CONTEXT

To *Lord of The Flies* by William Golding

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PUBLISHING DATE

1954

WILLIAM GOLDING'S ROYAL NAVY SERVICE

LTF is haunted by William Golding's service in the Royal Navy (1940–45), during the Second World War.
- The hazards of the endless battles of the North Atlantic against German submarines culminated in Golding's participation in D-Day, the Normandy invasion of June 6, 1944.
  - Additionally, there was a pervasive and often irrational fear prevalent in the Cold War era of Golding's Lord of the Flies.
    - in the post WWII decade of the 1950s, adults and children alike were under constant reminder of the fear of atomic attack.
      - Posters, videos, and drills were commonplace at schools, businesses, and even at home.
        - At the end of the novel, the surviving boys set the island on fire, which appears to symbolize the detonation of an atomic bomb

GOLDING'S VIEW ABOUT WWII

In the 'After words' to *Lord of the Flies* (New York; 1962), Golding expressed his concern for the Second World War as implied in the novel. He said,
- *If you had met me before the Second World War, you would have found me to have been an idealist with a simple and naive belief. From the Second World War we learned something. The war was unlike any other fought in Europe. It taught us not fighting, politics, or the follies of nationalism, but about the given nature of man.*
- *Before the Second World War I believed in the perfectibility of social man, that a correct structure of society would produce good will, and that therefore you could remove all social evil by a reorganization of society. It is possible that today I believe something of the same again; but after the War I did not because I was unable to. I had discovered what one man could do to another…. I believed then, that man was sick—not exceptional man, but average man. I believed that the condition of man was to be morally diseased creature and that the best job I could do at the time was to trace the connection between this disease and the international mess he gets himself into.*
  - He further clarified—in fact, he did so whenever he got any opportunity— that the Second World War had changed his view of man altogether. The evil that lies dormant in man's mind was nakedly exposed during that time. Golding wrote:
    - *If you had met me before World War II, you would have found me to have been an idealist with a simple and naïve belief…From World War II we learned something. The war was unlike any other fought in Europe. It taught us not fighting, politics, or the follies of nationalism, but about the given nature of man.*
      - In a conversation with Jack I. Biles, Golding said:

GOLDING'S OBSESSION WITH THE ATOM BOMB

Golding became so much obsessed with the atom bomb that he chose the holocaust of an atomic war in Europe for the setting of his novel. The novel is apocalyptic in this sense, as it presents a picture of the future atomic war in Europe and the incidents that follow.

CONTEXT

His boys are indeed British private school boys: regimented, subjected to vicious discipline, and indoctrinated with narrow, restrictive views of human nature. Golding's long career as a teacher at Bishop Wordsworth's School in Salisbury was a kind of extension of his Naval service: a passage from one mode of indoctrination and strict discipline to another. The regression to savagery that marks Lord of the Flies is a peculiarly British scholastic phenomenon, and not a universal allegory of moral depravity.

WILLIAM GOLDING'S NEED TO MAKE A STATEMENT ABOUT MAN

Golding had a need to express some fundamental statement about the nature of man in tangible terms,
* and he tended to use sharply defined polarities to generate his ideas

GOLDING vs BALLANTYNE'S OPTIMISM IN *THE CORAL ISLAND*

Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* represents, for Golding, an extremity of Victorian confidence and optimism in the civilised values of English schoolboy society.
* In Ballantyne's novel, the boys, shipwrecked on the island, organise their skills and exercise their imaginations to duplicate the comforts and the values of the society they have temporarily lost.
  o Working with discipline, they build shelters and a boat, make various utensils for their convenience, and find a healthy and interesting variety of animal and vegetable food.
    ▪ With the same kind of devotion to higher powers that characterises the more adult survival in the earlier Robinson Crusoe, the boys in The Coral Island radiate a confidence in their sense of community and organisation which would seem rather smug were they not also genuinely pious and aware of their luck.

HOW EVIL IS PORTRAYED IN BALLANTYNE'S *THE CORAL ISLAND*

Evil in the novel is externalised,
- represented by cannibals on the island whom the English boys defeat
  - they work together
  - and excel in both wit and virtue.
    - Their rescue almost does not matter, for they have essentially recreated the world they came from.

BALLANTYNE'S CONCEPT OF CHILDREN

Ballantyne draws on a concept of the child that reaches back through the nineteenth century,
- at least as far as Rousseau and Locke,
  - the child as inherently either…
    - good
    - or neutral,
      - manifesting this goodness if left alone and uncorrupted by the adult world
        - or reflecting and recreating the healthy and civilised environment of his initial consciousness.
          - The ship-wrecked boys in Ballantyne's book also reach an uninhabited island
            - they were able to organise themselves on the pattern offered by the Victorian standard of life
            - and they were rescued at the end of the novel.
              - This confidence in civilised enlightenment, developed from a faith in human possibility in the eighteenth century to a particularly English social achievement in the nineteenth, is precisely what Golding, in *Lord of the Flies*, is determined to reverse.

GOLDING'S REVERSAL OF BALLANTYNE'S CONCEPT

The school children on the uninhabited island in a tropical area offered Golding an opportunity to reconstruct R.M. Ballantyne's well-known story of adventure described in *Coral Island*.
- Lord of the Flies is a reconstruction of *Coral Island* and Golding expresses his views through the modifications done on Ballantyne's story.
  - The external framework of the two novels remains almost the same:
    - in both the novels the children are left in an island where there is no grown up person to guide them
    - and finally they are rescued.

- But the differences are well designed so that Golding's views on modern civilisation and on human nature become explicit.
  - While Ballantyne's novel has three children characters, Golding's novel has a good number of boys and all of them could not be rescued.
    - One was missing
    - and two were killed;
      - it was no accidental death, but death caused by other children who turned savage.
        - Thus the adventurous story of Ballantyne is reconstructed into a grim one with the message that evil lies in the very nature of man. The message is so explicit that most of the critics have treated the novel as a moral fable, and have interpreted the characters in terms of allegory.

GOLDING'S BELIEFS ABOUT MANKIND AND NATURE

Golding believed that our planet is being raped by man, and that it can be saved only if man tries to behave more humanly. He says:

- *We need more humanity, more care, more love. There are those who expect a political system to produce that, and others who expect the love to produce the system. My own faith is that the truth of the future lies between the two, and we shall behave humanly and a bit humanely, stumbling along, haphazardly generous and gallant, foolishly and meanly wise until the rape of our planet is seen to be preposterous folly that it is.*

THE PARABLE

Though Lord of the Flies can be seen a moral parable in the form of a boys' adventure story, in a deeper sense it is a war story.
  - The book's central emblem is the dead parachutist, mistaken by the boys for the Beast Beelzebub, diabolic Lord of the Flies.
    - For Golding, the true shape of Beelzebub is a pig's head on a stick,
      - and the horror of war is transmuted into the moral brutality implicit (in his view) in most of us.
        - The dead parachutist, in Golding's own interpretation, represents History,
          - one war after another,
          - the dreadful gift adults keep presenting to children.
            - Golding's overt intention has some authority, but not perhaps enough to warrant our acceptance of so simplistic a symbol.

LTF vs GOLDING'S OTHER NARRATIVES

Introduction to *Lord of The Flies* by William Golding

Judging Lord of the Flies a period piece means that one doubts its long- range survival, if only because it is scarcely a profound vision of evil.

- o Golding's first novel, *Lord of the Flies* does not sustain a critical comparison with his best narratives: *The Inheritors, Pincher Martin* (his masterpiece), *Free Fall* and the much later *Darkness Visible*.
    - o All these books rely upon nuance, irony, intelligence, and do not reduce to a trite moral allegory.
        - ▪ Golding acknowledged the triteness, yet insisted upon his fable's truth
            - • Man is a fallen being. He is gripped by original sin. His nature is sinful and his state perilous. I accept the theology and admit the triteness; but what is trite is true; and a truism can become more than a truism when it is a belief passionately held.

LTF's APPEAL

Lord of the Flies aspires to be a universal fable, but its appeal to American schoolchildren partly inheres in its curious exoticism.

- o Its characters are implausible because they are humorless; even one ironist among them would explode the book.
    - o The Christlike Simon is particularly unconvincing; Golding does not know how to portray the psychology of a saint.
        - ▪ Whether indeed, in his first novel, he knew how to render anyone's psychology is disputable.
            - • His boys are indeed British private school boys:
                - o regimented,
                - o subjected to vicious discipline,
                - o and indoctrinated with narrow, restrictive views of human nature.
                    - ▪ Golding's long career as a teacher at Bishop Wordsworth's School in Salisbury was a kind of extension of his Naval service:
                        - • a passage from one mode of indoctrination and strict discipline to another.
                            - o The regression to savagery that marks Lord of the Flies is a peculiarly British scholastic phenomenon, and not a universal allegory of moral depravity.

A WARNING AGAINST VIOLENT TENDENCIES

Lord of The Flies is a well-told tale of a reversion to barbarism is a warning against tendencies in many groups that may become violent,

- • and such a warning remains sadly relevant in the early twenty-first century.

REGRESSION TO SAVAGERY – A VICTORIAN LEGACY

Golding's fear of regression to savagery was not a new one, in the 20th Century

- In Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Hyde is a form of primitive man, an embodiment of the fears of Victorian Britain.
  - With their penchant for classification and control, the Victorians not only divided neighbourhoods into safe and unsafe, but also notoriously classified people into law-abiding and criminal types.
    - Inspired by the evolutionary writings of his half-cousin Charles Darwin, Francis Galton used composite photography to determine the facial features shared by the "criminal type."
      - Galton's process superimposed the portraits of criminals, making their common traits appear bolder and their individual traits fade away, resulting in ghostly, almost-human "criminal" faces.
        - Jekyll and Hyde articulates in Gothic fiction's exaggerated tones late Victorian anxieties concerning degeneration, atavism, and what Cesare Lombroso called "criminal man."
          - Lord of the Flies appears to, in some ways, have inherited the theme of regression to savagery, but with a modern twist to it – incorporating the fear of nuclear war and the abuse of science as types of regression
            - The fear of the monstrous potential of science can also be seen as an inherited element of Gothic fiction
              - The fear of nuclear war may be seen as a modern equivalent to…
                - Frankenstein
                - Edward Hyde (*Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*)

WAS GOLDING AN OPTIMIST OR PESSIMIST?

Golding refuted the charge of pessimism brought against him.
- "I am by nature an optimist," he said.

Lord of the Flies may apparently look like an expression of utter frustration and pessimism, because the innocent and the good natured boys are killed and the rule of discipline and good sense is ousted by savagery.
- But this show is a real one, based on the experience of the evil forces active in the politics of Europe during the first half of the twentieth century.
  - That is why Golding said in an interview that whatever he depicted about man's nature (in Lord of the Flies) was taken from life:
    - *You cannot write about man without including his evil nature and this evil is more prominent than good. He has the original evil—original sin as Christians would say, but he also has original good. Perhaps the colour of original good is not as strong as the colour of original evil. So original evil, when it is portrayed, appears to dominate the picture. So I don't think pessimism has been a dominating concern of mine. It is simply there because it is what we notice.*

GOOD VS EVIL IN THE STORY

The author's observation holds good when we find that the colour of what he says 'original good,' found in Simon, Piggy and Ralph, is not as strong as that of 'original evil' projected through Jack and his hunters' party. The 'original evil' is not yet projected as the ultimate winner. The death of Simon and Piggy brought an element of purgation in the novel. The concluding part of the novel may be quoted as an example:

- *Ralph looked at him (the officer) dumbly. For a moment he had a fleeting picture of the strange glamour that had once invested the beaches. But the island was scorched up like dead wood— Simon was dead and Jack had…. The tears began to flow and sobs shook him. He gave himself up to them now for the first time on the island; great, shuddering spasms of grief that seemed to wrench his whole body. 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. 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 (248).*
  o Awareness of evil is the first step towards getting rid of it.
    ▪ Ralph and the little boys had not earlier wept, for they had not been fully aware of the nature of evil.
      • Now that they weep for the end of innocence and for the darkness of man's soul, there is a sense of purgation caused by Simon's self-sacrifice and Piggy's murder.

'SIMON IS THE WHOLE POINT OF THE STORY'

Elaborating his view as revealed in the novel, Golding said that "Simon is the whole point of Lord of the Flies and Simon is Love."

- Lord of the Flies is thus an experiment with form which includes symbolic images and characters that explain the author's ideas. Explaining one such image Golding said,
  o *I felt a tremendous visional force behind the whole book. At the end, for example, there is a scene where Ralph is fleeing from the fire on the island, and the point is not just that the boy is being hunted down, but that the whole natural world is being destroyed. That idea was almost as important to me as Ralph himself: the picture of destruction was an atomic one; the island has expanded to be the whole great globe. The book is concerned with what human beings were doing to each other and to the world in which they lived.*

GOLDING AND HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

It was Frank Kermode who said:

- "Golding's novels are simple in so far as they deal in the primordial patterns of human experience and in so far as they have skeletons of parable. On these simple bones the flesh of narrative can take extremely complex forms. This makes for difficulty, but of the most acceptable kind, the difficulty that attends the expression of what is profoundly simple."