

BIOGRAPHICAL, POLITICAL, AND PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXTS FOR *BLINDNESS*

José Saramago's biography (briefly):

b. November 16, 1922 in Azinhaga, Portugal to landless peasants. His name "Saramago" was his father's nickname and means wild radish! His parents could not afford to send him to school in Lisbon in the 6th grade. Instead he attended technical school and became an auto mechanic. He also spent as many hours as he could in the Lisbon Public Library, reading and reading. Later he became a civil servant, a social welfare officer, a journalist, newspaper editor and a novelist and man of letters. With Orhan Pamuk, he founded the European Writer's Parliament. A far cry from his early years....

He wrote his first novel in 1947 and not another until

1982 *Balthazar and Blimunda*

1984 *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*

1991 *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, which was banned as religiously offensive in 1992

1995 *Blindness*

and many more, including *Seeing* (2004), a sequel to *Blindness* that begins with a Parliamentary election in which most of the population casts blank ballots. This novel is written in the same style and includes the Doctor's Wife and the Dog of Tears. Saramago also wrote poetry, plays and essays.

In 1995 Saramago won the Camões Prize

In 1998 he won the Nobel Prize for Literature

He died on June 18, 2010 in at his home in Lanzaro in the Canary Islands.

In 2003, Harold Bloom the critic described José Saramago as "the most gifted novelist alive in the world today" and at Saramago's death in 2010, Bloom said that he considered him to be a "permanent part of the Western canon." (Wikipedia)

Political Context for *Blindness* (briefly):

- dictatorship in Portugal under António de Oliveira Salazar(1928-1974)
- the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)
- Aristide de Sousa Mendes, consul, issued false Portuguese identity cards to Jews for safe passage from Germany although it was forbidden by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1939)
- the gassing and execution of Jews in Nazi Germany (1939-1945)
- the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (1945)
- gulags, labor camps and prisons for Soviet dissidents where many died (1920s-1950s)
- Portuguese prison cells at Caxias and Peniche would fill with excrement and rubbish because of their placement on tidal water. Conditions were like those of a concentration camp. The concentration camp Tarrafal in the Canary Islands was for Portuguese dissidents.
- genocide of 500 thousand to one million Tutsi and moderate Hutus by militant Hutus in Rwanda (1994)

Saramago wrote: "I cannot save anything but what I can do is write about what I think and feel and the anguish of seeing a world that could already have resolved a large portion of its humanitarian problems, but which not only has not solved any, but which, in fact, aggravates many of them."

A Philosophical Context for *Blindness*:

In western philosophy, the terms "gnosis" (knowledge) and "agnosia" (ignorance) are linked to seeing and to blindness: to see is to know while not to see is to be ignorant. In contrast to this genealogy, the anti-philosopher Lacan maintains that seeing does not guarantee knowledge, at least not knowledge of the "truth," because there is always one point from which we can never see, that is, the blind spot. In a parallel way, however much we talk or write, we never manage to represent the whole truth or what Lacan terms the Real. The experience of analysis, the shattering impact of trauma, or, at times, a work of art, can enable us, however, to lift the veil covering truth. This article addresses Saramago's twin dystopian fiction *Blindness* and *Seeing* and suggests that by pushing the limits of the possible and portraying the possibility of the impossible, Saramago enables us to catch a glimpse of the Real. The trauma depicted in *Blindness* leads to Saramago's characters reassessing their relationship to knowledge and in particular their knowledge of the Big Other.

Maria Aristodemou, "Democracy or Your Life! Knowledge, Ignorance and the Politics of Atheism in Saramago's *Blindness* and *Seeing*," Law, Culture and the Humanities 9 (2011):169-187.