



Primitivism in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*

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Abstract

This paper deals essentially with William Golding's masterpiece *Lord of the Flies* (1954), tackling an issue that is highly significant to the thematic structure of the novel; namely, primitivism. Humanity freedom is based on the human nature after freeing itself from all the binds and rules leading to downfall and to savagery.

The paper falls into two main parts, besides the introductory and concluding sections. After introducing William Golding (1911-1993) as a modern British novelist, it presents the subject of man torn between two contradictory states, a civilized and an evil character in Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Struggle is masterfully shown to be the point that marks the transition from man's seeming innocence to his horrible reality as a savage, evil creature.

1-Introduction

William Golding can be considered as a modern British novelist. His writings reveal an awareness of the age in which he wrote, as well as an acknowledgment and recognition of the eternal truth about the human nature, the very nature which writers long before him tried either to hide its true shape or polish it shining and glamorous. Before going through the details of his *Lord of the Flies*, it is convenient to have a glance at the writer himself and study the nature of his fiction in brief.

An intellectually curious man, Golding was delighted in learning about a variety of things, particularly languages, ancient cultures, and literatures. Evidently, he was very sociable. Nevertheless, he was a private man refusing to speak freely about himself. Therefore, his biography was denied to be written during his lifetime. He hardly allowed publishing his journals or letters.⁽¹⁾

At a very early age, Golding had a different view from his father's because he recognized the existence of darkness and evil around and within human beings. He first learned this philosophy from his mother, who, commenting on the sinking of the *Titanic* when Billy was seven months old, confided in him that she believed the world was "an exhilarating but risky place."⁽²⁾

In his childhood, an incident affected his personality. It occurred when he was briefly separated from his parents when they were walking in the woods one winter afternoon, he perceived the world as terrifying when he saw a dark stag's head of "stillness and terrible indifference" staring at him, and he ran screaming to find his parents.⁽³⁾

In his school years which lasted for 15 years, he loved adult classics, such as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*; at the same time, he was enchanted by children's classics. With his love for words and novels, it is not too surprising that Golding decided to write his own novel when he was about twelve years old.⁽⁴⁾

In his adulthood, Golding spent almost the entire war in the naval service, first as an ordinary seaman and later as an officer. These years destroyed any idealism Golding may have held about the rational or beneficial nature of human beings. The war was Golding's



greatest educational experience, confirming for him the process of shattering the liberal and optimistic image of man. As a young man, Golding explains that, "[b]efore 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 ills by a reorganization of society."⁽⁵⁾ Golding's *Lord of the Flies* is haunted by Golding's service in the Royal Navy (1940–45), during the Second World War.⁽⁶⁾

Throughout the rest of his life, Golding believed that all human beings are born with original sin and "are about balanced between potentiality for good and potentiality for bad."⁽⁷⁾ In his novels, he "peers out at the world as through a bearded mask, and he has largely kept himself to himself except in his novels, which reveal the writer though perhaps not the man."⁽⁸⁾ Although Golding thought deeply about human depravity, he was an energetic, optimistic man.⁽⁹⁾

In spite of all the changes and advancements that occurred during his nearly eighty-two years of life, Golding did not think that human beings were capable of change. Although he recognized that people could change their environments and their societies, he believed they by no means could alter their inherent, evil natures.⁽¹⁰⁾

Through his fiction, including *Lord of the Flies*, Golding forces readers to recognize the truth of the human soul so that they can realistically understand themselves, other people, and the world. He examines basic human nature and helps his readers gain "a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity, perhaps even the evil, of people."⁽¹¹⁾ Like *Lord of the Flies* that was inspired by a book by Robert Ballantyne, *Coral Island* (1857), Golding's other famous novel, *The Inheritors* (1955) was also inspired by a book, H. G. Wells's *Outline of History*. Golding did not believe in Wells's idea of social perfectibility in man. Unlike Wells's evil, unenlightened Neanderthals who were replaced by new and better humans, Golding's primitive Neanderthals are innocent beings who are gradually exterminated by a more intelligent, but also more depraved, type of human being, the direct ancestors of current people.⁽¹²⁾

Instead of focusing on the sins of society, Golding looked at the wickedness found within every individual, revealing a world destroyed because of fallen humans. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Golding did not view people as victims of a corrupt society. In fact, he said, "I was writing *Lord of the Flies* because of my feeling that people had been looking at systems rather than at people."⁽¹³⁾

Tracing the evils found in society back to individuals because "man produces evil as a bee produces honey" *Lord of the Flies* shows that evil lies outside civilized beings and is found only in savages and pirates that visit the island. Golding's English schoolboys, shipwrecked on a beautiful tropical island during a war, quickly destroy it, worship an idol, and kill two boys before they are rescued by a naval officer, showing "that within us all, eagerly waiting to be let out, lie savages."⁽¹⁴⁾

One of the prominent issues in *Lord of the Flies* is man's need for civilization. The story shows that laws and rules, policemen and schools are necessary to keep the darker side of human nature in line. These institutions and concepts slip away or are ignored; human beings revert to a more primitive part of their nature.⁽¹⁵⁾

2-Primitive vs. Civilized Cultures

Broadly speaking, primitivism can be defined as the belief that primitive peoples were nobler and less flawed than civilized peoples because they had not been subjected to the tainting influence of society. Examples of literature adopting primitivism include Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko: Or, The History of the Royal Slave* (1688), Jean- Jacques Rousseau's *Julie ou la Nouvelle Heloise* (1761), and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*.⁽¹⁶⁾ Primitive life is shown to be healthy and a rich source of happiness and eternal bliss, or so the Romantics



seem to believe. Primitive life is simple and unsophisticated, which secures one's feeling of sublime and union with Nature as an omnipotent force.

Charles Darwin assumes that man lived originally in small communities, each with a single wife, or with several, if powerful, whom he defended (out of jealousy) against all men. In a primitive community, the totem (which is a class of material objects that a savage regards with superstitious respect, believing in the existence of an intimate or special relationship between him and every member of the class) refers to an animal or plant respected as an ancestor, and the code of restrictions reflect the self-imposed limitations on incestuous desires which primitive man observes in reference to the memory of the primal father. Respect is shown for the totem by not killing it if it be an animal and not cutting it or gathering it, if it be a plant. Violation of the prohibition to eat or kill the totem animal or plant is punished severely, despite the fact that the punishment in this case takes place automatically.⁽¹⁷⁾

In its broadest sense, culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."⁽¹⁸⁾ Some primitive tribes may have held relatively closer to primordial forms of behavior than modern man, but this can be a relative matter. There is no justification for identifying one contemporary primitive custom with the original type of human behavior.⁽¹⁹⁾ Primitivism, in this context, is abandoning codes of rules and laws that mark a civilized culture. It is man's living under no or very limited codes of rules or norms. There is that tendency to leave the social laws and norms and to live by the rules of nature, a kind of life that is often described as primitive.

3-Primitivism in *Lord of the Flies*

Lord of the Flies is often claimed to be the most popular of Golding's novels and one of the most important texts of the twentieth century. It is a fable vital to our times for three reasons: "the urgency of its questions, the audacity of its answers, and the formal originality of its investigation."⁽²⁰⁾

The Second World War changed thinking about man's essential nature. Before the war, people generally believed that man was essentially good-hearted and society often was evil. However, the atrocities of the war made it impossible for many people to believe any longer in man's basic innocence.⁽²¹⁾ In his novel *Golding* argues against the commonly held belief that human beings are moral creatures who can be perfected as long as they are not corrupted and victimized by an immoral society. Instead, he shows that all humans have good and evil within themselves. He describes the novel as "an attempt to trace the defect of society back to the defects of human nature"⁽²²⁾

Golding's reading of the classics (Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and Ballantyne's *Coral Island*), his war experience, and his new insight into humanity laid the groundwork for his writing.⁽²³⁾ Ever since *Lord of the Flies* was first published, critics have recognized that the novel is a type of allegory whose characters represent ideas or themes. However, because "Golding is a simply complicated writer", the characters are not straightforward representations of only one idea. They can represent various categories of allegories—political, sociological, religious, and psychological.⁽²⁴⁾ Bloom⁽²⁵⁾ thinks that in accordance with Golding's long career as a teacher at Bishop Wordsworth's School in Salisbury as a kind of extension of his Naval service, the regression to savagery that marks *Lord of the Flies* is a peculiarly British scholastic phenomenon, and not a universal allegory of moral depravity.

In any case, Golding's tale of a reversion to barbarism is a warning against tendencies in many groups that may become violent, and such a warning remains relevant. Hence, Bloom⁽²⁶⁾ insists upon the moral truth of his allegorical fable:



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.

The novel deals with the group of boys who find themselves on their own on an uninhabited island—as the result of a plane crash during their evacuation from England in an atomic war—try to create a society for themselves, but experience its disintegration. The theme is "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. . . . The whole book is symbolic in nature." ⁽²⁷⁾

The novel takes place on a tropical island. Near the lagoon is a beach where the meetings take place. Farther inland is a mountain where the boys first set their signal fire. Much of the island is a jungle with thick vines the boys call "creepers." ⁽²⁸⁾ When people live in a safe, civilized society, they often can remain ignorant about the true nature of human beings. This leads to disaster because humans who are naive more easily give in to evil. Golding's boys begin in a state of innocence, seeing people as well-intentioned and goodhearted. They act like well-behaved children who desire to work together in order to be rescued, and they innocently occupy their time by swimming in the lagoon. But soon they become vicious hunters, roaming the jungle searching for pigs to torture and kill. They are so enamored with hunting that they no longer wish to keep a signal fire going so they can return to their homes. ⁽²⁹⁾

The society begins to come into being when Ralph blows the conch he has discovered, the children collecting on the beach. But already there is a hint of irresponsibility in the pleasure the young ones feel at the notion of "something purposeful being done"—by others (Ralph is sounding the conch, and Piggy gathering names) —a pleasure underscored by the action of one who starts sucking his thumb. ⁽³⁰⁾ The conch shell found on the beach by Ralph becomes the symbol of order and democracy. At first the shell is nothing more than a lovely object that is pulled out of the weeds. It develops a community purpose after Piggy decides that it should be used as a horn to call the boys together for a meeting. The boy holding the conch has the authority to speak. In fact, it is partly because Ralph holds the shell that he is elected the leader. ⁽³¹⁾

Attempts to build shelters on the side of the boys prove as ineffective as its effort to keep a signal fire going. Only Ralph and Simon are still on the job when Golding first shows this world at work, the other children having drifted off to do whatever they enjoy, with Jack devoting himself to mastering a technique for hunting pigs. The split between Jack and Ralph, discernible when they met initially, starts to emerge as a split between different organizing principles of society. ⁽³²⁾ Maintaining a signal fire symbolizes the boys' desire or lack of desire to return to civilization. The first thing Ralph asks the boys to do is to make a fire to alert a passing ship so that they can be rescued. Since they want to go back home, all of them rush to the mountain to gather wood and build a fire. ⁽³³⁾

People's natural inclination toward evil is seen obviously in Jack, one of the major characters, and his tribe of hunters. Although their stated reason for killing pigs—to provide meat for everyone— seems logical, the boys are also hunting because they enjoy killing and torturing living creatures. In the first pig kill, their delight in overpowering and killing a living animal is apparent as they excitedly describe the event. Their joy becomes ritualized in their chant: "*Kill the beast! Cut her throat! Spill her blood!*" ⁽³⁴⁾ After killing a pig once, the hunters want to do more than merely kill; they wish to inflict pain. In the second pig killing, the boys brutally kill the sow, torturing it before cutting its throat. After this they accidentally murder Simon, one of the boys whom they think is a beast, as they let their savage emotions take control of their reason. Killing Piggy is even easier for Roger, who purposely releases the rock to squash him. By the end of the novel, the boys have become so diabolical that they



hunt Ralph like a pig.⁽³⁵⁾ Golding shows that some people, such as Jack, become more and more depraved when there are no consequences for their actions, while others, like Ralph, recognize the tendency toward evil in themselves and seek to contain it.⁽³⁶⁾

Since the novel has rendered a civilization deteriorating step by step until it lies in ruins, the regression from innocence to savagery can be illustrated fairly briefly. In the first part of the story, the fires that the children light are normally associated with rescue, while in the second half they are linked with cooking the killed pigs and feasting. The final fire not only dramatizes the literal cruelty of the children in hunting down Ralph but implies as well that the world which began as Eden has become Hell.⁽³⁷⁾

The repeated dances constitute still another motif: it is initiated by Jack's capering about when he first succeeds in fashioning a hunting mask; the motif evolves through the ritual dances that domesticate ever greater cruelty and culminate in the murder of Simon; by the end of the story, the dance has become a habitual ceremony of Jack's group.⁽³⁸⁾ Such primitive dances show that the boys have abandoned their civilized parts of their selves and are now committed to the barbarian identities which are hidden under their apparent innocence.

As the boys become savages, the conch loses its symbolic power for the hunters. Ralph, trying desperately to regain order and morality after he helps kill Simon, clings to the conch. But he and Piggy are almost alone in desiring to be good; when they go to Jack's camp and he tries to blow the conch to bring the hunters back to an orderly government, the boys throw stones at him.⁽³⁹⁾ Golding shows that the boys no longer wish to return to civilization but would rather remain on the island as savages. Although Ralph tries to keep the fire going because he feels that "[t]he fire is the most important thing on the island" and tells the boys that "we ought to—ought to die before we let the fire out"⁽⁴⁰⁾, he does not have enough people left in his tribe to succeed.

The novel's central symbol 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, as he sees it, in most of human beings. The dead parachutist, in Golding's own view, stands for History, one war after another, the dreadful gift adults keep presenting to children.⁽⁴¹⁾ By making the children terrified of an imaginary beast, Golding looks at how fear of the unknown causes people to act irrationally and even give up their morals.⁽⁴²⁾ Jack leaves open the possibility that such a beast may exist, saying, "There isn't a snake-thing. But if there was a snake we'd hunt it and kill it. We're going to hunt pigs and get meat for everybody. And we'll look for the snake too."⁽⁴³⁾

The existence of the atmosphere of fear symbolizes the breakdown of civilization. When the little ones tell of their fear of a beast that comes out of the sea, Golding shows that human capacity for evil cannot be controlled or eliminated by humane government. Even though Jack tries to appease the beast by offering it a pig's head on a stake, the boys still live in terror. This fear causes their dark natures to surface, as they savagely kill Simon, whom they irrationally think is the beast; Roger murders Piggy; and they attempt to kill Ralph.⁽⁴⁴⁾ *The Lord of the Flies*, a bloody pig's head that Jack places on a stake as a sacrifice to the beast, is the main symbol of the novel. The words *Lord of the Flies* are a literal translation of the name "Beelzebub," one of the devils in the Bible.⁽⁴⁵⁾

The scene of Simon's first encounter with the pig's head that Jack and his group have left as an offering to the beast moves the story toward a climax of its own in its symbolic statement. It is so realistically rendered that Simon will himself become a sacrificial victim. The scene first introduces the phrase "Lord of the Flies," which identifies the Devil with society's reification of its own fears through its sacrificing to them.⁽⁴⁶⁾ What the Lord of the



Flies says to Simon here marks the lawless type of existence the children have come to have on the island:

This has gone quite far enough, my poor, misguided child, do you think you know better than I do? . . . I'm warning you. I'm going to get waxy. D'you see? You're not wanted. Understand? We are going to have fun on this island. Understand? We are going to have fun on this island! So don't try it on, my poor misguided boy, or else-----
(47)

One of the sharpest juxtapositions in *Lord of the Flies* pits Jack against Piggy, the two presented as instinctively antagonistic from the start. Although Jack turns out to be the leading force in destroying the society established originally on the island, he stands at initially as a supporter of civilized values, inquiring for the adult in charge when he appears on the beach with his fellows. (48) Later he declares to an assembly: "After all, we're not savages. We're English; and the English are best at everything. So we've got to do the right things." (49) Ironically, the boys are having their own codes of a primitive civilization that have nothing to do with human values and ethics.

Whereas Jack disregards the restraints of civilization, makes a principle of fear, and persistently pursues power, Piggy is devoted to the orderly processes of civilization, constantly brings to bear what rationality he can preserve, and proves woefully weak. Even for Ralph's society he is an outsider, a comic butt because of his fatness, asthma, and dependence on spectacles—a figure already faintly discredited by his trips to the bushes when "taken short" in the opening pages of the novel. (50) So it is Piggy who must juxtapose the values of the two societies that the island has known: "Which is better—to have rules and agree, or to hunt and kill . . . "Which is better, law and rescue, or hunting and breaking things up" (Golding, 1982: 222). The answers to such questions come along with the rock that smashes him to death. Marking the inadequacy of any rational, logical world, Piggy's death symbolically shows the end of civilization on the tropical island. (51)

Piggy symbolizes Golding's view that rationality alone is by no means sufficient. Similarly, Ralph's good intentions, capacity for leadership, and commitment to social order are not sufficient to prevent a reversion to savagery under pressure. Furthermore, the character of Jack stands for the idea that the fears, cruelty, and lust for power in every human soul can gain dominance all too easily. (52)

By the end of the novel, Ralph is turned into an outsider, a beast, who must be killed by Jack's group, and his head must be offered as a sacrifice. Although Ralph and the others are shocked into regaining some sense of themselves as children by the sudden appearance, at the novel's close, of a naval officer from a cruiser that has sighted the smoke of the conflagration, Golding never seems to suggest that civilized values have indeed been effectively restored, for the adult world is thoroughly engaged in its own war. (53)

Adults are even worse than the boys are since they commit evil on a larger scale by waging a war in which atom bombs are exploded. The war is the reason the boys are abandoned on the island in the beginning of the novel. Because of the war, an adult intrudes on the island in the middle of the novel when an air fight occurs over the island and a dead parachutist lands on the mountain. At the end of the book, an officer engaged in war rescues the boys, but he brings them back to a world in which there is great destruction. (54)

As a social allegory, the novel describes "the way in which, when the civilized restraints which we impose on ourselves are abandoned, the passions of anger, lust and fear wash across the mind, obliterating commonsense and care, and life once again becomes nasty, brutish and short." (55)

4-Conclusion

Man is that creature known for his love for freedom of rules and their confining restraints. Attempts have long been made to free man from slavery to people and to laws or



principles. Among philosophers, it is commonly believed that society and its corrupt civilization limit man's chances of happiness and comfort. Therefore, there is the everlasting desire to get that sort of primitive existence where there are no unnecessary rules to abide by and where one can achieve the goals of personal freedom and individual independence.

Golding, in his masterpiece *Lord of the Flies*, seems to think the other way. It is society that adjusts and contains any evil inclinations the individuals may possess. It is the typical place where the "Lord of the place" can be held in check. Once such a civilization that the society has establishes begins to fall apart, primitive norms turn to savagery, always showing that the supremacy is for the most powerful side, and survival, according to Darwin, is of the fittest.

Notes

- 1-Reipp, Raychel Haugrud, 2010, *William Golding: Lord of the Flies* (New York: Marshal Cavendish Benchmark), p. 9.
- 2-Quoted in Reipp, pp. 11-12.
- 3-Reipp, p. 12.
- 4-Reipp, pp. 12, 17.
- 5-Quoted in Reipp, p. 28.
- 6-Harold Bloom, 2005, *Novelists and Novels* (Philadelphia: Vhelsea House Publishers), p. 399.
- 7-Quoted in Reipp, p. 29.
- 8-Reipp, p. 9.
- 9-Reipp, p. 9.
- 10-Reipp, p. 65.
- 11-Quoted in Reipp, p. 67
- 12-Reipp, pp. 33-34.
- 13-Reipp, p. 65.
- 14-Quoted in Reipp, p. 33.
- 15-Ismail Salami, 1999, *Study of Thirty Great Novels* (Tehran: Mehrandish Books), p.293.
- 16- David Galens, 2002. *Literary Movements for Students*, Vol.1 (The Gale Group), p. 391.
- 17-Osborn, R., 1931, *Freud and Marx: A Dialectical Stud.* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd), pp.113-115.
- 18-Quoted in Edward B. Taylor, 1981, *Primitive Culture* (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street), p. 1.
- 19-Ruth Benedict, 1934, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company), p. 18.
- 20- Reipp, p. 67.
- 21-Salami, p. 284.
- 22-Quoted in Reipp, p. 71.
- 23-Salami, p. 285.
- 24-Babb, Howard S. Babb, 1970, *The Novels of William Golding* (The Ohio State University Press), pp. 90-91.
- 25-Bloom, p. 400.
- 26-Blom, pp. 399-400.
- 27-Babb, pp. 7-8.
- 28-Reipp, p. 77.
- 29-Reipp, p. 73.
- 30- Babb, p. 8.
- 31-(, pp. 87, 89.
- 32-Babb, p. 9.
- 33-Reipp, p. 89.
- 34-William Golding, 1962, *Lord of the Flies* (London: Faber and Faber), p.58.
- 35-Reipp, pp. 71-72.
- 36-Reipp, p. 73.
- 37-Babb, p. 13.
- 38-Babb, p. 14.
- 39-Reipp, p. 89.
- 40-Golding, p. 69.
- 41-Bloom, p. 399.
- 42-Reipp, p. 74.
- 43-Golding, p. 28.
- 44-Reipp, pp. 74-75.
- 45-Reipp, pp. 85-86.



- 46-Babb, p. 25.
- 47-Golding p, 178.
- 48-Babb, p. 20.
- 49-Golding, p. 47.
- 50-Babb, p. 21.
- 51-Reipp, pp. 82-83.
- 52-Babb, p. 30.
- 53-Babb, p. 11.
- 54-Reipp, p. 72.
- 55- Reipp, p. 91.

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ملخص

يختص هذا البحث بدراسة لرواية وليم غولدينغ الشهيرة (سيد الذباب) (1954)، متطرقاً الى مسألة بالغة الاهمية فيما يخص البناء الموضوعي للرواية، اي مسألة النمط او المذهب البدائي. ان معالجة غولدينغ لرغبة البشر المتزايدة بالحرية من احكام الحضارة او المدنية استناداً الى الطبيعة الملتوية والمتأصلة للبشر هي، في الواقع، مؤشراً على مطابقته للارتداد البشري الى الهمجية البدائية مع تلك الرغبة في التحرر من اية اعراف او قيود، سواء كانت اجتماعية او دينية.

يقع البحث في جزئين رئيسيين، فضلا عن المبحثين التعريفي والختامي. بعد تقديم وليم غولدينغ (1911-1993) كرائد للرواية البريطانية الحديثة، فان موضوع تردد الانسان بين الحياة البدائية الخالية من أية قوانين والحياة المتحضرة التي تتميز باعرافها يتم تقصيه تقصياً كاملاً في رواية الكاتب (سيد الذباب). يجري اظهار الصراع بأنه البؤرة التي تحدد الانتقال من براءة الانسان الظاهرية الى حقيقته الفظيعة ككائن همجي وشرير.