

**Understanding of Humanity A Study in:
William Golding's *Lord of the Flies***

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Abstract

William Gerald Golding is a prominent English novelist, an essayist, poet, and winner of the 1983 Nobel Prize for literature. Golding in many of his novels deals principally with evil that resides in the dark side of man's personality.

Golding's *Lord Of The Flies* is a symbolic portrait of humanity as he views it. The island, the boys and many other events in the novel represent this symbolic portrait. To be more accurate, *Lord of the Flies* explores the dark side of humanity, the savagery that underlies even the most civilized human beings.

The Background of Lord of the Flies

Few decades earlier, artists used to depict children as innocent, brave, good, and pure:

It is only after 1790 that the child is a serious subject for English literature, and it is a work of the Romantics, especially Blake and Wordsworth, which chiefly celebrates the original innocence of childhood. The child's state is seen as one of the spontaneous wonderment and joy before Nature...(David Archer:47).

Novels like Robert Louis Stevensons' *Treasure Island* , Robert Michael Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*, and Richard Hughes's *A High Wind in Jamaica* depict children as heroes who use their bravery, wisdom, and innocence to repress the evil and help the oppressed or the poor.

Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* tells the story of three young Victorian boys who find themselves marooned on an unidentified Pacific island. Those three boys, whose names are Ralph, Jack, and Peterkin, have the well mannerism of the Victorian society. Though they lead an unhappy life on that Pacific wild island, they have the ability to remain civilized up to the last moment when they are saved.

William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies* parodies that one of Ballantyne's. In a sense Golding based the structure of his novel on that one of *The Coral Island* and he borrowed the names of *Lord of the Flies*' characters from the characters' names of *The Coral Island*. The difference is that Golding was unable to respond to Ballantyne's vision of humanity. In other words, both of Ballantyne and Golding's novels tackle the theme of evil, but whereas Golding finds evil in the boys' own nature, it comes to Ballantyne's boys not from within themselves but from the outside world. *Lord of the Flies* as Golding describes its theme "Is an attempt to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human nature." (quoted in James: 311)

In reading *Lord of the Flies*, one may sense its pessimistic mood. The reason behind such mood is related to Golding's experience during the World War II. Golding wrote *Lord of the Flies* just after the end of that war-- an event that caused Europeans to re-examine their construction of themselves as 'civilized'. On that, Golding said: "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"(G. Vaidyanathan:2)

Golding set his tale on an imagined island in the ocean, a place where the boys have to struggle in order to develop their new society. On this tropical island, the boys are free to create their own new society.

Lord of the Flies' characters are skillfully portrayed. This results from the fact that:

After the war, Golding returned to teaching in a boys' school, which may explain why the characters in *Lord of the Flies* seem so real. Ralph, Jack, Piggy, Simon, and other boys are based on the faces and voices of children Golding knew. (Ibid.)

To conclude, Golding's reading of the classics, especially that one of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Robert Michael Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*, in addition to the experiences he gained in the war and as a teacher of small boys for about 13 years, laid the groundwork of his most famous novel *Lord of the Flies*.

The Contradictory Faces of Humanity In *Lord of the Flies*

It is said: "Everything is bad as it leaves the hands of the Author of things..."(quoted in Archer:47). This speech can only be improved by man's feelings and actions. Though he tries his best to reflect the good side of his personality, sometimes his efforts go with the wind when he loses the ability to control the evil side, which resides inside him by instinct.

Usually the child is the most pure one of humanity. Through his mouth, many fundamental truths can be seen as he has a spark of knowledge that may spring from God's spirit or may be because; as Archer believes, "Childhood represents humanity's original imaginative enthusiasm for the world". (Ibid.) This outlook is completely opposed by William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* in which "he described the nightmarish adventures of a group of English school boys stranded on from a state of innocence to blood lust and savagery" (The Columbia Encyclopedia:19820).

Vaidyanathan proclaims that Golding's *Lord of the Flies* explores his belief that loss of innocence does not depend on one's age. Wherever civilization exists, man remains innocent and ignorant about his true nature, but whenever this civilization slips away, man goes back to the most primitive part of his nature. (Vaidyanathan:35). In fact, William Golding through *Lord of the Flies* opposes the popular and the influential beliefs of the philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau who mainly believes that children are born with pure instincts, which are corrupted by the greed and materialism of civilization, as they become adults.

What Golding believes in is embodied through the skilful portrayal of characters whose varieties of personalities stand for the varieties of humankind as a whole. In other words, *Lord of the Flies* is the conflict between man's instinct nature of savagery and the rules of civilization, which are designed to limit and minimize such nature.

Throughout the novel, this conflict is dramatized by the clash between Ralph and Jack, who respectively represent civilization versus savagery. Their contrasted ideologies are expressed by each boy's distinct attitudes towards authority. Vaidyanathan argues that

"Ralf is the symbol of rational, but fallible, mankind. He tries to establish an ordered society, based on rulers, authority, and knowledge; but he struggles against the forces of evil throughout the book"(Ibid:.37). While Ralph uses his authority to establish rules, protect the good of the group, and enforce the moral and ethical codes of the English society, which the boys were raised in, Jack is interested in gaining power over the other boys to gratify his most primal impulses.

Ralph is one of those schoolchildren on that deserted tropical island. From the very beginning of the novel Ralph is described as strong as "a boxer" with "golden body", and there is " a mildness about his mouth and eyes that proclaimed no devil". Golding intentionally chooses to portray Ralph with such features in order to reflect his innocence, which is embodied in his strong believe that his father will come "to rescue" him. (Kirstin Olsen:10). Moreover, Ralph is symbolically portrayed to be likable, because the civilization and the good that he stands for are likable.

Though Golding shows his reader how Ralph possesses the innocence of childhood, he at the same time and at the same level makes the reader sense Ralph's maturity: "We got to find the others. We got to do something."(Golding:15). Ralph's intention of doing something is achieved when he finds the conch. He blows the conch and summons the deserted children together:

More and more of them came. Taking their cue from the innocent Johnny, they sat down on the fallen palm trunks and waited. Ralph continued to blow short, penetrating

blasts....The children gave him the same simple obedience that they had given to the men with megaphones (Ibid:19)

Ralph's maturity, order, civilization, democracy, and his thought of law are elaborated when he suggests certain rules through which he tries to preserve the civilized living principles among the boys. The first rule that he suggests is to have a chief by voting: "Seems to me we ought to have a chief to decide things.....Let's have a vote." (Ibid:23). After Ralph's election as the chief, he establishes rules of speaking. When anyone of the boys wants to speak, he must have the conch. Another thing which Ralph decides when he becomes a leader is to seek way for rescue by setting a signal fire for attracting a passing ship, and to build some sort of shelter. Ralph's rules symbolically stand for an establishment of a government or as Vaidyanathan suggests, "as a society with rules begins to form on the island" (Vaidyanathan:52).

At the beginning Ralph is obeyed by all the boys especially Jack who says:

I agree with Ralph. We 've got to have rules and obey them. 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 (Golding:47)

As the events of the novel develop, Ralph fails to keep Jack as an ally , fails to prove himself as a leader or a chief, and the rules which he set have no effect. Olsen states "Ralph appears to be the chief but has no actual power, only a slight influence that ultimately dissipates. He cannot force the boys to build shelters or to keep the fire lit,..."(Olsen:11)

The power of savagery is what Ralph does not have while Jack owns it. From the beginning of the story, Jack claims to hunt for meat—a matter as Olsen believes is synonymous with violence and unlike Ralph, Jack is a grand master of manipulation and public image. Almost everything he does, whether by instinct or calculation, increases his power over the boys. (Ibid:12)

Jack's desire to hunt pigs expresses his desire for shedding blood. He wants to experience the pleasure of conquest and killing more than eating meat as he recalls, "He has outwitted a living thing, imposed their will upon it, and taken away its life like a satisfying drink".(Golding: 76.). Day after day, the evil of Jack begins to reveal itself as well as its true face. He paints his face as well as the faces of his followers with black- the colour of their dark heart and with red-the colour of the blood they desirably shed. Day after day, Jack and his followers (hunters) are detached from any tie of civilization, and humanity. They become completely possessed by bloodlust, and violence to the degree that killing pigs does no more satisfy them. They exceed killing pigs to murder those who one day were their friends like Simon, Piggy, and nearly Ralph, who at the end of the novel and when he is rescued weeps, "for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy"(Golding:223) . In fact, the character of Jack depicts the power of evil when it elopes from the prison of humanity at the hand of lust. This power is just like a beast, when it controls man; he loses the value of his humanity and he turns to be almost like animal. In conclusion, Golding showed his readers what most of the world may not realize, that innocence is

perhaps the most important thing in the world that no one ever has forever.

The Use of Symbolism in *Lord of the Flies*

Paulette Michel Michot is reasonable when he says, "Golding works out his themes by means of symbols" (Michot: 176) for the use of symbolism in any fictional work is not a mere decorative technique. It is used either to depict a certain theme or to draw certain qualities of certain characters. In *Lord of the Flies*, William Golding displays the two different personalities that humanity possesses; one civilized, and another primitive, by using the setting, personalities, and imagery to give the reader a detailed description of these two faces of man.

The island where the events are set works as a metaphor for the world. Vaidyanathan suggests that: "The boys are trapped on the island as we are trapped on this planet. What happens there becomes a commentary on our world" (Vaidyanathan:18). The island is shaped like a boat. Ironically, the island where the children are trapped on is shaped exactly like the thing that could save them (a boat): "It was roughly boat-shaped: humped near this end with behind them the jumbled descent to the shore" (Golding:31)

The ocean by which the island is surrounded stands for the boundary between civilization and primitiveness. The ocean makes the boys sail deeply inside themselves to discover what is there inside. The island and its jungle take the role of a microscope, which enables one to see things he can never see by his abstract eyes. There on the island the boys confront the power of evil, which is embodied in the beast they imagined.

When the boys kill the pig, they think they kill the beast. They hang down the head of the pig on a stick, and day after day, the flies begin to gather on that head in such a disgusting way. Hence, from this picture, the title of the novel is derived. Moreover, "Lord of the Flies" is the English translation of the Greek word "Beelzebub", which means "devil".(G.C Thornley: 151). Vaidyanathan confirms that when he says: "The pig's head is a symbol of Satan, but this devil is not an external force, but rather an internal evil created by the boys themselves" (Vaidyanathan:81) When Simon sees the head of the Pig in the jungle , he begins to hear the voice of Satan:

"Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill! Said the head. For a moment or two the forest and all the other dimly appreciated places echoed with the parody of laughter. "You knew, didn't you? I'm part of you? Close, close, close! I'm the reason why it's no go? Why things are what they are?" (Golding:158)

The existence of Lord of the Flies (Satan) inside the boys begins to expand "like a balloon" more and more, until the pressure of this balloon kills the last breath of their innocence:

Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!"...Simon was crying out something about a dead man on the hill. The sticks fell and the mouth of the new circle crunched and screamed. The beast was on its knees in the centre, its arms folded over its face... The beast struggled forward, broke the ring and fell over the steep edge of the rock to the sand by the

water. At once the crowd surged after it, poured down the rock, leapt on to the beast, screamed, struck, bit, tore. There were no words, and no movements but the tearing of teeth and claws.... Only the beast lay still, a few yards from the sea. Even in the rain they could see how small a beast it was; and already its blood was staining the sand (Golding:168).

Civilization and primitiveness lead an apparent battle against each other in *Lord of the Flies*. Weapons of civilization are the conch, the signal fire, and Piggy's glasses. The conch, which Ralph and his friend Piggy discover in the lagoon and use to call the children to assemblies, is a symbol of order and communication, and civilization. Whenever the boys hear the sound of the conch, they gather and become a group, and being a group means thinking together and civilization. Michot explains that when the boys can think together, they can be called away from primitiveness towards awareness and civilization. (Michot:50). Moreover, as Vaidyanathan suggests the conch is "an actual vessel of political legitimacy and democratic power." (Vaidyanathan:39). What Vaidyanathan suggests may remind one of the parliaments. If any member of the parliament wants to speak, he has to have the loudspeaker in order to be heard. In the same way the boys cannot speak unless they have the conch.

Piggy' glasses is another weapon of civilization. It stands for the power of knowledge and science. The boys use Piggy's glasses to focus the light of the sun in order to start a fire. When Jack's followers steal Piggy's glasses they leave Ralph and his followers helpless.

The last weapon of civilization is the fire by which the boys want to attract the attention of any passing ship. This fire is the medium by which Golding measures the boy's connection to civilization. Whenever there is fire there is a desire of the boys to be rescued and return to their civilized England. Paul Crawford believes that: "the signal fire thus functions as a kind of measurement of the strength of the civilized instinct remaining on the island" (Paul Crawford: 60). The fire that brings the rescue for the children at the end of the novel ironically is the fire of their savagery. The end of the novel shows how Jack starts a big fire in the forest as a deep and strong savagery desire to catch and kill Ralph. This fire of savagery brings the conflict between civilization and primitiveness, good and evil to its end. It ends with Ralph's tears who weeps for the death of innocence and humanity. It ends when the boys are rescued and when they reach the climax of understanding the nature of their humanity.

Conclusion

Lord of the Flies is Golding's theory of man's inherited nature. The savagery and primitiveness of human nature will reveal itself when the restraints of civilization are missing. In other words, laws and rules are definitely necessary to keep the darker side of human nature in line. When all elements of civilization disappear on the island, the boys revert to a more primitive part of their nature, and they turn into savages and anarchy replaces democracy.

Golding confirms his theory by using symbolic fictional elements like characterization, setting, and action. Each of these

elements implies certain contradictories. As an instance, Ralph is the contrast character of Jack. The fire and the conch are the contradicts of Lord of the Flies, and building shelters stand against hunting.

The moral message which Golding delivers in *Lord of the Flies* is that society holds everyone together, and with civilization and rules, man's ideals, values, and basic ideas of what is right and wrong are set, to stand strongly against the emergence of human's evil nature.

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