

Paper 4, Module 12: Text

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Lord of the Flies

1.1 William Golding: An Introduction

Sir William Gerald Golding (1911-1993) is a versatile legend who is famous for his evocative style and haunting themes. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1983 and has acquired various accolades throughout his literary career. His novels bear testimony to his preoccupation with human nature and its intricate nuances. His works try to capture the elusive motives that drive an individual into conflict with his environment. Golding's major novels are *Lord of the Flies* (1954), *The Inheritors* (1955), *Pincher Martin* (1956), *Free Fall* (1959), *The Spire* (1964), *Darkness Visible* (1979), *Rites of Passage* (1980), *Close Quarters* (1987) and *Fire Down Below* (1989).

Golding's novels often focus on the sheer depravity staining the human soul. Though most of his works have disturbing themes, they illustrate a deeper reality that one cannot choose to ignore. The Nobel Committee commented on the uniqueness of his perspective and said that his works "with the perspicacity of realistic narrative art and the diversity and universality of myth, illuminate the human conditions in the world of today."

1.2 *Lord of the Flies*: An Introduction to the Novel

Lord of the Flies is rightly acknowledged to be Golding's masterpiece because of the barrage of pertinent questions it raises regarding human nature and its potential for physical and psychological savagery. The novel displays an astute perspective as it comments on man's innate capacity for cruelty. It tackles the popular stereotype of "the innocent child" and demonstrates how even children assimilate the legacy of our inherent predilection for evil. Golding's dystopic vision of human nature and its atavistic potential for barbarity garnered a great deal of negative publicity as it dealt with a topic that had hitherto been sidelined in mainstream culture.

Golding raises a multitude of crucial issues that try to throw light on the cardinal motives that govern human conscience. The novel disputes the romantic ideal of human nobility in the face of

adversity. Earlier works like R.M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1858) has a very similar plot but its perspective focuses on the innocence of youth and the superiority of Western culture. However, Golding inverts this popular image when he depicts a chilling scenario where marooned British boys enforce their sadistic and perverse fantasies on their hapless victims. The novel problematizes dichotomous concepts like individual will and herd mentality; morality and savagery; the will to dominate and the urge to follow. The dialectical debate that the work provokes with its emphasis on man's regression into savagery ensures its place among modern classics.

1.3 Allegory

Allegory is a popular literary device that is used to convey a secondary level of signification other than the primary level of meaning, through symbolic figures or events. The two levels combine to create a deeper level of signification that the author wishes to impart. Often in an allegory, the primary level of meaning is literal and can be understood directly without any other reference. The secondary level of signification is often hidden and only a close perusal of the characters or action will reveal its latent possibilities. Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and George Orwell's *Animal Farm* are some among the famous allegories in literature.

Allegory is often used by writers to enrich their literary cosmos by making it multidimensional. This device is also used to project the author's moral or political perspective in a veiled manner. Characters in allegory generally become personifications of abstract ideals like virtues and vices, moral perspectives, religious tenets and so on. Imagery is highly relevant in an allegory as it serves to heighten the allegorical significance of a particular situation or event. Most religious texts offer ample examples for allegory as they often emphasise a latent level of meaning as well.

1.3.1 *Lord of the Flies* as an Allegory

In *Lord of the Flies*, Golding projects his own allegorical vision of the modern world. The novel's backdrop is a world that is in the dreadful grip of a nuclear war. The boys are marooned on the island in the process of their evacuation from a war-ridden place. The war ravaged background allegorically signifies a world of horror and destruction that the children are familiar with. In the course of the novel, Golding depicts how such savagery finds its reverberations deep in the psyche of young children as well. However as L. L. Dickinson aptly suggests, "The novel does not imply that children, without the disciplined control of adults, will turn into savages; on the contrary, it dramatizes the real nature of all humans. The nightmare world, which quickly develops on the island, parallels the destruction of the outside world through atomic warfare" (12-13). As the novel begins, the island is endowed with an Edenic grace which slowly metamorphoses into a sinister atmosphere that forms the ideal setting for the brutality espoused by the boys. However, Golding does not animate Nature and depicts clearly how it is overshadowed by the savagery of the boys. The benign and idyllic natural setting is corrupted into a harsh and unforgiving landscape by the evil inside the boys.

Golding's microcosm of the island closely mirrors the adult world wherein war and terror have destroyed the remnants of human kindness. As the novel ends, Ralph is saved by a Naval officer who is at once amused by the "fun and games" (LF 228) of the boys and preoccupied by the blatant reality of the adult world where warfare is an everyday normal occurrence. He is lost in the quagmire of his own sinister reality that he does not notice the viciousness of the young boys that he had rescued. Rather than assessing the truth of their situation, he seeks to bury it in references to the idyllic adventures like that essayed in *The Coral Island* (LF 230). Golding here presents a character who refuses to recognise the allegorical representation of his own war-torn world that is reflected in the children's island. This gesture of the officer can be symbolically taken as a rejection of a reality that one is not comfortable with.

The various characters in the novel also become allegorical agents representing particular human traits. Ralph, the protagonist symbolises order and democracy. From the very outset, he

thinks about escape routes and building shelters. He stands for the higher instinct of fair play and tries to sustain communal harmony. He is also an idealist who does not understand the baser instincts of the other boys. As Ralph's influence wanes in the narrative, there is a concomitant change in the perspective of the boys as well. Their whole attitude becomes more bestial and harsh as they gradually come under the influence of Jack, the antagonist of the narrative. He represents the destructive principle and stands for the innate savage in every human being. His ruthless and megalomaniacal quest for power indicates the base excesses of human nature. It can be argued that Jack embodies the pleasure principle or Id whereas Ralph stands for the reality principle or Ego. Simon and Piggy both become symbols of the morality principle or Super Ego as they worry constantly about the rules governing the society of boys.

Simon is also an allegorical representation of Christ as he is the saviour figure in the narrative and yearns for peace and harmony. He represents an innate spirituality that often finds a resonance in the tranquillity offered by Nature. Like Christ, he too is killed by the others for attempting to convey the truth. Piggy is the intellectual of the group who symbolises the rational and logical self. He is a pragmatist who tries to logically analyse the plight of the boys. When he is cruelly murdered by Roger, Golding demonstrates how our innate savagery strangles the voice of reason. Roger, Jack's close associate, is a sadistic and perverse boy who represents the most malevolent aspects of human nature. Jack's rule offers Roger the chance to unleash his demonic nature and he readily pounces on the chance.

Samneric (Sam and Eric), the identical twins become the allegorical representation of civilized society. They try to behave civilly under the leadership of Ralph but when faced with Jack's unmitigated savagery, they shift their loyalties. The big boys in the group, along with Samneric stand for crowd mentality. They shift their loyalties in relation to the undercurrents of power. They are also indicative of the ruling class who change their loyalties according to the changes at the power centre. The little boys in the novel symbolically represent the masses who prefer being led. They do not have a distinct perspective and are quickly swayed by the rhetoric of those in power. Thus Golding's novel teems with characters and settings that are enriched by their allegorical dimensions. *Lord of the Flies* tries to hold a mirror to contemporary society

which has degraded humanity to the level of crass bestiality. Golding's pessimistic cosmos is shaped by his own disheartened vision of the modern, war-ridden world. Nevertheless, through his creative cosmos, Golding tries to make the contemporary world aware of its shortcomings. And as Dickinson rightly comments, "If *Lord of the Flies* "teaches" through its moral allegory, it is the lesson of self-awareness" (26).

1.4 Biblical Allusions in *Lord of the Flies*

Lord of the Flies can also be seen as a Biblical allegory; a work that is rich in its religious connotations. The unnamed island which acts as the setting of the novel becomes an archetype of the Biblical Eden in its pristine beauty and vitality. The initial innocence of the boys can be compared to the state of Adam and Eve before their fall from grace. The carefree idyll is shattered when the boys are corrupted by the influence of the Lord of the Flies (Beelzebub) who represents the serpent in Eden. However, Golding does not posit this evil as an external agent and highlights the fact that evil resides within the boys. The Lord of the Flies or the sow's head on a stick becomes an external manifestation of the bestiality that lurks within human beings.

Golding's narrative is preoccupied with the concepts of good and evil. The novel tries to analyse man's predisposition towards the notion of evil and how an individual is inevitably drawn to a natural state of sin, once freed from the fetters of civilisation. In this aspect, Golding's narrative differs from the Biblical idea of evil as there is no external agent to lure the boys in *Lord of the Flies*. The Eden in the novel is corrupted not by the beast but by the innate evil residing in the hearts of the boys.

Many critics have identified Simon as the Christ figure in the narrative. Of all the boys, he alone comprehends the "truth" of the beast and he is tortured and killed cruelly for trying to reveal the truth. From the outset of the narrative, Simon is carefully depicted as a spiritual symbol; one who is compassionate and introspective. He also appears to be in communion with Nature and this enhances his image as the saviour. Simon's actions in the narrative closely mirror many Biblical incidents. He is the only boy who is troubled by the presence of evil within the group. Though

Ralph is concerned about Jack's excessive love for hunting, he does not comprehend the truth like Simon. Kirstin Olsen comments on the similarities between Simon and Christ and says, "Simon, like Christ being subjected to the mocking reverence of Pilate's men, is ridiculed by the boys, who call him "batty" and "cracked". Most significantly, in the very act of bringing the truth of the beast's nature to the boys, he is mistaken for the beast and executed" (127).

Simon's encounter with the Lord of the Flies is reminiscent of Christ's conversation with the devil in the wilderness. While Christ attains victory over the devil, Simon cannot boast of such a claim as he realises that the evil he is trying to fight is within their hearts. Though he comprehends its real nature, he is helpless to act against it. Therefore, one may even perceive Simon as a defeated Saviour who is not able to realise his spiritual potential. The evil mocks him and warns him of his dire fate and he is left with no option but to run. Nevertheless, his spiritual fortitude urges him to warn his friends and it is during this attempt that he is murdered viciously. Simon thus dies for no fault of his own but his sacrifice does not liberate the other boys from their state of sin. Instead it reinforces the social schism straining the lives of the boys. His death aggravates their collective guilt and they perform more savage acts so as to exorcise its memory from their minds.

The title of the novel is also steeped in Biblical allusions as the eponymous Lord of the Flies is a reference to Beelzebub. As the novel progresses, the young boys become increasingly dirty and violent and soon become fit subjects for the grotesque Lord of the Flies. In the narrative, Beelzebub is the "beast" whose physical manifestation is the sow's head impaled on a stick and covered with flies. Jack and his gang venerate the Beast and try to assuage its lust for blood. Simon is the lone figure who fights against the lure of the beast. His conversation with the Beast is captured in a surrealistic passage that highlights his helplessness and heightened awareness. The Beast says to Simon, " '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?' " (LF 161-62)

The boys never realise that the Beast within them have captured their wills and like misguided people, they fail to grasp the deplorable cycle in which they are trapped. The little boys “imagine” the Beast quite early in the narrative. They conjure the image of “snakes” (LF 48), “twisting things” (LF 92) and all these abstract fears are concretised in the figure of the sow’s head. Jack and Roger, the chief agents of evil become devil incarnates as they lure the boys to their side by insidiously manipulating their unnamed fears. The narrative reaches a culmination when the erring boys are jolted into awareness of the adult world by the Naval officer. Ralph weeps for the “end of Innocence” (LF 230) and this cry echoes the primordial wail of the Biblical man as his Eden is lost forever. Ralph’s Eden thus becomes a state of being; one wherein he cherished the ideals of innocence and purity. As the novel comes to an end, this idyllic Eden is lost to the boys and there is no promise of redemption as they have murdered their saviour.

1.5 Intertextuality

Intertextuality refers to the manifold ways in which a text’s meaning is moulded by the influences exerted by the other texts and authors. Richard Nordquist defines it as “the interdependent ways in which texts stand in relation to one another (as well as the culture at large) to produce meanings.” The term was coined by Julia Kristeva in the 1960s. Allusions, quotations, pastiche and parody are some of the figures associated with intertextuality. The central idea of intertextuality is that a work’s relationship with other texts is equally important in its evolution as an independent piece of art. “Intertextuality is . . . a way of accounting for the role of literary and extra-literary materials without recourse to traditional notions of authorship. It subverts the concept of the text as self-sufficient, hermetic totality, foregrounding, in its stead the fact that all literary production takes place in the presence of other texts; they are in effect, palimpsests” (Christopher Keep et al.).

Intertexts always stand in relation to one another and the reader is invited to share the cultural and social awareness of the author. There are several ways in which intertextuality can occur and the most common form is one wherein there is a brief or prolonged reference to a literary text in

another literary work. The author can use the title or characters or even scenes from another text and use it to enhance the cultural signification of his work. Tracy Lemaster comments that, “Intertextuality can create a simultaneous re-reading of both the primary book and its intertext. This involves a back-and-forth re-reading of each text based on what their similarities and differences reveal about one another.” The act of re-reading reveals newer permutations of signifiers, both literary and cultural. These new levels of significations reveal newer perspectives that lead to greater comprehension.

1.5.1 Intertextuality in *Lord of the Flies*

Golding’s narrative of stranded boys resorting to savagery becomes all the more disturbing when seen in the light of earlier adventure texts like Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island*, R. L. Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* and Arthur Ransome’s *Swallows and Amazons* which celebrate the exuberance and innocence of youth. Golding’s novel can be viewed as an intertext of *The Coral Island* as both are shaped in the similar mould of adventure narrative. However, in *Lord of the Flies*, the boys’ initial joy as they try to celebrate their presence on the pristine island foreshadows the savagery that is to follow. Ralph and the boys anticipate that their presence on the island will be one filled with delightful adventures like those found in the adventure stories they are familiar with (LF 34). This eager note of anticipation is soon cast aside when the evil in the boys slowly unfurls itself. In order to enhance the novel’s comparison with *The Coral Island*, Golding retains the names of two of Ballantyne’s characters, Ralph and Jack. While Ballantyne’s Jack is an absolute gentleman in his comportment, Golding’s Jack becomes the antagonist; one who unleashes the power of the Beast within the boys. Golding’s subversion of the English classic highlights his attempt to examine the dominant narratives of human behavior and psychology. The cruelty of the boys in *Lord of the Flies* form a stark contrast with the cloying innocence portrayed in *The Coral Island*. In Ballantyne’s narrative, evil is externalised and conveniently cast aside in

the savagery of the non-western natives. Golding, on the other hand, views it as a brooding and potent force that resides in all human beings.

Golding's dystopic creative cosmos offers a critique of Ballantyne's naïve and implausibly optimistic narrative that idealises human nature. The names of the characters are retained so as to indicate a deeper parallel between the two divergent worlds depicted in the novels. This contrast is ironically presented at the end of the narrative when the Naval officer who is unaware of the events that had transpired on the island unwittingly says, "Jolly good show. Like *The Coral Island*" (LF 230). Through this gauche and misplaced comment Golding explores the shallowness of idyllic stories which masks human nature by eulogising its finer aspects and negating its savagery. The officer's expectation of ideal behaviour from British youth is also ironically projected as a construct that had been created to further the Imperialist design. Golding's novel thus becomes an ironical re-reading of stereotypical portraiture. And as James R. Baker aptly points out, "Ballantyne, . . . is a fabulist who asks us to believe that the evolution of affairs on his coral island models or reflects the adult world, a world in which men are unfailingly reasonable, co-operative, loving and lovable. . . . In choosing to parody and invert this image, Golding posits a reality the tradition has generally denied" (xiv).

1.6 An Analysis of Major Themes, Motifs and Symbols

1.6.1 The Innate Savagery of Man

Perhaps the most important theme in *Lord of the Flies* is man's innate savagery and the restraining influence that culture plays in our lives. According to Golding, the novel tries "to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human nature" (qtd. in Baker xv). Thus the essential tragedy is wrought not by the savagery of the boys but by the flawed and yet fascinating human nature. Canonical literature has by and large focused on the nobility of human endeavour and Golding disputes this stereotype by emphasising the dichotomy between man's savage instincts

and the refinement imposed by culture. The novel focuses on man's overwhelming instinct for barbarity when freed from the confines of civilization. Ralph, Piggy and Simon symbolise the spirit of order, culture and democracy. Jack and Roger, on the other hand, represent man's primal urges. As the narrative progresses, there is a marked shift in power politics and most of the boys choose to side with Jack. They paint their bodies and hide the shame imposed by culture behind their masks of bestiality. The temptation represented by Jack's anarchic life style proves too strong to be resisted and most of the boys join him despite their moral qualms. Golding thus projects man's nature as inherently evil and susceptible to savage yearnings.

The novel also examines the ease with which the boys adapt to their barbaric nature. The veneer of culture is cast aside once the world of adult supervision seems like a distant mirage. The instinct for evil emerges as a primal force that easily overpowers the voice of reason. The brutal murders of Simon and Piggy hint at the hidden amorality that resides within the boys' psyches. These murders fail to move their sympathies as they are visibly excited and eagerly look forward to their next killing. Human morality is posited as a "construct" that is nurtured by the codes of civilization. The mythical Lord of the Flies becomes the most prominent symbol of savagery in the novel. The beast is represented by the head of a sow which had been killed in an extremely brutal manner. The intense bloodlust provoked by the violent killing of the sow is manifested more aggressively in Simon's murder. Ralph and his ideal of culture becomes a threat to the savage world of the boys and it is for this reason that they try to hunt him down like a pig. The conflict between culture and nature reaches its pinnacle when Ralph is chased by the vicious hunters who seek to assert their rule. Ralph's rescue does not offer any solace as he understands "the darkness of man's heart" (LF 230) and realises that there is no escape from it.

1.6.2 Lord of the Flies: The Evil Within

Lord of the Flies raises several pertinent questions regarding the nature of evil and its genesis in the human psyche. Golding tries to analyse the crucial concept of evil through a socio-political prism that disputes the idea of man's innate nobility. Though the beast of evil is titled as Lord of

the Flies, Golding makes it emphatically clear that man's inherent affinity for evil is by no means supernatural. The myth of the beast is carefully cultivated so as to disguise the boys' violent acts behind a mask of self-righteousness. Their belief becomes stronger with each act of violence and the beast becomes a receptacle to vent their pent up savagery. The symbol of beast regenerates into a new God and gradually evolves into a totem of murder and mayhem. In the novel, the instinct for evil is placed as one that governs man's savage desires and the boys' self-induced paranoia only urges them further in their repudiation of cultural norms.

Nevertheless, the pessimistic tone of the narrative is tempered by the presence of characters like Ralph, Piggy and Simon who symbolise man's capacity to fight evil. They do not embrace their darker side like the rest of the boys and assiduously cling to the societal and moral norms that govern human behavior in a civilized society. Though they constitute the minority, they are steadfast in their adherence to rules and committed to the concept of "what's right's right" (LF 195). Ralph's survival at the end of the narrative also represents a victory; albeit a minor one.

Golding also examines the social evolution of evil as the novel is set in the backdrop of a nuclear war which necessitates the evacuation of the boys. The background of war and violence critiques the nature of evil exhibited by the boys. Are they mimicking the actions and attitudes of the adult world or are they conditioned by a world which advocates meaningless violence? The ending of the narrative remains ambivalent as the Naval officer who rescues Ralph and the boys seem to be preoccupied with the war raging on in his world. As his eyes "rest on the trim cruiser in the distance" (LF 230), the narrative is again left open-ended. Though Ralph is given a brief respite from the ordeals he faced on the island, there is no escape from the larger question of violence as he is returning to a world ruined by the ravages of war.

1.6.3 Symbols of Civilization

The conch shell represents the spirit of democracy. It stands for man's reasoning faculty and functions as an ordering principle. When Ralph and Piggy find the conch shell, they use it to summon the other boys and it bestows a sense of legitimacy to their endeavours as only the boy who holds the shell is given the privilege to speak. It becomes a symbol of democratic power and

it can be noticed that though Ralph is comfortable wielding its influence, Jack is vexed by its presence right from the beginning. As the rift between the boys becomes prominent, the conch shell also loses its significance. Ralph and Piggy try to cling on to the vestiges of democratic ideals by insisting on the shell's significance but Jack and his group constantly derides its authority. And when Piggy is brutally crushed by a rock, the conch is also destroyed, thereby annihilating all traces of culture from the island. The destruction of the conch shell heralds complete anarchy which is mirrored in the ensuing hunt for Ralph.

The signal fire, like the conch shell is another symbol for the values represented by civilization. In the beginning, the boys diligently maintain the fire with an intention of attracting the attention of ships passing by. The fire signifies their fervent desire to escape from the island and return to civilization. However, as their innate savagery asserts itself, the desire for a "return" vanishes gradually. Apart from Ralph and Piggy, all the others are content enacting the roles of little savages and are no longer interested in denouncing the nascent power of their bestiality. As the signal fire peters out, it leaves chaos in its wake.

Piggy's glasses, which are used to start the fire, become a symbol of rational thinking and scientific spirit. The ability to start the fire bestows on it an additional potency; one that is coveted by all the boys. The power politics in the narrative revolves around the ownership of the glasses. While Ralph and Piggy harness this power to appeal to the voice of reason, later Jack and his gang steal it in a blatant display of the principle of the survival of the fittest.

1.7 Conclusion

As the principles of logic and order slowly crumble, the island descends into a state of paranoia where the boys are driven by a savage bloodlust. Fear becomes the predominant emotion in a society that is governed by sheer force and ruthlessness. The fear of the unknown slowly manifests in a blinding frenzy that spurs them to torture and murder their own friends. Ralph's impassioned "speech" on the importance of order becomes superfluous in a society that is governed by Jack's "silent" savagery. Instead of the rhetoric of words, Jack prefers the

brutishness of silent cruelty and the voice of reason is forcibly silenced. Golding thus shows how dialogue becomes impotent in a lawless society where the voice of reason is no longer heeded. And in the anarchic universe of the boys, words become meaningless as it is the savagery of action that proves more effective in the comprehension of the language of fear.

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