

## Reconnoitring the Conflict between Good and Evil in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*

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### Abstract

Literary representation of the dichotomy between good and evil has flourished as a new trend, especially in the post-war literature. Ugliness of war and hatred taught us about the

inherent evil in human nature. Different scholarly studies showcase that human being is responsible for the perpetration of evil in society. Sir William Golding powerfully brought out this idea in his first and most popular novel *Lord of the Flies* (1954). The novel portrays the growth of evil interestingly in the absolute absence of the grown-ups and the evil is drawn through children without the control of any civilized restraints. This paper examines how the dichotomy between good and evil grow inherently in human heart with special reference to its theme, characterisation, different allusions, and the dystopian vision of the post-World War world.

**Keywords:** Sir William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, Evil, Absence, Civil Restraints, Dystopian Vision.

### **Introduction**

The concept of good and evil are very much relative that cannot be defined because of its open-ended nature among different spheres of academic studies. For example, philosophers, humanists, psychologists, each of them has a different understanding of the nature of good and evil. Whereas theologians are basically concerned in terms of religions, philosophers study the relative temperament or nature of good and evil with the reference of historical trajectory through classical to the present day. However, the term *evil* is basically associated with human cultural inheritance and the essence of it which emblems the destruction, violence, disorder and chaos in the society. Literary representation of the dichotomy between good and evil has flourished as a new trend especially in the post-war literature. Ugliness of war and hatred taught us about evil as a latent phenomenon of human nature. Different scholarly studies uphold that it is the individual who is solely responsible for the perpetration of evil in society.

Sir William Gerald Golding (1911-1993) powerfully brought out this idea in his most popular debut novel *Lord of the Flies* (1954). The novel skilfully portrays the growth of evil interestingly in the absolute absence of the grown-ups and the evil is drawn through children without the control of any civilized restraints.

*Lord of the Flies* has twelve chapters with descriptive titles, but the content, meaning and the intent of the chapters may not be clear immediately. The titles are abstract and carry allusions and deeper meanings just as the story narrated by William Golding.

- Chapter 1 The Sound of the Shell
- Chapter 2 Fire on the Mountain
- Chapter 3 Huts on the Beach
- Chapter 4 Painted Faces and Long Hair
- Chapter 5 Beast from Water
- Chapter 6 Beast from Air
- Chapter 7 Shadows and Tall Trees
- Chapter 8 Gift for the Darkness

- Chapter 9 A View to a Death
- Chapter 10 The Shell and the Glasses
- Chapter 11 Castle Rock
- Chapter 12 Cry of the Hunters

### **The Conflict between Good and Evil in *Lord of the Flies***

When *Lord of the Flies* was first published in 1954, in an interview given to the American publishers of his book William Golding himself described the novel's theme as "an attempt to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human nature. The moral is that the shape of a society must depend on the ethical nature of the individual and not on any political system however apparently logical or respectable" (qtd. in Spitz 22). This novel is partly based on Golding's personal experiences of the real life violence and brutality of World War II. Having witnessed the carnage and slaughter of war, Golding comes to believe that the element of evil is latent phenomenon in human being: 'man produces evil as a bee produces honey' (Fable 87). Allegorically, the novel reiterates the eternal theme of the conflict between evil and good, a conflict in which evil is the winner in the first round and then suddenly the table is turned and the good that still remains, is saved. In *Paradise Lost as Myth*, Isabel Gamble MacCaffrey observes that, myth is symbolic but a direct expression of its subject matter, "a narrative resurrection of a primitive reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants" (MacCaffrey 89). This definition is also applicable in *Lord of the Flies* which may be interpreted as a modern myth on an ancient theme.

Ever since Daniel Defoe wrote *Robinson Crusoe* landing his hero on a desert island, stories of castaways have emerged in literature as a new trend to take on different issues of human being and society. Famous among these are Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Jule Verne's *The Mysterious Island*, and Golding's *Lord of the Flies* also belongs to this genre.

However, the immediate source of *Lord of the Flies* is R.M. Ballantyne's novel *The Coral Island* which narrates the story of three English boys, who have been stranded, away from the cares of the adults, on an island in the South Seas. These boys, somewhat older than in Golding's story, have similar names, and there is a direct mention of *The Coral Island* in chapter 12 of *Lord of the Flies*. Ballantyne's book is Christian in approach and manner. His boys are all pious and the pointed moral is that Christianity spreads over the forces of evil in the world. One cannot be a Christian and be evil simultaneously, so it follows that everyone should become a Christian. Here, Golding distinctly contradicts with Ballantyne, for his choir boys with crosses on their cloaks turned into the most blood thirsty of hunters. Indeed, the inter-textual references of *The Coral Island* serves to highlight the difference in vision, where Ballantyne appreciates the civilizing effect of the White race, Golding questions the very edifice of civilization itself.

Western philosopher Spinoza opines that good is that which "we certainly know is useful to us" and evil is that "which we certainly know hinders us from possessing anything

that is good” (Spinoza 21). Based on this proposition, Ralph and Jack’s portrayals in the novel *Lord of the Flies* are not only made evident but also interconnected. Golding portrays Ralph as Good: “ There was a mildness about his mouth and eyes that proclaimed no devil” (Golding 4), as he arranges the useful fire and gives advices to others like a priest, and though the instrument of fire is not his own, it can be taken to be his endeavour later in the novel. Jack, on the contrary, is aggressive and violent by nature and highly disruptive. Not only does he hinder the possession of good advice but also the proper mode of behaviour “as expected from British boys”. Readers can easily point out this in Jack and his party: “Jack was on top of the sow, stabbing downward with his knife; Roger found a lodgement for his point and began to push till he was leaning with his whole weight” (Golding 120).

Throughout the novel, association of the instinct of civilization with good and the instinct of savagery with evil are artistically portrayed by Golding. Ralph seems to uphold the true embodiment of leadership, whereas Jack, the antagonist represents savagery and lust for power. Playing with blood and horror turns into Jack’s obsession which happens to lead him to the ultimate assertion of power. Jack finds absolute pleasure in killing the innocent and his unquenched thirst for blood seems to subdue all other thoughts of his mind: “His mind was crowded with memories; memories of the knowledge that had come to them when they closed in on the struggling pig, knowledge that they had outwitted a living thing, imposed their will upon it, taken away its life like a long satisfying drink” (Golding 59). Such passion for power calls on Jack’s evil instinct which enables him to connive against Ralph for leadership. This is in a way analogous to the conflict king Duncan and Macbeth, in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Just as Macbeth kills Duncan following his “vaunting ambition”, so Jack says that he does not need Ralph anymore and forms his own army. However, Jack’s wrong doings have a bound while Macbeth is determined to continue in committing sins. Jack’s humiliation of Piggy, causing death of Piggy, sacrificing a pig for the beast, and pilfering the glasses are all outburst of his inner voice hankering after power which encourages him in evil doings. In the words of Harold Bloom, “Ironically, he (Jack) is the rule breaker who splits from the group, forces others to join him, and becomes more and more evil” (Bloom 93).

Besides this, Golding also manages to describe several kinds of goodness in *Lord of the Flies*. It is spiritual for Simon, common sense for Piggy who advocates for order and justice: “put first things first and act proper” (Golding 36), for Ralph it seems to be primarily the obedience to the dictates of duty. On the contrary, Roger and Maurice remained dormant by the discipline and order in their past life, and their suppressed evil nature got exposed in the island without the control of any civilized restraint: “Roger led the way straight through the castles, kicking them over, burying the flowers, scattering the chosen stones” (Golding 50). In this novel, Golding highlights that evil is inherent in human nature, and nobody can deny its existence or pass it over by any means, rather it can be controlled by the endeavour of consciousness of the self. Among the other mates, only Simon could sense the truth about evil: “Simon became inarticulate in his effort to express mankind’s essential illness. Inspiration came to him” (Golding 77).

Within the pages of *Lord of the Flies*, there are bountiful allusions to the *Bible* (*Old and New Testaments*). The island seems to be a portrayal of earthly Eden, with fruit thick on the trees. Yet the boys, like Adam, are provoked by temptation to have the illicit food in Adam and Eve's case, the fruit of knowledge tree of Good and Evil, in boys' case, the meat of pigs on the island. Further religious allusions are used in the narrative, not the least of which is the name of the pigheaded beast, whose name "Lord of the Flies" is a rough English translation of the Hebrew name of the devil Beelzebub. Evoking the devil in a diverse form, the beast is acknowledged by the littluns as a "snake-thing". Again, in the *Lord of the Flies*, as in the Bible, innocents are frequently slaughtered, and an atmosphere of chaos and disorder take the whole sky over the island. For Kirstin Olsen, "Lord of the Flies is a perfect example of the necessity of familiarity with the Bible to any serious study of western literature" (Olsen 125).

Perhaps the best illustration of the links between Christianity and *Lord of the Flies*, however, lies in the life and death of a single character, Simon who is actually the incarnation of Christ-like figure. Like Jesus he does prophecy as he predicts Ralph's survival: "You" (Ralph) will "get back all right" (Golding 98). Here, in the novel the struggle between 'Good' and 'Evil' is represented with Simon's confrontation with the Lord of the Flies. Evil allures man first through temptations and then through threatening. At first, the pig's head asked Simon to join the other boys and be merry. Then, it threatens Simon: "There isn't anyone to help you. Only me. And I'm the beast." (Golding 128).

In fact, it would not be wrong to assume that Golding has consciously set out to dramatise Freudian theory. Claire Rosenfield in her article, "Men of a Smaller Growth: A Psychological Analysis of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*" remarks that "the imagery surrounding Ralph and Jack as being 'godlike' and 'satanic' is obviously intended to recall God and the Devil... but as Freud reminds us, 'metaphysics' becomes 'metapsychology', gods and devils are nothing other than the processes projected into the outer world" (Rosenfield 96).

If Ralph is taken to be the projection of man's good impulses from which one can obtain the authority figures- whether God, king or father who define and establish the necessity for valid ethical and social actions, then Jack is the externalization of the evil instinctual forces of the unconscious. Here the allegorical has become the psychological.

Towards the end of the novel, the title of the novel "Lord of the Flies" turns out as a central metaphor which surpasses its literal meaning of simply an animal or a pig, as Simon points out, it is a "pig's head on a stick" (Golding 128); rather it seems to be the emblem of man's sadistic cruelty to natural things, and his ignorant attempts to placate a falsely externalized evil upholding the eternal conflict between good and evil of human nature. Here, Golding's message is quite explicit in nature that man is either good or evil, but simply that he is capable of becoming and needs to become self-aware as man himself creates his own hell, his own devils.

## Conclusion

Thus, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* delineates the picture of the intrinsic evil of human nature throughout the smaller world on the island. It draws a parallel picture of the contemporary post-war period which echoes painful gloomy vision of the world of grown-ups. Each of the character in the novel explicitly depicts how ambition, lust for power and seven deadly sins perform an active role in the development of the character. It is the individual who needs to decide the way s/he wants to behave or act. Both good and evil are subjected to our judgments and they dwell in the heart of man side by side. Plato has rightly said "that evil could not pass away from this earthly experience, for there must always be something opposite to Good" (*The Philosophy of Religion* 541). Evil needs to be identified to hinder it from further wrong doings. Throughout the novel, Golding brings forth this distressing picture of the conflict between good and evil, where the satanic spirit or the evil in human nature needs to be subdued in order to restore peace, sanity and order in modern world.

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