

## Impressions

I stood for a moment in the hushed atmosphere of the exhibition trying to make up my mind on where to go.

Most of the paintings on exhibit were of abstract nature with shapes and forms conveying symbolic meaning via the medium of art.

However, there was this one painting in one corner of the exhibit room that seemed to be different from others. Two middle-aged men stood before it gesticulating and talking animatedly (about the painting I presumed).

In the background, I could hear a presenter say, *"As you would notice, many of the paintings show delicate strokes mixed with bold ones, showing that the artist wasn't afraid to experiment..."*

I walked up to the painting. It was what is called a "landscape portrayal". The painting was mostly strokes in black and gray and it showed a small lake lit by a pale full moon. Beside the lake, to one side, knelt a fair woman with waist length hair. Despite the darkness around her, her naked fair skin seemed to glow with a natural intensity that outshone even the moon. She seemed to be looking at something directly opposite to her, at the other side of the lake. The object of her gaze seemed to be a misshapen, ugly beast on four legs that stared back at her with glowing red eyes that seemed to burn with extraordinary malice and hate. Blood seemed to drip from sharp yellow fangs that were bared as if ready for a kill. And yet there seemed to be no fear in the woman's eyes. Just a steady level look that gave the impression that the woman knew the beast and knew it well.

*"... The painting 'A calm storm' shows the artist's skill in using charcoal to maximum effect thereby conveying a sense of stark but subtle beauty in the form of..."* intoned the presenter in the background.

I stood beside a portly man with a receding hairline of mostly white hair and severe looking half-moon glasses perched on the end of his nose that was thrust out at the moment in a manner of intense examination of the painting. The effect would have been comical hadn't it been for the serious looking blue suit and dour expression on his face.

His friend, another serious looking man with silver hair that was brushed back smoothly, looked on in impatience.

"Hmm...yes...yes..." muttered the portly man.

"Look here Henry, the meaning of the painting is quite obvious. Any fourth grade art student can tell you", said the silver haired man impatiently.

The portly man didn't reply at once, but after a few more seconds of scrutinisation straightened up and faced his friend.

"Cedric, must you always rush things? So, you have an opinion on this piece. Please, enlighten me", he said in a manner that left no doubt that he didn't think much about Cedric's opinions.

My ears pricked up. Cedric Peabody and Henry Divine? I had heard those names before. Said to be one of the leading art critics in England, both were known to be highly critical and opiniated stiff necks who had been the downfall of many a budding artist. This would be interesting, I thought to myself.

*"... After rave reviews in France, the British Art Club is proud to bring to you this first time exhibition by the talented young genius..."* continued the presenter. I wasn't paying much attention though. My focus was entirely taken up by the two veteran critics.

Cedric cleared his throat. "My dear fellow it's quite simple. The painting is of sexual nature and origins. The moon is used to give the painting a classical sensual touch with the lake symbolizing the holy communion of two bodies. The reflection of both the woman and the beast in the lake symbolizes the joining of the spirit during this communion."

My curiosity grew in intensity. This was something I hadn't expected to hear.

"Moreover, the woman is symbolic of the virgin. Her submissive posture indicates the willingness to be corrupted, so to speak. Correspondingly, the beast signifies the primitive instinct - the animalistic nature of sexual desire. The blood on the fangs is of course

symbolic of the... how shall I say... blooding?..yes the blooding of the virgin", finished Cedric.

For a second Henry continued to stare at Cedric than after another examination of the painting he turned back to face Cedric.

"Well done my chap. A fine interpretation, but a completely wrong one I'm afraid", he said in a half indulgent tone.

Cedric's mouth was now just a thin line in his pale face. His silver moustache quivered with barely suppressed outrage.

Henry didn't seem to notice all this though and he at once began expressing his impression with a great deal of gesturing.

"The scene is a classic representation of the gulf between the haves and the have-nots in the world. The woman symbolizes beauty, perfection and perhaps richness. The beast is the antithesis of the woman. It is ugly, it is imperfect and it is, in a sense, poor - poor of all that makes the woman so desirable. You could look at it as the classic rich man vs. poor man, or the beauty and the beast or something along those lines. The lake symbolizes the gulf between the two - the disparity, the inequality. The blood on the fangs is simply an artistic touch that symbolizes nothing more than a fervent desire on the part of the beast to get at the woman and taste her blood - her success, her richness", finished Henry.

For a long moment the two men looked at each other like two gladiators in an arena seizing each other up.

*"...Although his work and talent became known only six months back, he is already being hailed as a genius in the class of Teugert and Meldrop..."* The presenter was still at it apparently.

I was about to slink away when suddenly Henry turned upon me and said, "Well sir, I see you are interested in this piece too. No doubt you have already heard Cedric and me talk about this piece. No, don't deny it - your eavesdropping was quite obvious, and there is no need to apologize. Anyhow, I'd like to hear your opinion on this - which of the two of us do you think is right in this regard?"

I considered him and Cedric for a moment. Here were two well-known art critics asking me, of all the people, as to which one of them was right! I was in a tight spot, but I could see no way out of it except to tell them what I thought. So, I did.

"Actually, I had a different impression altogether regarding this painting", I ventured.

Cedric and Henry exchanged quick glances and then looked back at me with a dubious expression that seemed to indicate that a third opinion in this matter was entirely unthinkable.

Then with that same annoying look of indulgence Henry said, "Oh, really? Well then, lets have it then."

I took a deep breath and then plunged in. "Well, to me the painting symbolizes the degeneracy of the modern world - the good and the bad of humanity and indeed of life. The woman symbolizes the good, with the ethereal beauty indicating the inherent nature of goodness. The beast is indeed the antithesis of the woman. It is evil and the ugliness indicates the inherent nature of it and the blood signifies the ruthlessness of evil. The lake is symbolic of all life. The reflection of both the woman and the beast signifies that both good and evil co-exist in the world. The woman's stoic gaze is an acceptance of this and willingness to live with it. The beast's bared fangs, on the other hand, portray the unwillingness of the beast to accept this co-existence and its desire to destroy all that is good. The moon is symbolic of perception of this good and evil. For, the moonlight highlights both the goodness of the woman and the evilness of the beast at the same time. The woman glows with an inherent power of goodness because she casts the light of the moon into insignificance, while the beast looks more evil and foul because of the pale light of the moon that highlights its dark shadowy form. In effect, our perception is distorted by what we would like to believe. Erm... and that's about it."

Neither of the two men spoke but I could see them assessing my thoughts in their minds. It was, of course, utter drivel. Not surprising since I had made it up just few seconds ago. But it seemed to have a suitable impression on the two men.

Henry nodded. "Yes...an interesting interpretation. But it's too simplistic. Young men like you should learn to look beyond the obvious and learn to read the artist's mind."

"I agree", intervened Cedric. "Young folks have to be educated on the finer points of art. It isn't enough to know the theory of art techniques. One should also learn the subtler applications of these theories in modern art forms."

Henry took up the line again at this point. "But don't worry. You have plenty of time ahead of you. No doubt, you will learn the art of art interpretation with time."

Both he and Cedric chuckled at this little joke.

However, just then my attention reverted back to the presenter who it seemed to be coming to the end of his lengthy discourse. "... *And so ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention please.*"

All heads turned to the small dais from which the presenter was speaking.

"*For, it gives me great pleasure to introduce to you the nouveau genius who has given us these magnificent paintings. There is no doubt that we will be seeing and hearing more of this remarkable artist. Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Edwin Blackmoore!*" finished the presenter in a great flourish.

Applause rang out in the room and necks craned towards the dais to catch a glimpse of this supposed genius. Henry and Cedric were applauding loudly I noticed.

I glanced back at the painting once more and couldn't help smiling to myself. The art of art interpretation indeed.

Then smoothing my hair one last time, I began my slow and deliberate walk to the dais, as it stood empty, waiting for me.