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THE PROBLEM OF EVIL IN *LORD OF THE FLIES*

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ABSTRACT



Lord of the Flies by William Golding is about the nature of man, his essential being and the inherent evil in him. It is about discovering the darkness in man's heart. One is obliged to look within oneself and see the lurking darkness (evil) there. Evil is in man's heart, only it needs to be recognized to weaken its grip. The devil is not present in any traditional or religious sense. Golding's Beelzebub is the modern equivalent of the anarchical, amoral driving force that Freudians call the 'Id.' The novel suggests that institutions and order imposed from without are only temporary, but that man's irrationality and his urge to be primitive and to destroy is enduring. Civilization is only a mask.

Keywords: evil, human nature, civilization, behaviour

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Lord of the Flies, William Golding's first novel is about the nature of man, his essential being and the inherent evil in him. The novel was written after the World War II, in which Golding himself took part. His shocking war experience changed his views about man. By exploring the invisible forces lying dormant in man's heart, Golding in the novel exposes the inalienable violence and evil in human nature. The novel is in the nature of "a moral fable embodying a conception of human depravity" (Hynes 16). In fact on account of its complex theme, the novel has variously been described as fable, allegory, myth and so on. Fredrick Karl calls it an allegory and aptly remarks that "Golding is interested in the metaphysics of behavior in states of being and aspects of survival" (Karl 254).

To demonstrate the evolution of society conditioned by man's 'sinful' nature, Golding starts the novel with a group of English school boys in the age group of 4-14, finding themselves dropped into a deserted island, away from the war torn world. In the island, the boys construct a society which comes crashing in "blood and terror because the boys are suffering from the terrible disease of being human" (Golding, "Fable" *The Hot Gates* 89). The comparison with R.M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* is remarkable: it forms a literary background. In *The Coral Island* an optimistic view of English boys' courage and resourcefulness is presented which Golding refutes in his novel and goes much beyond it. Both the books deal with the problem of evil but from totally different perspectives. In *The coral Island*, Victorian "smugness, ignorance and prosperity" (Golding, "Fable" *The Hot Gates* 88) is presented. Evil comes from outside. While in *Lord of the Flies* it comes

from within. The novel is meant for adults. It is concerned with violence and innate evil in human nature. It purports to show the ‘idealized’ boys to be ‘fake.’ Ballantyne’s English boys hunt not for sport but in order to eat; in Golding the school choir hunt solely for sport and the pleasure of killing.

The title “Lord of the Flies” is symbolic of beast or evil in man. It can, perhaps be traced to the Jewish hierarchy of demons where there is reference to Beelzebub who is known as the Lord of the Flies, the chief representative of the false gods. The novel like a fable conveys a moral that “the world is not the reasonable place we are led to believe” and that one has to live with “the darkness of man’s heart.” Once the boys have landed on the island, the novelist concerns himself with the adaptation of the boys to their new tropical background. The boy’s behavior on the island has been variously interpreted as they evolve their own gods, totems and taboos when they are deprived of parental authority. To some, it as a parable of man stripped of sanctions, customs and civilizations. Others view it as a tract about the differences between democracy and anarchy. And some relate it to the story of the Fall of Man and the Garden of Eden. Whatever interpretation one may believe in, little doubt remains about the fact that Golding believes that the evil is inborn and civilization and childhood innocence only cover it.

In the novel, the boys start off well with an assurance to follow the English discipline. It looks that they will enact the Ballantyne drama. An excited Ralph warmed in the “delight of a realized ambition” (Golding, *Lord of the Flies* 12) “Patted the palm trunk softly and forced at last to believe in the reality of the island, laughed delightedly again and stood on his head... and looked at the water with bright excited eyes (Golding, *Lord of the Flies* 15). The word of children is quickened with life when Ralph and his friend Piggy blow the conch to summon the assembly of the others. There are no elders to boss around. Then we’ll have to look after ourselves,”(Golding 28) says Piggy. “We ought to have a chief to decide things,” (Golding 29) says Ralph. They are like organized, civilized and disciplined boys of a cathedral school. But the tragedy is sharp as they fall from that civilized height. They turn into naked and painted savages. They gorge on pig flesh. Their whoops of “aah-ah” and “ooh-ooh” are heard. They create evil and participate in exploring its meaning and consequences.

Golding draws our attention to the fact that the boys are humans and humans do not behave in an idealized manner. His boys are dirty, inefficient and irresponsible. They are vicious and murderous. Ralph has goodwill and common sense but he does not know what afflicts them all. Blood lust and savagery surface slowly but surely, making him realize that everything is wrong with their society which is finally dissolved in disunity and chaos. He finds it difficult to hold the growing savagery in leash. Piggy’s rationalism and humanism and Simon’s prophetic vision do not help. Golding traces the reason for the disintegration of the boys’ society to “mankind’s essential illness” (Golding 111). Even the rationalists and civilized are not free from this illness (evil). It is clearly seen whenever the boys sing the ritual chant. Even Ralph loses his sense in the excitement and becomes a part of the death-dance.

Children are traditionally regarded as innocent and it is shocking and horrifying in the novel to see them acting so evilly. The childhood innocence covers the innate evil which emerges gradually. Ralph is Jack-in-evil whenever an unguarded opportunity offers itself. Thus even a child as the “father of man” is free from evil. It is not Golding’s intention to simply show that the children turn into savages without the control of adults. “The majesty of adult life” is a delusion and this is what they long for, without knowing that the adults are responsible for their helpless position. The dead parachutist is the history of man in a sense and depicts in himself what man has done and can do to man. He is evil and therefore he is shown to be the “Beast” lying on the mountain top.

The island looks enchantingly beautiful. But a long scar caused by the tube has disfigured it. So the boys’ advent is linked with the disfigurement of the beautiful island. Soon the darkness enters it and swallows the struggling ‘humanism’ of Ralph and Piggy and spiritual ‘acceptance’ of Simon. When Jack arrives with his group, he appears out of ‘darkness’ and as a ‘creature.’ “Within the diamond haze of the beach something dark was fumbling along. Ralph saw it first.... Then the creature stepped from mirage on to clear sand, and they saw that the darkness was not all shadow but mostly clothing” (Golding 26). Later, Jack appears as “a stain in the darkness.” Ralph had patted a tree trunk, but Jack slammed his knife into a tree trunk. Golding depicts

Ralph with "a mildness about his mouth and eyes that proclaimed no devil and Jack on the other hand with his fiery red hair and blue eyes reminds one of devil."

On the surface, the novel appears as a tug of war between Ralph and Jack who stand for two contradictory values. But when one reads between the lines, it emerges that Ralph includes Jack and Jack includes Ralph. Jack alone is not responsible for bringing the hell down on the island. No doubt he is aggressive from the beginning and believes in power and leads the forces of anarchy and savagery. But Ralph also has a fascination for abomination. It is Jack who discovers fire in Piggy's spectacles. In fact all the boys have their own points of view. Simon is the first and only one to recognize the darkness, the evil in the world. He is a saint - a "Christ-figure" ("Fable," *The Golden Gates* 97) as called by Golding.

In the early part of the novel, the force of inherited morality prevails. Jack resents at first the killing of a pig "because of the enormity of the knife descending and cutting into living flesh; because of the unbearable blood" (Golding, *Lord of the Flies* 41). Maurice destroys the sand castles built by Percival, Henry and Johny, but feels 'the unease of wrong-doing' (Golding 76). Roger too throws stones at Henry only to miss. "Yet there was a space round Henry.... into which he dare not throw. Here, invisible yet strong was the taboo of the old life. Round the squatting child was the protection of parents and school and policemen and the law. Roger's arm was conditioned by a civilization that knew nothing of him and was in ruins" (Golding 78).

All this shows that morality is present but it is obvious that it is not inborn. It is a matter of conditioning. The restraint exercised by Roger is just a taboo. Civilization has failed to prevent mankind from destroying each other with savage weapons. Golding stresses the frailty of conditioning. Man invents new devices to secure release from shame. Jack's face-painting shows him "liberated from shame and self-consciousness" (Golding 80). In the deserted island, away from civilization, the deep-lying natural instincts in the boys come out and their fun and play assume sinister proportions. After the killing of the first pig, Maurice "pretended to be the pig and ran squealing into the centre, and the hunters, circling still, pretended to beat him. As they danced, they sang 'kill the pig, cut her throat. Bash her in'" (Golding 94). But this is suggestive of something vicious in the offing. In the early part, there is an unidentifiable threat to the security that Ralph and piggy are trying to provide.

In the latter part of the novel, the threat materializes. Ralph encounters frustration in his efforts to exercise authority which is challenged by Jacks every now and then. The inadequacy of his rationalism is made clear to us in him repeated failure to complete his sentence after the connective 'because'. Piggy's spectacles though taken for granted to denote superior intellect, essentially hide his myopic vision. The novel suggests that the fragile culture of man is under a continuous threat from the evil within. It is portrays a dramatization of man's lapse into his savage origins and his urge to be primitive. The most cruel and beastly illustration of man's hunger for control is provided by Jack, Roger and others when they chase a sow and are 'fulfilled upon her.' According to Kinkead-Weekes and Ian Gregor, it means "an impulse in lust and in killing, which seeks the obliteration of the other as the most complete expression of the 'self'" (Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor 42-43).

It is noteworthy that Piggy recalls the adult world time and again to control the children. He laments that "we are all drifting and things are going rotten. At home there was always a grown-up. Please, Sir; please Miss; and then you got an answer. How I wish" (Golding 17). Ralph too prays to the adult world: "If only they could get a message to us.... If only they could send something grown up a sign or something (Golding 17).

And a sign surely comes down from the world of grown-ups. A dead parachutist dangled in the ropes of his parachute falls on the mountain top. The boys already terrified at the thought of a beast prowling around them think it to be the beast. The coming of the dead parachutist indicates that man's own nature is responsible for destruction and savagery and also that "there is no essential difference between the island world and the grown-up one. There too, order can be and has been overthrown; morality can be and has been inadequate to prevent wholesale destruction and savagery" (Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor 43). The four main boys express their views to deal with the beast. They view the beast (evil) outside in a material form. But it is Simon who speaks the truth: "What I mean is..... maybe it's only us. Simon becomes inarticulate in his effort to express mankind's essential illness" (Golding 111). The other boys laugh at him but it implies that the object of

the boys' dread is a dark side of themselves. "Lord of the Flies" is not something outside man. It is in man's own being.

Simon goes up the mountain and faces the "Lord of the Flies" - the beast. He frees the dead body of the parachutist. This act is symbolic of his emancipation. Running down to reveal the identity of the beast 'harmless and horrible' he pierces into the circle of the boys who are dancing and are 'liberated from shame and self-consciousness.' He is taken for the beast and is killed while the boys keep on chanting: "kill the beast; cut his throat; spill his blood; do him in." Simon's murder signifies the killing of conscience and the extent of degeneration and depravity of the boys. Jack and his tribe think it to be the act of the beast. They still see the beast external to them, an evil force that can be propitiated. Piggy is also killed like a pig by Roger. Both Piggy and Simon are killed not as human beings but as 'pig' and 'beast.' Ralph too is another 'human pig' who is chased by Jack towards the end. He also faces like Simon the "Lord of the Flies" in his hideout which is a pig's skull, but unlike Simon, it does not show him his 'ancient, inescapable recognition' because he is still concerned with himself whereas Simon is concerned with the welfare of his society. Therefore Hynes rightly observes that "there is no sign in the novel that Simon's sainthood has touched any soul but his own. The novel tells us a good deal about evil..." (Hynes 16). Ralph cries in the end for mercy which is answered and a naval officer in full uniform stands before him. The irony which pervades the novel, reaches its peak when the officer asks him "What have you been doing? Having a war or something?... You're all British aren't you?---- would have been able to put up a better show than that..." (Golding 247-248). It is horrifying and strange that the officer does not know that his world is responsible for the boys' sad plight. Ralph knows what has happened and he 'wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart.'

The novel thus is about discovering the darkness in man's heart. One is obliged to look within oneself and see the lurking darkness (evil) there. Evil is in man's heart, only it needs to be recognized to weaken its grip. The devil is not present in any traditional or religious sense. Golding's Beelzebub is the modern equivalent of the anarchical, amoral driving force that Freudians call the 'Id.' The novel suggests that institutions and order imposed from without are only temporary, but that man's irrationality and his urge to be primitive and to destroy is enduring. Civilization is only a mask. The boys make their tragic journey from ignorance and irresponsibility to viciousness.

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