

## The Symbolic Representation of Evil and Good in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*

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### ABSTRACT

This Study sheds a new light on William Golding's view of evil and good in *Lord of the Flies*. For many writers, critics and theorists, evil is a societal construct, while good is an internal one. Both are structured by external factors. William Golding, however, believes that man has an inherent potential for evil and that it cannot by any means be a cultural product as has long been thought. Man's potential for good, on the other hand, is dictated by law, common sense, culture and from the fact that man's social engagement with others is inevitable. In *Lord of the Flies*, Golding seeks to give answers to the philosophical questions: Can man live a lone? Can there be a life in the absence of law and order? What would become of people should there be no society or civilization? Golding's central argument centers on critiquing the inherent potential of man's capacity for evil in the absence of law and order. In this study, there will be an examination of Golding's pessimistic view of good and evil in light of the modern literary definition of these polarities.

**Key words:** Evil, Good, Civilization and Culture

### INTRODUCTION

*Lord of the Flies* (1954) presents a conflict between good and evil and raises many questions about human nature. The novel gives answers to the philosophical questions: can there be a human life in the absence of law and order? Are human beings evil by nature? Is evil external or internal? Do humans have a savagery instinct? The general framework of the story, presented in the novel, is derived from novels such as Robert Michael Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1858) and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). However, William Golding seeks to go beyond the traditional philosophy that these novels deal with. His aim was not to introduce the same subject of these novels and reiterate the main ideas of those writers. Rather, he tries to penetrate into the inner side of human beings and illuminate the dark aspects of their nature.

Among many other novels, *Lord of the Flies* gives a vivid picture about the human nature which many writers failed to grasp. In the novel, we are introduced with a group of little boys who find themselves stranded in a deserted island. The boys start gradually to fit in, first by carrying out a poll to find out who can be the best one to lead the island. At this time, they find Ralph, on a bar with Jack, being the best one. Meanwhile, Jack tries to win everyone's heart. He strikes a chord that Ralph is unable to provide food and give protection. The narrator, here, invites the reader to find evil not in the island but inside the boys.

### Review of Related Literature

In their article, "Personal Accountability to Evil in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*," the writers contend that evil

has "a momentary supremacy," which "sooner or later gives a way to the ultimate triumph of good" (George and Raju 174). This, we regret to say, is a rudimentary understanding of evil and good as Golding has dramatized in *Lord of the Flies*. The writers, above, seemed to have closed their eyes to Golding's pessimistic attitude towards life and reality in the novel. They must have been lured by the ending scene in which the boys are rescued.

In this study, however, it will be maintained that evil is far more powerful and prevailing than good. It will be argued that good will not triumph at the end of the novel as has been claimed in the article above. This will help in better understanding the writer's purport and the novel's underlying meaning. In other words, this study aims to dramatize Golding's pessimism about mankind and the external reality.

Another article, titled "William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*: A Study of Evil in Man" presents evil as something inevitable and inherent in mankind. The author of this article rightly assumes that evil has "an instinctual hold upon the human heart" (52). This must be Golding's purport in rendering man's potential for evil being inherent and inevitable. There is something, however, about this article which the writer seems to have misinterpreted. It is about the notion that the boys' evil is coming from the society from where they emerge. Again, we regret to say that this reading of Golding's representation of evil is not precise and lacks proper understanding of the novel. This study, therefore, purports to show that evil is what we make and that the external reality is formed by our own evil not the contrary.

## Objectives

The importance of this study lies in answering the following questions: can there be a human life in the absence of law and order? Are human beings evil by nature? Is evil external or internal? Do humans have a savagery instinct? What would become of people should there be no society or civilization? To achieve its objectives, this study seeks to analyze the text in the light of the modern understanding of our conceptions of evil and good.

## Methodology

This study will be analytical and research based. There will be an analytical reading of the text in order to examine the writer's purport and the novel's underlying meaning. We will shed light on certain instances from the novel and try to demonstrate their significance in the light of the body of criticism written about the subject.

## DISCUSSION

As a modernist, Golding's major concern is to present reality as something to be overcome. For many modernist writers, however, reality has no definite meaning. It changes from one writer to another, depending on how each writer can see it or understand it. How Golding sees reality in *Lord of the Flies* requires us to engage in examining the various elements that he has used in the novel.

To begin with, Golding uses a group of children to perform the action of his story. He wants to create an affinity between children and the world. Each child, therefore, becomes a symbol of a certain power or force. This element serves many purposes. One purpose is concerned with Golding's critique of the adult world. In *Understanding Lord of the Flies: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents* (2000), Kristen Olsen suggests that Golding's use of children "strips away layers of social conditioning that would be found in adults and increases the novel's atmosphere of abstraction" (20). The children, therefore, are used to form Golding's fictional world and to dramatize his attitude towards reality. In other words, any child in Golding's world refers to a certain part of his attitude towards reality. Olsen assumes that through the use of children, "Golding explores some of the universal traits that define [reality]: power hunger, fear, faith, betrayal, jealousy, curiosity, logic, cowardice, and violence..." (ibid).

On the other hand, the use of Children in *Lord of the Flies* suggests the notion that evil is an essential part of human nature and exists within each human being. Evil is not depicted in this novel as something that comes to the children. Rather, it exists within all human beings as an essential part of their nature. Besides, the children's fear of the unknown symbolizes the savage instincts that exist within each of them. Their fear of the beast, that they think is lurking somewhere in the island, is triggered by their capacity for savagery and evil. The children, therefore, become a symbolic picture of the beast they are afraid of, and the more they are afraid of the beast, the more savage they become. In his book *The*

*Modern Allegories of William Golding* (1990), L.L. Dickson confirms that "In *Lord of the Flies*, Golding has explored the human potential for evil, and irony has been the novelist's fundamental dramatic device." According to Golding, "The supposedly innocent British schoolboys," Dickson sums up, "are quick to reveal a terrible capacity for human destruction" (53).

## Symbolic Significance of the Novel

Golding's use of many symbols dramatizes his keen observation of seeing reality. This element is considered as one of the main features of modern novels. The whole novel reflects Golding's symbolic view of seeing the world. Through the use of symbols, Golding seeks to comment on certain aspects of social life. He does not seem to question these aspects. Rather, he wants to confirm them and encourage others to celebrate them. In her book *Exploring Social Issues Through Literature: Youth Gangs in Literature* (2004), Claudia Durst Johnson confirms Golding's notion that getting outside "societal controls" is very dangerous because it strips one of one's own nature. Besides, it transforms human beings into a beast. Johnson writes:

*Lord of the Flies* ultimately shows the inevitability of gang savagery when individuals are placed outside societal controls. It contradicts the message of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Ralph Waldo Emerson that children are innocent until they are corrupted by society. Golding prints a verbal picture of innate darkness—a beast—at the heart of every human, a beast that is kept at bay only by society. (99)

## The Symbolic Myth of Man's Fall from Paradise

Another major element used in *Lord of the Flies* is the myth. Golding seems to have a very pessimistic view of reality. He attributes the children's failure to establish their own society to man's original sin. The myth of man's fall from paradise, therefore, looms large in the novel. It reflects Golding's negative attitude towards life and human beings. In an article "Good Grief: *Lord of the Flies* as a Post-War Writing of Salvation History" (2004), Marijke Van Vunnren argues:

The symbolic narrative of *Lord of the Flies* is [polysemic] and, when read as [anagogic] or religious myth, spans the entire [Judaic]-Christian *Heilsgeschichte* or salvation history, rewriting its chapters of creation, [Fall], the problem of evil, the failure of law, the hope of salvation.... (3)

Golding tries to suggest that the quest for power and independence seems to be the primary reason for evil and the main instigator of violence. Jack's desire to be the leader of the island awakens the savage instincts and evil in the island. After his defeat in the election to be the leader of the island, "Jack responds by creating his own society and waging war on Ralph's" (Fitzgerald and John R. Kayser 81).

On the other hand, the beast myth is used in the novel to highlight the fact that evil is part of human beings and exists as a result of the original sin of mankind. Golding's pessimism and negation towards human beings becomes visible as Ralph asks: "What are we? Humans? Or animals? Or sav-

ages? What's grown-ups going to think? Going off-hunting pigs-letting fires out-and now!" (129). These words reflect Golding's pessimistic view towards human beings. For him, all human beings are originally sinners. "Our diseased nature," John F. Fitzgerald assumes, "leads the boys to war and barbarism just as it does in the adult world" (80).

Golding's pessimistic views towards reality become even more vivid in the scene in which Simon imagines the pig's head speak to him. The head speaks to him in the form of the "Lord of the Flies."

"There isn't anyone to help you. Only me. And I'm the Beast."

Simon's mouth labored, brought forth audible words.

"Pig's head on a stick."

"Fancy thinking that the beast was something you could hunt and kill!" said the head.

"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?" (206)

These words dramatize Golding's pessimism and reflect his negative attitude towards reality. The truth that human beings are essentially evil and there is no way to escape being so seems to dominate his thinking and prevails through his philosophy. Only through nature and by embracing the laws of the adults' world can human beings find salvation and seek refuge. Golding believes that nature is the main source of human existence. The evil side of human beings, therefore, results from the failure to come to terms or identify with their nature. According to Rohitash Thapliyal and Shakuntala Kunwar, "Golding tries to picture the havoc which the inherent evil in man has brought down upon nature" (86).

Golding uses fear and power to "stimulate contemplation about the nature of being human" (Barkcin 236). Fear and love of power are universal traits that define human beings. They control and motivate their behaviors. On the other hand, these elements overlap; the growth of one element affects the other and causes the other to increase. In the novel, the children are controlled by their fear of the beast. It is the fear of the beast, therefore, that leads the children to seek power and become violent.

"So this is a meeting to find out what's what. I'll tell you what's what. You littluns started all this, with the fear talk. Beasts! Where from? Of course we're frightened sometimes but we put up with being frightened. Only Ralph says you scream in the night. What does that mean but nightmares? Anyway, you don't hunt or build or help-you're a lot of cry-babies and sissies. That's what. And as for the fear-you'll have to put up with that like the rest of us." (116)

This quotation manifests violence and love of power on Jack's agenda to fight against fear. As Thapliyal and Kunwar suggest, "This violent inclination of humans leads to the breaking up of things. Jack disassociates himself from the keepers of order and harmony" (87). This is the reason, perhaps, why the children break away from Ralph and come to join Jack's tribe. In this case, Jack's rhetoric becomes a symbol of those who use authority to control people and exploit

them. Perhaps Golding tries to shed light on the hypocrisy inherent in the rhetoric used by men in power to justify their means of exploiting others. Jack, for example, uses the children's fear of the beast as a way to gain power and become the leader of the island. In his book, *The Atlantic Critical Studies: William Golding's Lord of the Flies* (2006), Santwana Haldar convincingly argues that Jack represents those who use the authority to achieve personal interests. Haldar writes, "Like his counterparts in the world of the grown-up, the autocrat Jack too, controlled the members of his group through creating fear and suspicion" (58). As the children's fear of the beast grows stronger, Jack's authority becomes greater and more powerful. Jack, therefore, keeps reminding the boys of the beast so that he will continue to be their leader. Whenever a child, for example, wants to raise a question about Jack's leadership, he responds by reminding that boy of the beast.

A savage raised his hand and the chief turned a bleak, painted face toward him.

"Why should they try to sneak in, Chief?"

The chief was vague but earnest.

"They will. They'll try to spoil things we do. So the watchers at the gate must be careful. And then-"

"-and then, the beast might try to come in. you remember how he crawled-"

Ralph, on the other hand, is Jack's antithesis. As a symbol of order and harmony, Ralph represents the other side of human beings: reason, hope, productive leadership and salvation. However, Ralph's failure to maintain the group's leadership indicates the lack of reason and the scarcity of human goodness. On the other hand, Jack's success to control the island and lead the group suggests the dominance of evil in the world and the decay of human civilization.

Unlike Jack, Ralph urges the boys to use reason in their thinking about the beast. He tries to mitigate their fear so that they can work together to maximize their chances of being rescued. He states, "... a beast, some sort of animal. I've heard. You thought not, didn't you? Now listen. You don't get big animals on small islands. Only pigs..." (117). However, these attempts fail and indicate "the end of his leadership." As Vunnren contends, "Ralph's attempts to deal with an irrational fear by reason fails, and the meeting he has called to this end marks the beginning of the end of his leadership" (9).

### Civilization and Savagery

The conflict between civilization and savagery seems to be the novel's main theme. This conflict is presented by the novel's major characters: Ralph and Jack. Evil is the major instigator of this conflict. According to Golding, the human tendency towards savagery is stronger than that towards civilization. Golding observes that individuals have more capacity for evil than for good. Even though Ralph, for example, is a good character, he finally succumbs to evil, by taking part and sharing the act of Simon's slaughter. Golding's ultimate goal, therefore, is to show the impact of the individual on society. In other words, he "traces the defects of society back to the defects of human nature" (qtd. in Kundu 240). In her

book, *New Perspectives on British Authors: From William Shakespeare to Graham Greene* (2006), Rama Kundu quotes Abraham H. Lass as stating that in *Lord of the Flies* “[the] moral is that the shape of society must depend on the ethical nature of the individual and not on political system however apparently logical and respectable” (240).

Golding, therefore, chooses the deserted island to be the setting for the action of his novel. It serves his purposes. First, he wants to show the impact of little innocent boys on nature. Then, he tries to confirm the idea that evil is innate in human nature not a product of social or political conditions. In a “Presentation Speech” delivered for the Noble Prize in Literature (1983), Professor Lars Gyllensten comments on Golding’s writing as saying:

Golding inveighs against those who think that it is the political or other systems that create evil. Evil springs from the depths of man himself-it is the wickedness in human beings that creates the evil systems or that changes what from the beginning is, or could be, good into something iniquitous and destructive. (qtd. in Kundu 239)

### The Novel’s Irony

Through the element of irony, Golding draws a narrative picture of reality. He exposes the contrast between civilization and savagery ironically. The whole novel, therefore, becomes ironical in terms of characters and themes. This element helps to see the discrepancy between reality and appearance more clearly. Golding’s success in *Lord of the Flies*, therefore, lies in the fact that he has penetrated into the dark side of human beings, observing the wickedness of their nature.

Despite their innocence and appearances, the children prove in reality to be wicked and have a propensity for evil. “When left to his own devices,” Golding suggests, “man can forget all his prior teachings and regress” (Blair & Pamela Takayoshi 215). Golding, however, uses children to be the characters of his story to achieve some ironical purposes. The children’s appearance, therefore, contrasts with their own reality.

Another example of irony occurs at the end of the novel when Ralph begins to cry after seeing the naval officer. His cries are mixed between joy and sorrow. “And in the middle of them, with filthy body, matted hair, and unwiped nose, Ralph wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man’s heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy” (290). Ralph weeps for discovering the truth about himself and the new knowledge that he has acquired, concerning the human potentials for evil.

It is ironical, on the other hand, that both Jack and Ralph survive at the end of the novel. This means that the conflict between good and evil is eternal and endless. The fire that brings rescue to the boys, then, is not a fire of civilization or rescue, but a fire of savagery that the boys set in the island to smoke Ralph out of his hiding place.

The officer grinned cheerfully at Ralph.  
“We saw your smoke. What have you been doing? Having a war or something?” (288)

### CONCLUSION

Finally, Golding gives us no definite meaning about reality and leaves us with no exact answers to the questions he raises. However, his pessimistic attitudes towards life and human beings are clear enough to understand his views. At the end of the novel, he presents a glimmer of hope where people are invited to conform to the laws and rules of their societies and obey them. Here, culture, society and man’s observation and commitment to the law of order serve an important function to cope with man’s inherent encounter with evil. Golding’s pessimism in this novel springs from his convictions that everyone does have the potential for evil and that there is no escape of it because it has a natural affinity with our lives. Also, Golding believes that the external reality is formed by man’s encounter with evil, which, in turn, cannot be avoided.

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