moral institutions. However, there are people that still try to help and to keep a bit of humanity and

decency.

"If we cannot live entirely like human beings, at least let us do everything in our power not to live entirely like animals."

I thought that the book is a metaphor of the people that are walking through life without thinking about the violence and cruelty that is in front of them, their ignorance of anything that could menace their civilized life. I believe the book brings forward our fear/avoidance to see our mortality and the insignificance of our lives.

"I don't think we did go blind, I think we are blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see."

"Perhaps only in a world of the blind will things be what they truly are."

"This is the stuff we're made of, half indifference and half malice."

An allegory of the breakdown of civilisation, *Blindness* is also the story of those who finally start resisting raw violence and brutal force, and of those who see through the darkness. However, even as the blind spell breaks, and people are regaining their vision, the world is changed forever. *Blindness* has become a real threat, a terrifying possibility lurking underneath everyday worries. If it can happen once, it can happen again. And who knows when? You may be waiting at a traffic light, and all of a sudden, life goes white...

The one person who remains seeing through the whole catastrophe realises in the end that people might not actually have been literally blind at all:

"Blind people who can see, but do not see."

That is a tragic reflection on humankind. We turn to mass blindness in periods, not because we are physically unable to see, but because we DO not see. We can see, we have the tools for seeing, but we do not use them - not as long as the cars keep moving when the traffic lights turn green. We only start to see that we do not see when we turn blind and there is a disruption in our unseeing complacency.

Let's use our eyes, literally and figuratively, to see what we need to see. Let's not turn a blind eye to the world's troubles! We know we can easily fall into the barbaric state of blindness. It has happened before.

The word Attention was uttered three times, then the voice began, the Government regrets having been forced to exercise with all urgency what it considers to be its rightful duty, to protect the population by all possible means in this present crisis, when something with all the appearance of an epidemic of blindness has broken out, provisionally known as the white sickness, and we are relying on the public spirit and cooperation of all citizens to stem any further contagion, assuming that we are dealing with a contagious disease and that we are not simply witnessing a series of as yet inexplicable coincidences.

Blindness, it is, or is it really? We have been brought up with the notion of blindness in which a person loses its ability to see things as they are, more often than not it reveals out empathy and compassion from us. But could *Blindness* draw out baffling horror out of humanity, perhaps if it succeeds in showing the ignominy of humanity to itself; probably that's what *Jose Saramago* has been able to achieve with this masterpiece. It just holds an inhuman mirror which shows humiliation of entire humanity, the farcicality of civilization to reveal our savage and primitive nature hidden under its inauthentic sheath of comfort, which is stripped down to rags of acrid and stifling truth, however appalling it may be. We invariably boast about feathers we have been able to add in the crown of humanity, over the years of civilization, but have we really moved a bit, transformed a bit from what we were, *Jose Saramago* shattered such notions, if any, with disdain; but perhaps that is how we really are, the ghastly image he shows us is probably we are essentially.

The author handpicks around half a dozen characters and they have been quarantined in an abandoned military establishment, wherein they are left to themselves, their lives have been totally cut off from the outer world. Their existence has been suspended between being and nothingness, as if it doesn't matter to those who are still considered civilized, but yet to be thrown in the hell of nothingness. The life of the quarantine camp briskly degenerates into an existential hell where the blind are victimized first by the way they have been rounded up and shoved into what was a mental hospital, after that they are not given proper food either, and most appallingly by

how they are reduced in their attempt to stay alive. We see new sort of barter system in the camp, which eventually takes inhumane form as human beings are demanded in return of food. The dangled and unfulfilled existence of these characters takes us through the manifold possibilities of human wickedness wherein they have been reduced to just vermin who do not have say in the social order of humanity as if their existence is just an apparition, so much so that they have not been even given names, just referred by their professions or relations. However, they are still alive and as human as anyone could be but the society becomes oblivious to their existence. Could they spring their unfulfilled existences back from the hell of nothingness or they would be crushed down under the humongous pressure of disarray, indifference, contempt and atrocities committed by the orderly world.

The author has been able to create here an alternate reality without touching the easily sought after characteristics of science fiction, he doesn't dive into any parallel universes, instead he just shows a world which is so strange by the word go, yet so much our own world; it takes us to the uncomfortable and unwanted recess of our memory and imagination however it is always there, which shows the ability of the author.

..... *We are so afraid of the idea of having to die, said the doctor's wife, that we always try to find excuses for the dead, as if we were asking beforehand to be excused when it is our turn,.....*

Do we have any hope then? Perhaps we do, otherwise we may not be reading this great piece of literature after progressing through so many hideous acts- genocides, wars, rapes, murders etc.- in our own history of civilization. Hope is a necessary evil, which instills confidence in you to move forward, though it may be shallow and baseless at times and that is all sometimes we need to put forth through madness of humanity. *Saramago* doesn't disappoint you here either. The major characters of *Saramago* braved themselves to last extend of their perseverance, which comes out to be most essential of human qualities needed for survival, to remain afloat in this sea of white nothingness.

The prose of *Saramago* is peculiar and inimitable with unique innovations one might come across. He takes movement of post-modernism to a different level altogether thereby constructing many long, breathless sentences, some of those may even go for more than a page, in which commas take place of periods, quotation marks, semicolons and colons. I have found something which one of its kind as far as narrative style of the book is concerned wherein narrative shift in the voices of characters may be identified with fist capital letter of the phrase, which may not be discernible immediately. The characters are referred to by descriptive appellations such as \"the doctor's wife\", \"the car thief\", or \"the first blind man\". Given the characters' blindness, some of these names seem ironic (\"the boy with the squint\" or \"the girl with the dark glasses\"), his style reflecting the recurring themes of identity and meaning, showing the imbecility and impotence of the existence of the characters. There is omniscient third person narrator amidst the changing but reliable narrative voices who, at times, tries to pull the reader into narrative showing glimpses of metafiction.

Saramago has used quite intelligently one of the characters to infuse intrusive narration through \"the doctor's wife\" whose eye balls remain utilitarian throughout the madness of Blind people. She is an intelligent woman who full of survival instinct which is quintessential to exist in such mayhem. Gradually, she becomes \"eye\" to the main characters of the story as their existence become solely dependent on her will and act. What may appear a position of fortune is essentially an unfortunate gift to her in the city of Blind people as she has to witness all the horrors, horrific acts through her experienced but numb eyes. The doctor's wife may also imply a type of internal narrator infused masterfully by the author to show the human virtues such as empathy, sympathy, co-ordination, assistance and perseverance amidst the madness of inhumanity.

One could not miss the ostensible impact of *Franz Kafka* on the prose of *Jose Saramago*, as his characters take the strange and outlandishly unusual events to be perfectly normal. In the start of the story itself, the sudden blindness of \"the first blind man\" reminds me of *The Metamorphosis* in which Gregor Samsa wakes up one day to find himself transformed in to vermin, and which he accepts as an ordinary situation. Like *Kafka* used to throw his characters into absurd and outlandish circumstances, *Saramago* uses the settings of the novel to bring out the most extreme reactions from the characters. Likewise, we see that *Saramago*, similar to *Albert Camus*, uses the social disintegration of people to the extreme to study the fragility of our vices and virtues.

It is like a social commentary using highly allegorical streamlined unique prose, as James Wood praises \"the distinctive tone to his fiction because he narrates his novels as if he were someone both wise and ignorant\", which may get sometimes a bit challenging to read due to its text having no quotation marks, no indentations when a speaker changes; however, if one could brave through initial pages then the book could not be put down. The book

is highly enjoyable with traits of acerbic, ironical and wry humor through the existential horrors of life, dense but comprehensible, its impact is immediate and a reflection of the sensibility of Saramago, which is at once alive and significant.

Blindness is more than a dystopian novel, it is a philosophical work that makes us wonder about our way of living. Moreover, it brings forth the horrifying truth of how the loss of only one sense can almost instantly dismantle our society, our civilization crumbles to nothing. People are reduced to living in unimaginable filth and rummaging for food and water like animals.

"We're going back to being primitive hordes, said the old man with the black eyepatch, with the difference that we are not a few thousand men and women in an immense, unspoiled nature, but thousands of millions in an uprooted, exhausted world, And blind, ..."

"There must be a government, said the first blind man, I'm not so sure, but if there is, it will be a government of the blind trying to rule the blind, that is to say, nothingness trying to organize nothingness. Then there is no future..."

Saramago's work reminded me of [William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*](#), both are about the crumbling of our civilization as we know it. *Blindness* is a masterpiece and an important reminder for us to be appreciative of several things that we take for granted, to look around and really see. Without an honest and accurate vision our very existence can disintegrate.

Saramago tells us the story of a mysterious mass plague of blindness that affects nearly everyone living in an unnamed place in a never specified time and the implications this epidemic has on people's lives. It all starts inexplicably when a man in his car suddenly starts seeing - or rather stops seeing anything but - a clear white brightness. He's blind. Depending upon a stranger's kindness to be able to go home in safety, we witness what appears to be the first sign of corruption and the first crack in society's impending breakdown when the infamous volunteer steals the blind man's car. Unfortunately for him, the white pest follows him and turns him into one of its victims as well.

Spreading fast, this collective blindness is now frightening the authorities and must be dealt with: a large group of blind people and possibly infected ones - those who had any contact with the first group - have now been put in quarantine until second order. Living conditions start to degrade as the isolated population grows bigger, there is no organization, basic medicine is a luxury not allowed in and hygiene is nowhere to be found. To complicate things further, an armed clique acquires control and power, forcing the subjugated to pay for food in any way they can. The scenes that follow are extremely unpleasant to read, but at the same time they're so realistic that you can't be mad at Saramago for writing such severe events packed with violence that include rapes and murders.

Contrasting with this dystopian desolation, there is some solidarity and compassion in the form of one character: the doctor's wife. The only one in the asylum who miraculously is still able to see, she takes care of her husband and of those who became her new family: the girl with the dark glasses, the boy with the squint, the old man with the black eye patch, the first blind man and the first blind man's wife - the characters' names are never mentioned, which is an interesting choice the author made. When we think of someone, when we hear their name, we always conjure an image in our head; a picture is formed before our eyes. Here we are with a bunch of people who no longer can rely on their sight so, in not giving them names, Saramago also puts us in the dark, forcing us to rely instead on personal characteristics and descriptions given to conjure these characters ourselves.

After an uprising, folks find out the asylum has been abandoned by the army who was until then responsible for it and they're able to leave. Realizing that what they went through in quarantine was only a detail in the huge landscape, now we follow our protagonists as they wander through the city in search of better conditions: water, food, clothes, a way to find their homes and their relatives.

Talking about Saramago's writing style, I should say that it may be a bit confusing at first due to the lack of punctuation; there are many long sentences and no quotation marks around dialogues. But in no time you'll get used to his simplistic style - not in any way devoid of meaning or deepness -, and you'll realize that it actually adds to this reading experience as you'll be going faster through the words; with fewer pauses and breaks, you'll find yourself feeling suffocated and almost breathless, which will only add to the book's atmosphere of urgency, anxiety and despair.

This novel is as much an exploration of the horrendous possibilities created by the dysfunction of anatomy as it is of the limits of human resilience to resist consummate annihilation. After all the process of evolution has taught us

very little; we adapt to external dangers but we fail when something goes amiss inside our bodies. We would live longer had it not been the case.

In one scene from the quarantine a group of soldiers on duty entered the premises to bring foodboxes to the blind internees who had been ordered to stay out of sight for fear of passing on their blindness to healthy ones. But as chance would have it, the mealtime had passed and the hungry internees moved toward the entrance, crashing into one another with outstretched arms and unsteady steps in the manner of Egyptian mummies, to reach the foyer so that they could shout to demand food. Just at that moment soldiers entered the place and, on spotting a group of staggering and tottering blind men, howled in utter terror, dropped the boxes and their guns and fled the building to be away from the field of vision of the blind internees! This was a powerful and ironic instance of the seeing terrified of the blind and the hapless.

I don't think we did go blind, I think we are blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see.

We, as the human race, take pride in the civilization we have built for ourselves and how we have changed the world in a way that no other life forms could. *Blindness* brings forth the horrifying truth about how soon the entire system and entire civilization crumbles to nothing if we lose just one of our senses. People are reduced to living in unimaginable filth and rummaging for food and water like animals.

We're going back to being primitive hordes, said the old man with the black eyepatch, with the difference that we are not a few thousand men and women in an immense, unspoiled nature, but thousands of millions in an uprooted, exhausted world, And blind, ..."

"There must be a government, said the first blind man, I'm not so sure, but if there is, it will be a government of the blind trying to rule the blind, that is to say, nothingness trying to organize nothingness. Then there is no future..."

On the positive side, even in times of utter hopelessness people do all they can to survive. The spirit which keeps them going and struggling to go on living commands respect.

The narrative voice comes across as very honest. The narrator gives a transparent description of what is going on, without ever trying to mitigate the horrors of the situation or to poetize people's misfortune. The narrator maintains an emotional distance and does not offer any judgement on what it observes. The narration, however, is not dry by any means. There are tender moments with love and compassion, and several darker ones which leave one gasping in horror. The writing, though simple, is laden with meaning. And many of those ideas are easy to identify with and understand, since they are not too far from the human nature that we encounter in real world too. They are often things we already know and understand, but haven't looked at them in the way Saramago presents them.

"...since we know that human reason and unreason are same everywhere."

As a dystopian novel, *Blindness* is a very convincing one. I remember reading *Lord of the Flies* which, too, is about complete break-down of civilization. I could never understand what could possibly give rise to murdering instincts in those innocent kids. With *Blindness*, on the other hand, it is difficult to imagine how things could have been any better than the way they have been portrayed in the book.

"No, I am not an optimist, but I cannot imagine anything worse than our present existence. Well, I am not entirely convinced that there are limits to misfortune and evil."

Saramago does not try to provide justifications for the course things take, but everything we read about there is very possible and does not leave room for doubt. It was specially the section about people in the asylum which makes this book memorable for me. One can't possibly read through that section without a lump in the throat. The feeling of hopelessness that prevails is haunting.

Be forewarned that the writing style may bother some people. If you were annoyed by the lack of punctuation distinguishing dialogue in *The Road*, then this book is most certainly not for you, as Saramago gives no formal names to his characters and frequently shifts who is talking in the middle of a sentence *along with* refusing to punctuate any of the dialogue. I can fall into the stream-of-consciousness style of writing as it is similar to my sloppy, random "thinking style," but I can also see how it is not for everyone. In this instance, it communicates the universality of the experiences the blind are facing, how they are all in the same boat (well, technically mental

institution), all victim to the same needs to eat and sleep and defecate and piss and fuck and fight, so it is really of no concern who is speaking, as they are all screaming out the same frustrated banshee yell.

. The full-stops are frighteningly less... before you reach a full-stop after series of run-on sentences, you will already be panting. But the exhaustion is an exhilarating one, not enervating. This is an exhaustion you get addicted to. Thank you Saramago for pushing me into a delectable state of exhaustion.

An unknown person in an unknown land suddenly plunges into a strange blindness in the middle of a road. His visual canvas is suddenly painted all white, milky white, obliterating the colourful painting his vision once was, by an unknown 'brush'. He sees nothing but absolute white. He screams out of sheer despair, out of sheer terror. Thus 'Blindness' has been born, unprecedented and devoid of any explanation. The eyes that fell victim to this white sickness didn't spare anyone that had normal vision. With an unswerving determination, the disease spreads like an inundating fog. The government, in a frantic attempt to curb the unprecedented cataclysm, decides to confine the initial victims. An erstwhile mental asylum was chosen as the quarantine. Thus came together the characters of our story : Doctor, Doctor's wife, first blind man, first blindman's wife, car-thief, girl with glasses, boy with the squint and the blackman with eyepatch. In the realm of blindness 'Names' are insignificant, meaningless. In the realm of blindness, all factors like beauty, features, expressions, gestures diffuse into an all-obliterating white mist. The person's identity narrows down to his voice alone. The voice that speaks out his soul.

Who are you? I am the voice that you hear

No matter what conditions strike humanity, there exists an animal nature that clings to everyone like a leech. Altruism and magnanimity are just a garb that one dons in good times. As soon as the wards of the asylum get inundated with victims, the animal nature looms out as the shortage of food and water became harrowing. As everyone is blind, there is no masquerade left for the animal instinct, and it sticks its head out in all its selfish ferocity.

Saramago created an all powerful dystopian fable that is so haunting and so eye-opening that, we understand that once the deceptive and alluring vision is lost, the beautiful garb our soul has donned— our body- no longer exists and the soul itself looms out of the surface, revealing its fang. This animal nature resulting from the utmost despair and haplessness is beautifully portrayed in this ghastly novel of paramount significance. Excerpts from the novel expounds why humans are selfish and animal-like in the utmost sense:

"Many hours have passed since he last asked his mummy, but no doubt he will start to miss her again after having eaten, when his body finds itself released from the brute selfishness that stems from the simple, but pressing need of sustenance."

"When the bowels function normally, anyone can have ideas, debate, for example, whether there exists a direct relationship between the eyes and feelings, or whether the sense of responsibility is the natural consequence of clear vision, but when we are in distress and plagued by pain and anguish that is when the animal side of our nature becomes most apparent"

Saramago painted a very accurate picture of the 'blind' world. He even refrained from naming his characters which is meaningless in an incorporeal world of blindness where a person is merely the voice he utters, and he possesses nothing, even the 8 or 9 inches of land his feet is on.

Among the characters, Doctor's wife is a tantamount to perfect composure and maturity. When all the blind people turned to mere hungry animals, she with her unswerving determination fed and guided the people she loved, saving them from a very terrible abyss. She is akin to Ma Joad of Grapes of Wrath, both being composed and essentially matured in the face of debilitating reality. But Doctor's wife is much more intellectual than Ma Joad (a simple lady) and has a philosophical inclination, if that is a big difference. She, the only one who could see, carried into her arms all the mentioned above, guiding them like a mother. She transcended her limitations as being a wife, a well-bred middle aged woman as you can see as you read the novel (I don't wish to reveal anything that is important).

Another interesting factor is Saramago's language, which is very dense. Most strikingly, there is a lot of dialogue, but there are no quotations marks, which plays well with the theme of blindness: You have to pay close attention where the voices are coming from in order to piece together who is speaking, because you don't see it, as the text does not clearly indicate it. I wouldn't say that the text is hard to read, but it sure makes the reader work.

Associated to this ethical aspect is the tint of oral literature that these popular sayings incorporate. That the characters are identified not by a name but by an epithet (the girl of the dark glasses), adopting the mnemonic ploys of oral literature, reminds us of epic literature. But it is really these moralistic laws and comments – at times made by the narrator and at times by any one of the characters – that endows the tale with an almost heroic dimension.

For these judgments or lessons or appreciations cannot be debated. They are the result of layers of experience that have been passed on from our ancestors from immemorial times and that cannot be argued against. Their authorship is unquestioned. They are often introduced with a "as the other one said" to the point that Saramago, always injecting elements of humour even in his most horrifying tragedies, has in one instance one of the characters responding: "Shit, do finish with 'what the other one said', I am sick and tired of proverbs, Was this said also by 'the other'? – No, it is I who says it".

There are many elements that make this novel unforgettable; I just wanted to focus on one aspect that may seem menial at first, but which I think contributes considerably to the widely embracing human significance of the story, relying as it does on what life has taught and still teaches us all.

Many of Saramago's sentences are punctuated by commas, where we would otherwise expect a full stop to end the sentence. In some cases, the first word of the next part of the sentence following the comma begins with a capital letter. Thus, pretty soon, a comma becomes a mere substitute for a full stop:

"The blind man raised his hands to his eyes and gestured, Nothing, it's as if I were caught in a mist or had fallen into a milky sea. But blindness isn't like that said the other fellow, they say that blindness is black, Well I see everything white, That little woman was probably right, it could be a matter of nerves, nerves are the very devil, No need to talk to me about it, it's a disaster, yes a disaster, Tell me where you live please, and at the same time the engine started up."

Punctuation is conventional. Saramago is unconventional, but he nevertheless establishes his own conventions that parallel or replace social ones. Nothing about his punctuation truly disorients the reader.

Who Are the Blind?

My third comment relates to the naming of the characters. Nobody is given a name. Saramago only refers to people by their qualities: the first blind man, his wife, the doctor, the doctor's wife, the girl with dark glasses, the boy with the squint, the old man with the black eyepatch.

There is no suggestion that every character is representative of some class or category. What unites them is their blindness. Each has their own story as to how they became blind, so this is ultimately what differentiates them (other than the description they are given).

These characters are simply amongst the first to go blind in an "epidemic" of blindness from which everybody eventually suffers.

As we witness more and more people go blind, we inevitably ask what significance blindness is meant to have. We are never definitively told its true significance.

The epigraph to the novel is a quotation from the "Book of Exhortations":

*"If you can see, look.
If you can look, observe."*

To look might mean to look with a purpose or on a quest.

To observe might mean to look or see with a mindfulness or critical ability.

In a way, we are being exhorted to notice more than what we see in front of us, to look more deeply and less superficially.

What then if we are blind and cannot see? Does it mean that we can neither look nor observe? If so, what can we be exhorted to do?

"Blindness" doesn't so much exhort us to do anything, as investigate the possibilities of what might happen if we all suddenly turned blind.

Blind People Who Can See, But Who Don't See

Who then are the blind? The most obvious answer is all of us. A more precise answer comes at the end of the book:

"Why did we become blind, I don't know, perhaps one day we'll find out, Do you want me to tell you what I think, Yes, do, I don't think we did go blind, I think we are blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see."

Perhaps the blind are we who are willfully blind, or are blinded by an external cause, such as religion (the church) or the state.

Saramago imagines a church in which all the statues have a white bandage covering their eyes. (This reminds me of the apocryphal story that some room in the Vatican contains all of the genitals that have been chiselled off statues at the direction of the Pope, and one day will have to be matched to the statues from which they've been removed.)

Food to Survive

Another answer could be that the blind represent poor people or the working class/proletariat.

This possibility arises from the fact that what the characters in the novel lose when they become blind is the ability to find food and to survive.

Original Position

Blindfolded in a sense, they return to John Rawls' hypothetical "*original position*" in which they don a "*veil of ignorance*" that blinds people to their personal and social characteristics and enables them to negotiate and formulate a social contract without partiality.

Here, the blind people appoint leaders and delegates to perform particular tasks on behalf of the community.

They form themselves into some kind of organisation to replace the state that has ceased to function.

This organisation is against the state, without being animalistic or anarchistic:

"Unless we organise ourselves in earnest, hunger and fear will take over here..."

"The state of mind which perforce will have to determine social conduct of this nature cannot be improvised nor does it come about spontaneously."

"We're going back to being primitive hordes, said the old man with the black eyepatch, with the difference that we are not a few thousand men and women in an immense, unspoiled nature, but thousands of millions in an uprooted, exhausted world, And blind, . . ."

". . . blindness is also this, to live in a world where all hope is gone."

The ending takes a positive turn I might contend with, but this is a rich and powerful book with signs pointing to useful and hopeful directions in a crisis. I think because the doctor's wife and other women band together and take leadership it pairs well with *The Handmaid's Tale* as a work of strong feminism. It's also about language and its limits.

"Do you mean that we have more words than we need? I mean that we have too few feelings. Or that we have them but have ceased to use the words they express, And so we lose them. . ."

And the blindness does quickly spread -- everyone who came in contact with the first victim loses their sight, and

then everyone who came in contact with them, and so on, and so on. There is panic, there is looting, the city becomes desolate and dangerous.

There is a notable exception to the blindness epidemic: One person, a doctor's wife, was able to keep her eyesight, and she's able to guide others. No explanation for her sight is given, but I presume the author did it to keep the story moving and to have a protagonist. Otherwise things would be even bleaker.

An epidemic of "white sickness," a contagious disease that causes instant blindness, is spreading through an unidentified city. The storyline follows a group of seven unnamed people from the time they become infected through their quarantine in an asylum. They experience the difficulties of losing their sight and their freedom, as well as an increasingly chaotic social structure. A portion of the population becomes cruel abusers of power, leading to degradation of the vilest type. One person retains the ability to see and serves as a witness to the horrors of the unraveling of humanity.

Saramago's style will not be to everyone's taste. He writes strings of sentences separated by commas and dialogue is not separated from the descriptive narrative. His writing is intelligent, insightful, and expressive. The characters are drawn to reveal, through their actions, the many aspects of human nature. Some characters act heroically. Some become despots. Saramago shows what can happen when fear reigns supreme.

And yet, much like the prose, there are places where this great moral paintbrush leaves ugly streaks that readers must puzzle through. Did the author really mean this, they ask themselves, or are they speaking through a character that, for all their goodness, have the altogether human tendency to think correlation implies causation?

...but should I turn blind, if after turning blind I should no longer be the person I was, how would I then be able to go on loving him, and with what love, Before, when we could still see, there were also blind people, Few in comparison, the feelings in use were those of someone who could see, therefore blind people felt with the feelings of others, not as the blind people they were, no, certainly, what is emerging are the real feelings of the blind...

...Perhaps humanity will manage to live without eyes, but then it will cease to be humanity, the result is obvious...

Do you mean this, Mr. Saramago? Or are you giving life to these thoughts that the doctor's wife has, thoughts that you do not yourself share but feel that your character, whom you have put through so much, would? Because if I were blind, Mr. Saramago, I would not be so complacent about these subtle accusations, that lacking eyesight makes me something less than human. If you were blind, you would not either. But the line between you and your fiction is a flimsy and deceptive one, and it does me no good to ask questions that you yourself cannot answer.

But I cannot help asking one more.

...for we must not forget how the shameless girl tempted him into bed, well, as everyone knows, with women it is always a case of buyer beware.

You were doing so well, Mr. Saramago! But now we have a case where both your prose and your morals have overlapped into a thorny bramble of inscrutable meaning, and it would be oh so easy to misinterpret this and other instances like it as misogyny. The problem is, the pages before belie this evidence of a shallow and unfeeling mind, and I do not know what to think.

In light of that, I leave you with four stars for your book. It has an undeniable beauty and power to it, to be sure. But there are instances when these traits wreak havoc in their efforts to reach greater heights, and I cannot in good conscience ignore them.

Saramago describes disaster's potential to bring out both the best and worst of people, from the misguided actions of the city government, to the clear-headed ministrations of a blinded doctor and the bravery of his sighted wife, who has feigned blindness in order to stay by his side when the blind are shut away from the seeing world.

This is the basic premise of Jose Saramago's novel, *Blindness*. The first people to experience the loss of sight are quarantined in a mental hospital (and I think even the choice of venue has meaning), and in a deterioration of society that reminded me of *Animal Farm*, we see man at his worst and his best simultaneously. Among those present are an Ophthalmologist (yes, ironic isn't it?) who is blind and his wife, who can see but pretends to be blind in order that she may accompany her husband into quarantine. As everyone else, including the guards at the hospital, go blind, she alone maintains her sight.

Not only must she struggle with the conditions that quickly develop into catastrophic, she must also struggle with whether to intercede and help others, and how to do so without losing her autonomy. As her husband tells her,

\\"Think of the consequences, they will almost certainly try to turn you into their slave, ... You will be at the beck and call of everyone. One moral question after another assails her, not the least being what does the individual owe to self vs. to others. In the world we all know, there is seldom a circumstance where we cannot step back and watch to see if someone else will step up, but this is a situation in which there is no one else to shoulder the burden, the burden rests on your shoulders, or no one's.

What emerges from the depths of the affliction is a kind of understanding of who these people are, and what they think, without their vision to give them clues or preconceptions.

The mystery of the blindness, which is a white sea of light, not a dark one of void, is addressed frequently in allegorical terms.

If you want to be blind, then blind you will be. says one character.

it even used to be said there is no such thing as blindness, only blind people, when the experience of time has taught us nothing other than that there are no blind people, but only blindness.

In brief, it is the story of an epidemic of blindness which sweeps across an unnamed country beginning with a man who, whilst waiting for the lights to change whilst on his way home from work, suddenly loses his sight. From there the cascade of sightlessness rushes across from contact to contact sweeping along in its devastation anyone and everyone who meets someone infected and that is the true horror; the affliction is instant, one moment all light and shade and shape is clear and the next all is pure white, not black darkness but bright inescapable whiteness. That is the early shocking aspect of the book; it is the immediate nature of the curse which terrifies.

"The apprentice thought, 'we are blind', and he sat down and wrote Blindness to remind those who might read it that we pervert reason when we humiliate life, that human dignity is insulted every day by the powerful of our world, that the universal lie has replaced the plural truths, that man stopped respecting himself when he lost the respect due to his fellow-creatures.

Saramago has a writing style that makes me uneasy. He appears to have no regard for paragraphs or punctuation. He does not give names to the city or the people. So straight out the gate, Saramago throws me off balance.

Then he mixes in a mystery disease, causing people to become blind. The government quarantines the blind to try to contain the mayhem, but it is too late. Soon, the government that was providing food to the blind is unable to do so as they are blind as well. Chaos ensues. A gang of blind thugs emerges, stealing whatever food they can, committing acts of violence... however, one woman does not lose her sight. She faked it as to not be separated from her husband. She sees all the hell.