2009 Honorable Mention Great Works Entry

*Man Proposes, God Disposes* by Sir Edwin Landseer

**Historical Context**

In 1845, John Franklin’s expedition in search of the Northwest Passage began, but during its course, the entire crew was trapped in the Arctic ice (“Franklin”). Those in England remained ignorant of the expedition’s status until 14 years later, when search teams finally established that the entire party had died (“Franklin”). Sir Edwin Landseer was a well respected Victorian artist who had achieved prominence with his many animal portraits and who chose to depict the final fate of Franklin’s expedition. *Man Proposes, God Disposes* came late in Landseer’s artistic career and stood in sharp contrast to his other, rather sentimental animal portraits; some even see in his gruesome portrait evidence of the “mental instability and depression” which plagued Landseer in the last few years of his life (Cowling 187).

**Critical Analysis**

On a broader scale, however, Landseer’s work was an integral part of the social and philosophical turmoil of his day: the Second Industrial revolution brought rapid but filthy urbanization, Romanticism remained prevalent in philosophy and the arts and Charles Darwin’s socially disrupting theory of natural selection had recently been published. In *Man Proposes, God Disposes*, all of the painting’s elements built on these current ideas to critique trust in humanity and progress and to illustrate the hostile, unsentimental superiority of nature.

The primary focus of the painting centers on the broken mast and the tattered red naval ensign which is draped over it. While the red flag in one sense resembles the blood of those who have died, attacked as it is by the vicious carnivore, it also represents the British Empire and its naval superiority. By depicting the flag in tattered ruins, Landseer warns against a belief in undeterred progress, demonstrating how the grandest of human
designs are brought to ruin when pitted against the brute forces of nature. A telescope and a variety of other instruments strewn in the snow expand upon this idea, specifically critiquing trust in technology that will supposedly tame nature and submit it to the human will. Taken together, these details ultimately represent the “wreckage of civilization” in a harsh and unforgiving environment (Cowling 187). Such skepticism about progress is typical of some of the Romantic literature and art of the 19th century that rejects the formalism of the Enlightenment and firmly grounds Landseer’s work in intellectual sentiment. For example, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* questions progress by relating the tragic outcome of scientific effort to control nature, while other Victorian artists also depicted the evils and failures of industrialization.

The general setup of the painting, the primary events directly depicted in it and the background landscape all contribute a sense of fear in the work. The mast provides a line of action in the painting by cutting a diagonal across the painting and framing the other subjects around it. While the viewer’s eye quickly focuses on the bear on the left, the mast draws one’s eye to the twisted form of the second bear, connecting the two as they move violently through the wreckage. Thus the painting allows one to view both of the bears in rapid succession, prompting an instinctive feeling of revulsion and veiled fear. This vague sense of fear is further evoked by the tormented and violent figures of the polar bears—one ripping at the flag, the other with its head reared back above a ribcage, a bone clenched in its jaws. The light source of the painting is ambiguous, obscured as it is behind an iceberg, but since the landscape backdrop is dominated by jagged ice, this light is masterfully reflected in strange and foreign directions. Such lighting placed on an unfamiliar scene further adds an eerie feeling to the desolate surroundings.

Although these effects are effective in evoking emotion, the painting avoids excessive sentimentality, instead attempting to be realistic in its cold, aggressive portrayal. Unlike other paintings that put animals in either a sweet or a dramatically glorified light, the painting seeks to show the brutality of the polar bears without exaggeration. The impressive scenery, though pristinely beautiful, does not display the gentle grandeur that would reduce an unforgiving, hostile landscape into a fictionalized, transcendental portrait of nature. Even though the painting is about the Franklin’s expedition, it touches only indirectly on the suffering of those who died, “elevat[ing] the subject beyond mere horror” to the plane of true emotion (187).
In this respect, the painting departs from the Romantic tendency to invoke excess emotion and feeling, most likely since Romantic thought was waning near the end of the 19th century. The emotional aspect of the painting, however, is still fundamentally tied to Landseer’s social context: Darwin’s theme of “survival of the fittest,” introduced just a few years before the painting, is evident in the realistically brutal scene. Nature is not shown as a benign presence as in other Victorian art, but rather the grim driving force of natural selection. Given this, the title Landseer chose, *Man Proposes, God Disposes*, seems slightly incongruous. Darwin’s theory sought to eliminate the supernatural from life, yet the title in itself suggests the fulfillment of divine will in the painting. The conflicted theme further emphasizes the social turmoil of Victorian society, where Romantic notions were giving way to cold and harsh realism. Admittedly, Landseer may have chosen his title simply because it was a familiar phrase, but even then it still represents a conflict between archaic wisdom and modern thought.

**Personal Response**

As I consider the mixed emotions I felt seeing a copy of the painting for the first time, I find it easy to connect to the urban legends that have sprung up around this “cursed” painting. The first thing I ever even heard about the painting was that a student had supposedly been driven to suicide by it during an exam—and this in a conversation around the dinner table. Soon after dinner, the host showed me a small paper with the painting on it. In all honesty, I originally found the painting creepy, slightly horrific and rather disagreeable. Perhaps my views were only tainted by the horror story about it. The feelings of desolation and helplessness so accurately portrayed in the work naturally distance me from the painting, and such feelings made it easier to believe any disturbing tale about the painting.

The more I looked back at the painting, however, the more I was drawn to it and strangely engaged by it. After staring at it several times, I knew I wanted to write about it and its fearful intensity. Of course I still can’t say that I completely like the painting: even now I feel slightly uncomfortable looking at it. Perhaps my discomfort comes only from the stray thought that if I stare at the painting too long, I’ll be driven to suicide. This laughable idea, however, is not so irrational when I consider the painting’s focus on death. From this perspective, my revulsion is fundamentally mixed with a sense of connection to the fear of death and the will to
struggle expressed in the painting. Landseer’s painting reminds me of the desperate situation of mankind, its ultimate dependence on external forces in the fight for life. Even though I personally find the world less hostile than Landseer portrays it, I nonetheless realize that it clearly portrays my ultimate helplessness and that it remains basically relevant in any society, for all humanity.
Works Cited
