

## **William Golding between Pessimism and Optimism in Lord of the Flies**

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### **Introduction:**

William Golding's first novel, Lord of the Flies, published in 1954, is still widely considered as his major work. It is one of the most widely-read, widely- admired, and widely- discussed novels in the last few decades. Throughout the novel, he shows a consistent struggle between good and evil; goes in parallel with his pessimistic view of human nature and his optimistic aspect represented in the characters of Ralph, Piggy and Simon. This thesis makes Lord of the Flies one of those novels which can be given several interpretations and be subject to controversial, critical and analytical approaches. Some perceive a bleak picture of humanity offered in Lord of the Flies when the symbol of reason and common sense is forced into an outlaw existence, and evil is chasing it. While others celebrate the shining hope of Ralph's rescue and see the sacrifices as a homage good humanity pays for reaching to a more mature and higher state of being. What is so interesting in this novel is Golding's treatment of evil and his raising a subject of so much concern to the twentieth century people who have witnessed two horrible world wars. Such concerns were becoming the subject of critical controversies in popular and scholarly publications.

### **The Struggle between Pessimism and Optimism in Lord of the Flies:**

Of the many great events of the 20th century, the two World Wars played a great and decisive role in forming new attitudes and opinions. William Golding was among the many writers whose lives were touched by the calamities and horrors of war, which left an unforgettable stamp on his literary career. The horrors of the World War 11 helped him to perceive some kind of innate human evil, like that explored in Lord of the Flies. Golding himself stated that "Lord of the Flies takes the supposed innocent experience of the island- like life in order to test it against the experience of Nazism and Second World War."<sup>1</sup> His work in the navy where he became a lieutenant and was placed in command of a rocket launching ship helped him to formulate this new vision about human nature. During that war, Golding learned how brutal people can be to one another, and witnessed all kinds of inhumanity and persecution.

Golding insists that "evil is inherent in man; a terrifying force which he must recognize and control."<sup>2</sup> He, himself, referred to the idea of evil and corrupted man in modern society in his comment on Lord of the Flies:

**The theme [of the novel] is an attempt to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human nature. Before the war [Second World War], most Europeans believed that man could be perfected by perfecting society. We all saw a hell of a lot in the war that cannot be accounted for except on the basis of original evil....The moral is that the shape of society must depend on the ethical nature of the individual and not on any political system, however apparently logical or respectable.<sup>3</sup>**

According to him, man is a falling being who breaks his harmony with nature and becomes no more than a beast who finds pleasure in shedding blood. The novel's aim, then, is to serve as a warning of man's readiness to destroy his fellow man. This attitude of Golding is caused and agitated by war itself. Like so many people, the experience of war made him lose faith in man's natural goodness.

Apart from what Golding says in this novel, it seems that his mood is not totally pessimistic, for he gives hope by presenting his good characters: Ralph, Piggy and Simon who stand firmly in the face of evil represented by Jack and his choir. The first part of the novel deals with the arrival of the boys on the island, the conch, the assembly, the hope of rescue and the pleasures of every day's events. Part of Golding's realism is found in his insistence that the artist must possess some experience of the life he is trying to create. Therefore, Golding here uses his knowledge of the boys, since he was a schoolmaster for many years, and shows how these boys would behave when completely cut off from the world on an uninhabited tropical island, and without the protection and guidance of grown-ups.

At the beginning, everything is perfect; there are plenty of fruits to eat, the climate is warm and there are beaches for swimming. But things begin to change; though they are not threatened by any external force. Rather the change comes from within; from their inner natures. They begin to quarrel with each other and start the transformation into savagery under the leadership of Ralph's antagonist, Jack Merridew. However, such transformation does not take place suddenly. Golding prepares the readers for it at an early stage when the duties assigned by Ralph, like keeping the signal fire and building shelters against the storms, become boring and meaningless.

The idea of rescue loses its urge and meaning for the boys. Jack's enthusiasm for hunting takes him and his followers beyond anything human and civilized. Slowly, they degenerate into savagery and become hunters and killers. Golding starts his description of Jack and how he silently advances to kill the pig:

**Jack was bent double. He was down like a sprinter, his nose only a few inches from the humid earth....Then dog-like, uncomfortably on all fours yet unheeding his discomfort, he stole forward five yards and stopped. ... Jack crouched with his face a few inches away from this clue ... and his bare back was a mass of dark freckles and peeling sunburn. A sharpened stick about five feet long trailed from his right hand, and except for a pair of tattered shorts held up by his knife-belt he was naked.**<sup>4</sup>

In this passage, Jack is described as a primitive creature in an attempt to draw the final division with civilization. His position is a "dog-like" that symbolizes his transformation into another creature. Jack, who at first found it difficult to stab a pig "because of the enormity of the knife descending and cutting into living flesh"(1.17) finds later that slaughtering pigs is a lot of fun. He becomes obsessed with hunting and the desire to kill. He and his hunters paint their faces to be able to slay a pig with no fear or feeling of remorse. By painting their faces, they free themselves from shame and consciousness and become free to do things that have in the past been forbidden.<sup>5</sup> Jack represents evil and tyranny in man. However, if man is evil, he is also good.

Ralph represents the good in man and stands, with his two friends Simon and Piggy, as an antithesis to Jack; they demonstrate what is good and rational in man. They keep their look well and always try to tidy themselves up. Ralph once looked at the filthy boys and sighed, "We ought to comb our hair. Only it's too long"(4.59). Besides, he realizes the meaning of painting their faces and hence he refuses it when he says, "Well, we won't be painted ... because we aren't savages"(5.68). Later, Ralph also experiences the excitement that the others have known in hunting when Robert pretends, in a sort of game, to be the pig and the others attack him. While Robert is screaming, "Ralph too is fighting to get near, to get a handful of that brown, vulnerable flesh. The desire to squeeze and hurt was overmastering"(7.106). Yet, this cannot be accounted for reverting to savagery, for he immediately regains his control and renounces the instinctive excitement in hunting. Ralph's opinions and suggestions call for constructing a new civilization on that

island similar to the one they left at home and never forget the hope of rescue. Thus, his efforts to achieve this lost paradise stem mainly from a need for order. Ralph, then, stands for civilization, democracy, order, common sense, and all the pillars a modern and civilized society set on.

Ralph, Simon and Piggy on the one hand and Jack, Roger and the hunting group on the other represent two distinct types of mankind. The first group stands for civilization, democracy and mysticism; features associated with noble human beings. The second group stands for savagery, barbarism and tyranny. Through presenting the characters of the second group, Golding reveals that people share the instinct to destroy a living creature and never hesitate to turn to savagery regardless of the intelligence they possess. Such a conflict between those two parties is deliberately intended:

**Golding takes Ralph and Jack and studies them against an altered moral landscape. He is a schoolmaster, and knows boys well enough to make their collapse into savagery plausible, to see them as cannibals; the authority of the grown-ups is all there is to prevent savagery. If you dropped these boys into an Earthly paradise "they would not behave like God-fearing English gentlemen" but "as ... savages who were kindly and uncomplicated...." The devil would rise out.<sup>6</sup>**

Jack, at the beginning, demands to be called "Merridew" the surname and his mark of superior age and authority.<sup>7</sup> Jack has his choir with him as a source of strength to his position. But the personal traits of Ralph make him more loved specially by the little ones. When the voting takes place, Ralph is elected and Jack starts to protest. Ralph anticipates the opponency of Jack, therefore, wisely enough, he appoints Jack and his choir, the hunters, responsible for getting them meat. The hunters are also responsible for keeping a fire on the top of a mountain as a signal for the passing ships, which might come to rescue them.

These boys demonstrate all kinds of human traits and ambitions while struggling to survive. Their behaviour may seem shocking to some readers. Yet, it may not be shocking to those who, like Golding, believe that evil is with us from the moment of birth. It is true that the wars and the political tension may sometimes make it difficult for us to argue with Golding's notion that "Man is inherently evil." But we cannot possibly look at it only from one angle, and hence label all humanity with what is characteristic of some individuals. The wars are threatening our life and those who encourage them are evil. Yet, one has to be more optimistic

and hopes that such evil may sooner and later be defeated and that the good may regain power as Ralph did at the end of the novel.

Although Golding has shown enough of the evil in man represented by Jack, yet he has given us hope by making his good characters Ralph, Piggy and Simon stand so firmly in the face of evil, and made them immune against it. Although the boys were brought to this island as a result of a nuclear war and were rescued by a warship engaged in a most savage manhunt, Ralph was able to achieve a higher ethical standard by adhering to the civilized codes he has learned at home. The standards of civilized behaviour, though sometimes deficient, are the only thing that restrains human individuals from a life of utter barbarism and degeneration.<sup>8</sup> The orderly and refined instincts remain with Ralph and his good friends until the end of their lives. Ralph's statement, "The rules are the only thing we've got,"(3.41) is a sufficient proof. Almost all the boys show traits, which make us convinced that they are products of a civilized society. Ralph and Piggy blew the conch, which is a symbol of law and order to call other children. Later, they elect a leader by voting, a very mature way of organization. In other words, they are able to make use of their being schoolchildren. Even Jack shows a sense of decency when he apologizes for letting the fire out, and by telling the boys, "We've got to have rules and obey them. After all, we're not savages."(3.42)

What is so interesting in Golding's novel is the dualism he has shown in some characters. In fact, he succeeds in depicting that a human being cannot be entirely good or entirely evil represented in the characters of Ralph and Jack. Each one of them is a blend of both tendencies, and the question raised here is the amount of each he holds inside. Ralph, like Jack, experiences hunting and dancing; but he knew at what point to stop and suppress the evil powers that drive him to something against his good nature. Jack, on the other hand, expresses on any occasion his strong instinctive desire to hunt and kill. He tries to find any gap from which he could pierce out of order and restriction. For him, the most important thing is getting meat by hunting; but in fact he is not concerned with food, for if he were after food he would think of the ripe fruits found on this island. He is interested only in killing and shedding blood.

Golding exerts his efforts to widen the gap between Ralph and Jack and shows that the difference between them is not a superficial one; rather it is one of attitude and creed. Such a difference forms a conflict between two fronts, one tries to build and the other intends to destroy, one endeavors to construct its conceptions on logical, ethical and religious pillars while the other tends to establish its life on bloody ruins and savagery conduct. In depicting such a conflict Golding, in fact, reflects his attitude of the world as he sees it; a world of pessimism

portrayed in Jack, Maurice and Roger and a world of optimism represented by Ralph, Piggy and Simon. When the boys, almost near the end, follow Jack and desert Ralph, that cannot be accounted for Golding's pessimism. Rather, it is a realistic view that doubt and fear of the unknown may often cause an irrational attachment to a person or to a force, which is capable, in their view, of protecting them, though this force may engulf and destroy them.

At a moment of distress, Ralph, Piggy and Simon wish to have something grown-up to solve their problems, "If only they could get a message to us. ... If only they could send us something grown-up ... a sign or something," (5, 71) Ralph says. The wish, however, is answered and a message comes in the shape of a dead airman. Ironically, it conveys the brutality of the adults who, to those children, have always been perfect. The arrival of the dead parachutist, which is another symbol of destruction and brutality, is another factor that helps Jack to take over an absolute power besides his physical ability that confronted the pigs and brought them meat. The twins, Sam and Eric, see the dead man hanging on the trees and because it is dark, they see only a figure, which frightens them. They report to Ralph and the other boys that this "supposed" beast attacks them. Weekes and Gregor comment on this fact:

**This is not a novel about children, demonstrating Golding's belief that, without the discipline of grown-ups, children will degenerate into savages. There is no essential difference between the island-world and the grown-up one. The parachutist shows man's inhumanity to man, the record of what human beings have done to one another throughout human history. The children are revealing the same nature as the grown-ups ... the children's world is only a microcosm of the adult world.<sup>9</sup>**

When Jack hears about the "supposed" beast, he becomes excited and asks the boys to follow him and start the hunt immediately. Ralph asks him whether it is safe to go hunting a beast with sticks, which Jack takes as a joke, makes fun of him, and accuses him of being a coward. To the frightened boys, Jack then is a perfect leader who promised to protect them. Jack later finds out that playing on the children's fear of the unknown, and later creating an enemy, which does not exist is a good means to win their support. Therefore, the children remain in constant fear and unconsciously find themselves cling to Jack, their only protector.

In his attempt to destroy and kill the imagined beast or enemy he succeeds in making the boys follow him blindly. But who is the enemy? This may find an answer in Simon's words "may be it's only us." (6.97)

Simon represents mysticism in man. His quiet submission, his meditation and his solitary walks are things that remind us of some saints and prophets. Even his death may also have the implication of sacrifice. Like many saints and prophets, he has sacrificed his life so that others may live.<sup>10</sup> When the boys, led by Ralph and Jack, set out to search for the beast on the mountain, Simon suggests that there is not any beast on the mountain and it is no more than "a human at once heroic and sick" (6.96). The heroism and sickness of the human being is analyzed further by Denis M. Calandra:

**The words "heroic" and "sick" add another dimension to Golding's of tracing the defects of society back to the individual. Until now emphasis has been pessimistically centered on the roots of evil within the various characters. But there is another side to humanity, a heroic side, evident for instance in Ralph's faith in man's power to survive and to remain civilized, and in Simon's love for the littluns.<sup>11</sup>**

In his imaginary confrontation with the head of the pig, the Lord of the Flies, the head explains an important fact about human beings in general, which announces Golding's view of the inherited evil. The head warns Simon of the impossibility to escape him, the devil, for he is part of everyone. The head here is a spokesman of Golding's view that evil is within man; that man has an immense capacity for evil. From such a standpoint, Golding describes the horrible image of the boys attacking the sow-mother while suckling her babies, or why the boys find more interest in hunting than in building huts or keeping the fire on, or the horrible image of killing Piggy. The head, then, becomes a symbol of man's cruelty and corruption. The head, in reality, is the slaughtered sow that has been killed savagely and yielded to the most violent human torture where they have made of it a dreadful example. It is no more than a message in the form of a victim sent by a human being to the supposed beast, which is again a message in a form of a victim sent by a human being, too. The dead pilot, the beast, is the message sent by the adult world to the boys. Simon realizes that they must free themselves from the responsibility of evil; and he loses his life in his attempt to reveal the truth.

Simon's death refers to the great capacity of evil that the boys have. It symbolizes the cruelty of people that extends to include even their

prophets and reformers. Simon's death can be looked at symbolically as being dual, a scapegoat and sacrificial. In his essay "Simon", Donald Spangler emphasizes this fact and states that:

**The responsibility for the martyrdom of Simon, like the responsibility for that of Jesus, can be ascribed either to secular or sacred interests. At first the tribe maintains that it was not Simon they had killed, but the terrorizing "beast" and Simon is made a scapegoat, the capital-punishment of whom satisfies the established state (the tribe) by eliminating a supposed enemy. Later on the boys admit that it was not the "beast" that they had killed, but Simon, rationalizing that the human sacrifice will finally appease the "beast," which they have been placating with pig's heads; and Simon is made a human offering, the immolation of whom assuages the established god (the "beast"), the priests of which the "celebrants" of the sacrificial feast become.<sup>12</sup>**

Shortly after Simon's death, another boy, Piggy is to die too. He represents the power of thinking in man. But because of his physical defects, (his being fat, his shortsightedness, and his asthma) his opinion is never considered. He is always being laughed at and is always subject to Jack's attacks and cruelty. When Jack and his followers steal his glasses he becomes furious and makes a plea for right and justice when he asks Jack to give him back his glasses. Unfortunately, Piggy proves unequal to the task. This may indicate the inability of reason to confront the irrational in this big world. The same fate of Simon has faced Piggy. But now it is not Piggy alone, the conch as well, which is a symbol of democracy and order, encounters the same destiny. Both of them are destroyed and fragmented to pieces.

Ralph sadly sees that ideals are crushed and evil triumphs. Although the boys were leading a chaotic life, Jack remained an absolute power and authority. He gave orders and was obeyed. No one ever dared to question his orders. But when at the end the naval officer asked them who was the officer, Ralph loudly replied that he was. Jack here no more than "a little boy... who carried the remains of a pair of spectacles at his waist," (12.185) moved forward to challenge his mind and stood still. The force of law and order, which Ralph represents, are once again in control. But this happened only because an adult was present. Ralph very well knew that Jack's authority was not legal and that the latter was leading the boys to something brutal, but he kept quiet and was unable to show Jack



that he was wrong. Jack, too, knew that Ralph was protected by the officer and bitterly accepted the fact, which was once pronounced by Piggy, "What's right's right." (2.23). Ralph bursts into tears for he is alone after Simon and Piggy and for the end of the children's "innocence" with pain and grief:

**"I should have thought that a pack of British boys-you're all British, aren't you?- would have been able to put up a better show than that- I mean-" .... Ralph looked at him dumbly.... But the island was scorched up like dead wood-...The tears began to flow and sobs shook him.... His voice rose under the black smoke before the burning wreckage of the island; and infected by that emotion, the other little boys began to shake and sob too....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. (12.186-7)**

In spite of this, the arrival of the officer might be viewed as a sort of a final victory. It can be understood so in the light of how much hope Ralph sets on the matter of rescue. If Golding intends pessimism to overweight optimism, he would have made it possible for Jack and his hunting group to murder Ralph and made him an offering to the "supposed" beast, a scene that would be horrible to imagine. Yet, in spite of savagery, despair, murder, depression, sadness and evil, Ralph remains loyal and hopeful to his struggle for rescue. He never resigns or feels desperate. He is deprived of his leadership, the conch and his faithful friends Simon and Piggy, but he does not yield to despair to destroy him. Ralph symbolizes the stoic man who endures anything for the sake of a greater value. By presenting such characters, Golding wants to say that there is always a hand that extends to help and light a candle in darkness, and there is, of course, a brain to rack and ponder creating something valuable out of nothing.

**Conclusion:**

It is obvious that the struggle between pessimism and optimism looms within Golding's mind. His novel demonstrates repeatedly that human beings are capable of intense evil, as a result of their own natures and not because of any outside factors. The book, then, is valuable not only because it tells us about the darkness of man's heart, but because it shows it. Furthermore, this book suggests that civilization is the only thing that restrains mankind from a life of utter barbarism and degeneration. His vision may somehow be accurate for the great wars of the century are proof enough. We may not agree to all he says, but knowing the problem is a great step towards finding a solution. Golding, then, emphasizes the lesson that only through adhering to the moral standards of civilized behaviour, though sometimes deficient, that any hope exists for mankind to achieve a higher and a more mature state of being. Perhaps it is not possible to say which of the two views of the nature of civilization and human evil is correct. One thing remains certain; if one accepts Golding's view that evil is inherent in man's nature, it is not necessary to give up hope for man's eventual moral improvement. Hope does exist in the novel, for along with Jack and his savage choir, there is Ralph, Simon and Piggy. We conclude that, in this novel, Golding is reacting strongly against disagreeable aspects of life as he sees them. He writes with a revolutionary heart, aiming at restoring concepts of belief, free will, individual responsibility, forgiveness and principles in an unprincipled world of unbelievers. Whether Golding intends it or not, he provides a hopeful note in the characters of Ralph, Piggy and Simon who represent the major characters in the novel and who defeat any explanation of the novel in totally pessimistic terms.

## **Notes**

- 1-William Golding , in G. Hanscombe , William “Lord of the Flies” (London: Hanscombe and Cameron Ltd., 1986) , p.10.
- 2-James Keating, Interview with William Golding (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1979), p.191.
- 3-William Golding, in Denis M. Calandra, William Golding: “Lord of the Flies” (Lincoln: Cliffs Inc., 1998) , p.58.
- 4-William Golding , Lord of the Flies (New York: New York University Press, 1954), p.43. All subsequent quotations that appear here will be taken from this edition.
- 5-John M. Egan, “Golding’s View of Man”, America, CVIII (January 26, 1963) ,p. 141.
- 6-Frank Kermode , The Novels of William Golding (London: Calder and Boyars , 1961) , p.27.
- 7-Egan , p.140.
- 8-Thomas Marcellus Coskren , “Is Golding Calvinistic?” America, 109 (1963) , p.21.
- 9-Ian Gregor and Mark Kinkead- Weekes , “Introduction,” to Lord of the Flies (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1962) , p.116.
- 10-Donald R. Spangler, “Simon,” in Lord of the Flies: Text, Notes and Criticism, edited by James R. Baker and Arthur P. Ziegler (New York: Capricorn Books, 1964) , p.221.
- 11-Denis M. Calandra , Notes on Golding’s “Lord of the Flies” (Lincoln : Cliff’s Notes, Inc., 1998) , p.32.
- 12 Spangler , p.221.

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- 1- Calandra, Denis M. William Golding: "Lord of the Flies". Lincoln: Cliffs Inc., 1998.
- 2- ----- Notes on Golding's "Lord of the Flies". Lincoln: Cliff's Notes, Inc., 1998.
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- 7- Hanscombe, William G. Lord of the Flies. London: Hanscombe and Cameron Ltd. 1986.
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