



CHILDHOOD

Lord of The Flies by William Golding

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MAJOR THEMES

Lord of the Flies, a direct product of the writer's experience of the Second World War, offers a number of themes which are the byproducts of the writer's serious concern for the future of civilization, rendered almost devastated by the cruelty of the Second World War.

- The major themes and ideas of the novel may be categorized as follows:
 - the theme of evil
 - a. is it innate or is it learnt?
 - the theme of childhood
 - the theme of human civilization in the twentieth century
 - the Biblical theme or the theme of sin and expiation.

REVERSING THE MYTH OF THE INCORRUPTIBLE CHILD-GOD

Golding's Lord of the Flies is a novel about the activities of some school boys who ranged between six and twelve and who had been dropped by an aeroplane on an uninhabited island.

- The subject matter of the novel shows similarities with the adventurous stories of the boys written in the nineteenth century.
 - o Those stories are romantic tales which focus on the exploration of the unknown land by the boys who are far from the Christian notion of 'original sin.'
 - Within the text of Lord of the Flies, both Coral Island and Treasure Island have been referred to by the characters to point at the element of adventure.
 - But Lord of the Flies is a reconstruction of Ballantyne's Coral Island in which three school boys of Imperial Britain explore an uninhabited island which becomes a paradise for them.
 - o These boys—Ralph, Jack and Peterkin—are civilized and they spread civilisation.
 - The non-Christian natives and the pirates are the 'others' who form the evil.
 - Golding reverts the ideas altogether, though the characters (numbers increased) and the setting remain almost the same.
 - o Golding preferred the term 'myth' to 'fable' in connection with his novel;
 - and the myth that we find in his novel is the reverse of the myth of the incorruptible child-god or invincible child-hero of earlier ages.

GOLDING – CHILDREN ARE NOT ANGELS





Golding does not share the romantic ideas that offer children the status of innocent angels.

- According to him, children possess both the good qualities and the bad ones as do the grown-ups.
 - And in both cases only a few possess good qualities such as
 - love,
 - fellow feeling,
 - sympathy
 - and pity.
 - In *Lord of the Flies*, Simon alone is called innocent.
 - He is full of love, pity and sympathy for others:
 - he brings ripe fruits for the littluns,
 - offers his own share of meat to Piggy who was denied it
 - and thinks that the supposed beast might be some sick man who could not even chase the boys that went so near him.
 - But the other boys, even Ralph and Piggy who are noted for rationality and intelligence, did not possess the characteristic qualities of Simon.
 - Ralph taunted Piggy whenever he got any opportunity—he disclosed Piggy’s nickname to others in spite of his request not to do so—and did not bother about his hurt feelings.
 - Piggy also was not free from jealousy and selfishness.
 - Besides Jack, Robert and Maurice, others are not, however utterly cruel. But they lack in moral courage to support goodness.
 - They are prone to a materialistic way of life that offers them fun and tasty food;
 - they are unable to think logically and are lacking in the capacity to discriminate between good and bad.

GOLDING’S OBSERVATIONS OF CHILDREN

On the whole, though the boys started well, they made a mess of everything and the paradise-like island is soon left devastated by bloodshed and fire.

- Formerly a school teacher, Golding the novelist, had the opportunity to have a close view of the behaviour of the children, and he noted that the children, too, may lapse into savagery. Golding observed:
 - What I’m saying to myself is ‘don’t be such a fool, you remember when you were a boy, a small boy, how you lived on that island with Ralph and Jack and Peterkin’...I said to myself finally, ‘Now you are grown up, you are adult; it’s taken you a long time to become adult, but now you’ve got there you can see that people are not like that; they would not behave like that if they were God-fearing English gentlemen, and they went to an island like that.’ There savagery would not be found in natives on an island. As like as not they would find savages who were kindly and uncomplicated and that the devil would rise out of the intellectual complications of the three white men on the island itself.





RALPH USES DISCIPLINE TO CARRY OUT VIOLENCE

In the changed scenario of the 1950s, the romance of the British boys civilising the ‘savages’ is lost.

- And Golding the realist, finds the qualities of the savages in the British boys themselves.
 - Lord of the Flies does not, however, render the views unexamined.
 - Rather, it is the result of its author’s microscopic observation of the changes in the boys’ thoughts and ways of life.
 - Even the subtle changes in their behaviour do not escape his eyes. Thus,
 - the boys’ sadistic pleasure in taunting Piggy,
 - Piggy’s child-like reluctance to be known by his nickname
 - and his adult-like hesitance to raise his hand in support of Ralph,
 - Jack’s being mortified after his hope of leadership is denied,
 - the littluns’ fear of the snake-like things based on fear and ignorance—
 - all these are instances of Golding’s hold on child psychology.
 - In reply to Clair Rosenfield’s observation that Golding consciously dramatises Freudian theme, Golding says,
 - I suppose I am doing the same thing as Freud did—investigating this complex phenomenon called man, perhaps our results are similar, but there is no influence

CONTEXT ABOUT THE BOYS’ DISCIPLINE

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.
 - Golding appears to be making a point about the irony of discipline:
 - On the one hand, we see it as a sign of an educated and civilized society
 - We use discipline to suppress evil
 - And create law and order for the benefit of the entirety of society
 - Yet, on the other hand, Golding illustrates that it is these very same values that fascists, dictators, governments and organisations use to carry out mass violence and atrocities, such as those he witnessed in WW2





- And which provides much of the impetus for themes in this text

HOW JACK POSSESSES QUALITIES WE LOVE

Golding, however, did not intend to portray Jack as basically evil.

- As he said in an interview,
 - “Jack has got all the gallant elements—hunting, warrior instincts—that we like to think of in the Knights of the Round Table. He is not really bad. He is a man of anger, violence and action and wants to be a leader.”]
 - What Golding wants to say is that the traditional heroic qualities associated with leadership can also lead to destruction and violence if not harnessed properly and not taken in balance
 - This is a similar point that Shakespeare makes in *Macbeth*:
 - Like Jack, *Macbeth* possesses heroic qualities, but then takes those qualities to extremes, which leads to not only his destruction, but his wife’s and nearly society’s as well.
 - Similarly, In Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, she explores the negative side of scientific creativity
 - On the one hand, we value science, but on the other, Shelley illustrates that if science is not guided by moral principles, it can create ‘monsters’
 - Golding makes a similar point to Shelley; he illustrates how the power of science created possibly the most monstrous creation in human history: the atomic bomb
 - Advancement of science and technology made the time ripe for atomic explosion and aggravated the situation as a result of which modern civilization faces the threat of extinction.
 - The arrival of cruel autocrats vitiated the situation.
 - Roger in *Lord of the Flies* is one such autocrat—Golding calls him a kind of Hitler figure—who is noted for atrocity and murder:
 - “But the Hitler figure is emerging and he is Roger. He just comes to the surface by the time the book ends. It is only the naval officer’s stepping in which stops Roger from dominating the whole thing as Hitler dominated what was first a reaction partly against Communism. He dominated this and turned it into the evil thing that it became.”

DISCIPLINE SUPPRESSES EVIL

Golding tried to make it clear that the sadistic nature of Roger and Maurice remained suppressed by the discipline and order in their previous life, but on the island their dormant evil nature became exposed.

- When the little boys were playing on the sands, building castles and decorating them with shells, flowers and interesting stones, Roger and Maurice came out of the forest, relieved of their duties at the fire.





- “Roger led the way straight through the castles, kicking them over, burying the flowers, scattering the chosen stones. Maurice followed, laughing, and added to the destruction. The three littluns paused in their game and looked up. As it happened, the particular marks in which they were interested had not been touched, so they made no protest. Only Percival began to whimper with an eyeful of sand and Maurice hurried away. In the other life Maurice had received chastisement for filling a younger eye with sand. Now, though there was no parent to let fall a heavy hand, Maurice still felt the unease of wrong-doing. At the back of his mind formed the uncertain outline of an excuse” (Ch. 4).

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.
 - 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





- o 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.
 - o 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.
 - o 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.
 - o 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.
 - o 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

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.

- 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*.
 - 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.

- 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:
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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.
 - o 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.
 - o 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





- o 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.
 - o 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,
 - *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."

