

William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*: A Study of Evil in Man

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Abstract

William Golding's first and the most popular novel Lord of the Flies (1954) presents a depressing truth about man and his nature: here, he portrays inherent evil in man. In this novel there is almost a complete absence of grown-ups, and evil is portrayed through children. It has an instinctual hold upon the human heart. Generally the growth of the inherent evil in human being is kept under control by civilized restraint, but removal of such restriction results in a complete regression into savagery and brutality. This is what happens in the novel too. Therefore, inherent evil in man which brings out the dystopian vision of the post-modern world will be discussed with reference to plot, images, symbols and character in this article. Lust for power and control over other are the evils of society from which even the children are not immune.

Key Words: Evil, Savagery, Primitivism, Barbarism, Aggression

Reversion into Savagery in *Lord of the Flie*

The plot of the novel is about a group of English public School boys who have been evacuated from Britain, where an atomic war is raging, and are accidentally on a largely paradisaic but uninhabited desert island in the Pacific. They soon fall away from civilization into barbarism and a loyalty to "The Lord of the Flies" – a name for the devil. The boys, whose age ranges from six to twelve years, proceed to set up a rational society based on a "grown-up" model. In the island, there is a clear pool for drinking water and swimming, plenty of fruit to eat, and piglets to hunt for meat. To run the group systematically and to give leadership in critical hours, they feel the need of a leader. To fulfill the need, Ralph is chosen the leader in a democratic way. Although Ralph lacks the ability to think very clearly at times, he has almost all the qualities of a leader. He says that there are two essential tasks to be performed: keeping the fire burning all the time and building shelters. The children divided into three groups for carrying out different duties. Different duties are assigned to different groups. One group is given the duty of keeping the fire day and night; another group is assigned the duty of building shelters, and the rest group is given the duty of hunting pigs for meat. Allotment of duty is according to the age-group to which the children belong. At first shelters are constructed and food supplies are arranged.

The boys take up their duties in a team-spirit. However, they soon begin to lose interest in their routine work and become restless. Then onwards, the society disintegrates under two pressures – aggression and superstition. The "biguns" who are responsible for keeping the fire burning all the time indulge in hunting and neglect the fire, and the "littluns" lose interest in their tasks. The lack of interest in performing their assigned duties creates tension and invites conflict among the boys on the island. Jack, who later becomes the leader and who leads the choir boys from the very beginning, was not happy at Ralph's being elected as the leader. Jack is crazy for power and jealous of Ralph. Jack, therefore, continues opposing Ralph's leadership with increasing strength and aggression.

Peter Green rightly says that the novel portrays a gradual reversion to the most primitive and "bloodthirsty savagery." The boys split into two rival factions: one led by Ralph and the other by Jack. Ralph's group believes in rational whereas Jack's hunts and becomes savage. Philip Drew says, "The catastrophe occurs because the qualities of intelligence, address, bravery, decency, organization and insight are divided among Piggy, Jack, Ralph and Simon"(310). In the conflict which soon explodes, Ralph's constant associates, Piggy and Simon, are killed, Sam and Eric are taken to Jack's group, and Ralph is left alone. Ralph, thus, becomes first an outcast then a scapegoat. Ralph is hunted by Jack's group across the island and later Jack sets fire to smoke Ralph out of it; somehow Ralph manages to escape. A naval officer sees the smoke in the island, fortunately for Ralph, comes with a rescue party to the spot and saves him and others. The story concludes with the pathetic image of Ralph crying for "the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy"(248).

If we analyze from the point of view of comic resolution, *Lord of the Flies* turns out to be a comedy, which demands a happy ending and the moral response to comedy is "this should be" (167), writes Northrop Frye. But, in the real sense, the end of the novel is not happy one. It does not help the happy mood to prevail over everything. Although Ralph and other boys are rescued at the end, which was Ralph's prime aim, Simon and Piggy are dead. The death of these two boys preserves till the end a very gloomy and tragic mood. Even the rescue cannot be a perfect comic resolution. While alive, Piggy was the butt of ridicule and mockery to the other children. As far as Simon is concerned, he was silent and kept reserved. Their cruel death creates a remarkable obstacle to novel's ending on a tone of all enveloping happy note. The gloom and sadness created by their tragic death darken the comic resolution at the end.

According to Northrop Frye, the opposite of the manifestation of happiness in a comedy is not the villainous but the absurd. In this novel, Jack's action are not absurd and, thus, not comic at all. His plans, ideas and actions are villainous. Lust for power and leadership in both Ralph and Jack leads them to the ultimate confrontation. The demonstration of enmity in the conflict between Ralph and Jack has a color of hatred throughout, which helps to portray the dark aspect of the novel. Thus, within the circle of

conflict and confrontation in the main story, Jack seems to be cut in the size of a villain and Ralph seems to acquire the height of a hero.

In Golding's *Lord of the Flies* confusion and anarchy reign over the world in which the hero lives. Ralph's actions and performances show that he is a dreamer rather than an active doer of his deeds. He is not a good thinker and seldom sees the significance of things until someone points it out to him. When pressed to make a decision, he seems unequipped to think out of the problem. One of his notable misjudgments is to call a meeting at twilight to talk about the fear with the "littl'uns". Once he loses control over the group, Ralph is never able to maintain his position with security. He, thus, is an unheroic hero. He is left alone after losing Simon, Piggy, Sam and Eric. He makes attempts to devise methods for rescue. Having lost his leadership to Jack, he is almost completely unable to gain any height of moral or physical strength to resist the animalism and anarchy of Jack's group. He loses his courage and determination. Not only this, he even partially compromises with the members of the opposite group.

As far as the primitive group of the boys is concerned, they fully relapse to primitivism and sensational barbarism. The "biguns" frequently indulge in chanting, frenzied dancing and peg-hunting while there is utter confusion among the "littl'uns." Their pig-killing ritualistic dance is accompanied by a chorus of "kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood"(187). This chant heightens the irony of the reduction of Jack from the status of the leader of the choir boys in his school to that of the leader of a wild, singing group. The young children are swept by confused alarms of struggle and fight.

The beast becomes a representation of the boys' subjective terror. The rumour of the beast which is unseen and unknown raises the wildest terror in their superstitious minds. Like men in primitive societies, these children fall a prey to the most fantastic superstitions. In their primitive frenzy, they are gripped by the idea that the beast, which is a potential source of danger, should be appeased with ritual and sacrifice. They, to this end, murder one of their mates, Simon, to pacify this evil spirit which was in reality just a dead pilot. Simon represents that part of man which is sensitive to beauty and truth. He has discovered what the truth is, but he falls a prey to the sacrificial frenzy of the boys who languish in the gloom of the superstitions. Untruth changes innocent children into cannibalistic monsters thus:

The sticks fell and the mouth of the new circle crunched and screamed. The beast was on its knees in the centre, its arms folded over its face. It was crying out against the abominable noise something about a body on the hill. The beast struggled forward, broke the ring and fell over the steep edge of the rock to the sand by the water. At once the crowd surged after it, poured down the rock, leapt onto the beast, screamed, struck, bit, tore. There were no words, and no movements but the tearing of teeth and claws. (188)

The failure of the adults in managing their affairs well there has been a nuclear war. The children's story begins as an attempt to rescue them from the grown-ups' chaotic world. The children are brought to the island which is like a heaven at first and there is order and peace. But soon, the children like the adults, give themselves to cruelty, terror, untruth and anarchy. At the beginning there has been the establishment of an ideal commonwealth, which very soon becomes absolutely impossible to function smoothly. The boys convert the island into a hell. Thus, no matter how young or how innocent a person is, by nature he/she is prone to inherit impressions from his/her environment. What the adults have already sent to the children's island is the frightful dead body of the pilot.

In the island, the naval officer, who comes with his crew to rescue the boys, represents the adult world. When Ralph is hunted out of the jungle, he discovers a naval officer standing in front of him. The naval officer is in a huge peaked cap with an anchor gold foliage. The adult world is no better than the island. The reason the boys are on the island is adult "quarrel". The uniform of the naval officer and the paint and stick of Jack correspond to each other. Jack, with his wooden spear and war-paint on his face, confronts the officer who is equipped with a revolver, and wears a white drill with a row of gilt buttons down the front of his uniform and epaulettes. Both Jack and naval officers are symbols of evil propensities inherent in man—his greed, lust for power, selfishness and inhuman deeds. The children's world ends up where it sprang from.

Reign of Evil

In *Lord of the Flies* the echoes of the adult world indirectly govern the children's world of the island. No child is free from the corrupt adult tendencies. The rules that the children follow in the island world are like those already established in the adult world, rules that have turned the world into a nightmare. The world of the island is a microcosm of the adult world. All the seven deadly sins-- lust, pride, sloth, covetousness, gluttony, anger and envy—are present in the island world. The boys conform to the pattern of existence they were taught in the adult world. They affirm, "We will have rules. . . . Lots of rules"(44). Everyone there is bound to rules and, if anyone breaks them, he/she is liable to punishment. The rules help Ralph to be a strong leader. He, in this regard, becomes a constant reminder of the sensible adult world. The pestering adult vices such as lust for power, greed, control over others and slavery are at work in the boys.

The technique of diminution (Kernan⁵³), an often repeated technique in satirical writings, is applied in the novel. The device of diminution to create fantasy has a symbolic reference to the contemporary society. Golding, instead of presenting the basic human condition, has restored to fantasy and satire to that end where the adults world has been reduced to the children's world. The technique of diminution compels us to see the image of the adult in the mirror of the children depicted.

Ralph is confident of the fact that his father will rescue him and the other boys on the island as soon as he learns about the predicament of the children. The most intelligent

boy on the island, Piggy, is an orphan. However, his superior talent goes waste when he, instead of being a leader himself, remains subordinate to Ralph. It is mainly because of the lack of high social status that Piggy is not elected. He is from the lower middle class family and lives with his poor aunt. Thus, neither Ralph nor Piggy is a fitter candidate than Jack. Yet, Ralph is elected the chief.

Slavery is the natural condition of man. The boys, one by one, give up their freedom and willingly make a choice to become Jack's slaves. Losing their freedom, they are happy to be slaves. They choose the path to enslavement.

Keeping in mind the need to prevent confusion and to allow everyone to form a disciplined team, Ralph advises, "we'll have to have 'Hands up like at school'"(43). But, to Jack, this is odious. In his opinion, these sorts of rules cannot be a means of preserving a child's individual voice, they are just a means of punishment, like repression. "We'll have rules!" Ralph cried excitedly. "Lots of rules! Then when anyone breaks'em. . ." (44). This is Ralph's way of dragooning other boys on the island which is not characteristic of a good and reasonable leader.

Jack says that he is an English and that the English are the best at everything. "I agree with Ralph. We've got to have rules and obey them. After all, we are not savages. We're English; and the English are best at everything. So we have got to do the right things (55)." Here, Jack, very much reasonably shows his positive response to Ralph's scheme of regimentation. But very soon the implied understanding between them is fragile and momentary and results in shattering to pieces. Man is highly responsible for his degeneration. Because of fear, lust for power and greed man degenerates. Golding, through the portrayal of the boy's character in *Lord of the Flies* shows an aspect of the basic human condition. Ralph's total plan starts breaking up because the children are frightened.

The beast is nothing more than a haunting sense of the boy's vague, inarticulate and archaic fear. It is man who creates his own hell and his own devils. Evil is ineradicable and the earthly paradise is a delusion. Man's heart is dark. What becomes clear from Simon and Piggy's death is that no innocence lives beneath the sun, or if it does, it must suffer and die.

Frye's critical formulation is fully vindicated: "The demonic human world is society held together by a kind of molecular tension of egos, a loyalty to the group of the leader which diminishes the individual, or at best contrasts his pleasure with his duty or honour" (17).

There is Simon's conversation with the "Lord of the Flies." The grinning dead pig's head has a hypnotic effect over him. The head seems to tell him that he is nothing more than just a silly little boy. He must go and join the group of other boys who are enjoying the feast. But he is not misled. He has grasped the true nature of the problem on the island. He is really a solitary figure on the island which was once idyllic but has now degenerated into a chaotic lawless jungle because of the presence of human beings. Simon's recognition of evil and all mankind's complicity occasions his ritual death.

John S. Whitley analyses the novel as: "The true power of Golding's novel lies in the consistent presentation of the boys on the most realistic level"(24). The picture that emerges from all this is a parody of our so called civilized society in a period of anarchy, danger and almost mass hysteria. The head of the sow admits into Simon's brains the horrifying truth of what he has perceived. The head and what it seems to tell are echoes of the intuitively perceived truth within Simon; the conversation between Simon and the sow's head is in the real sense a superlative piece of interior monologue unbarring the unconscious of the human speaker. The dead beast tells the truth about the evil which lies deeply rooted in human nature. Simon realizes with a shock that it is this evil which his mates- the boys – have blatantly unleashed in their activities on the island. The racy dialogue which takes place between Simon and the "Lord of the Flies" is nothing but the flash point of the discovery of truth in the heart of human activities:

"Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill!" said the head. For a moment or two the forest and all the other dimly appreciated places echoed with the parody of laughter. "You knew, didn't you? I'm part of you? Close, close, close! I'm the reason why it's no go? Why things are what they are?" (177).

The head of the sow is not an abstract idea but a solid object like the parachutist, typifying how the beast in man has had a tyrannical hold upon his mind and sensibilities. Ralph and Piggy think that the sole wrong on the island is Jack, and, in Jack's opinion, a Beast or Devil is to be appeased. In the process of reading the novel it becomes apparent that what is wrong in fact is the inherent evil in human nature which Simon perceives and speaks of. Simon's voice cracks and chokes when he attempts to tell about what he has seen and realized. This typifies the tension operating with the discovery of truth. The sow's head and the figure of evil ingrained in man make the last ditch effort to establish power over Simon's heart, warn him not to tell the truth "I'm warning you. I'm going to get waxy. D'you see? You're not wanted. Understand? We are going to have fun on this island! So don't try it on, my poor misguided boy; or, else. . ." (178).

Ralph extols the adult world: his father is ironically a naval officer. But the adult world and the savages are no different from each other except in so far as the one lies to itself, denies its unreason, and claims to be civilized while the other doesn't. Ralph represents the perspective that would conceal the true nature of man and would rationalize acts of inhumanity. Claire Rosenfield says that the boys "degenerate into adults"(93-96). None of the boys on the island has a moral sense, a drive towards good or a strong spiritual awareness. Simon is the only one who comes close to the ideal only towards the tragic end of his life.

Conclusion

The novel depicts a picture of inherent evil in man that leads to degeneration and death. The most responsible factor for his fall is the complete denial of moral and spiritual values in life. The world of the young boys in the novel is wrapped up in an atmosphere of

artificiality. Golding, throughout the limited world of the characters, presents his own gloomy vision of human nature and society.

The children's world on the island is a painful microcosm of the adult world. They bring upon themselves their own ruin just as the adults do. It is atomic warfare in the world at large that brings about their initial descent to the island. Thus, *Lord of the Flies* gives a clear evidence of Golding's pessimistic view of human nature and fate. It is an attempt to locate the germs of social evils prevalent in human nature itself, we can evaluate it as a forcefully stated allegory about the evil inherent in the human heart.

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