

THEMATIC EVALUATION OF THE NOVEL “LORD OF THE FLIES”

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ABSTRACT

This research study is an attempt to assess thematically the underlying ideas implied by the novel *Lord of the Flies*. The novel realistically reflects the social and cultural human conditions of the contemporary time. It revolves around the idea of the evil inherent specifically in human and in society at large. The author is of the view that man by nature is evil. It is the cult of civilization which thwarts that evil from emerging. In addition to, the author has interwoven a variety of thematic interests including, the emergence of evil, loss of civilization, the motif of power, the fate of the intellectual, the uncertainty of life, symbolic manifestations and the essence of pessimism.

KEYWORDS: Golding, Lord, Flies, Evil, Thematic, Evaluation, Civilization, Motif

INTRODUCTION

The English Nobel laureate, Sir William Gerald Golding (1911-1993) got his first novel, *Lord of the Flies* published in 1954. Like many other contemporary novelists Golding is also influenced by the annihilation and aftermaths of the Second World War. The novelist creates a microcosm dominated by the evil impulses inherent in human beings. The novel tells us the story of the marooned English schoolboys, probably aged between six and twelve who have got scattered on a fictitious island far off in the Pacific Ocean, as a result of an air crash which occurred during an evacuation of the boys from the nuclear war that had broken out in Europe. This coral island is uninhabited and unnamed. The schoolboys thus become the only inhabitants of the island. Somehow, they succeed in organizing themselves on the island. We first meet Ralph who discovers a conch which he blows on the advice of Piggy. Consequently, all the boys on the island get together. Jack wants to become leader of the boys but instead Ralph is elected as the leader. With this Jack comes on the warpath. All the boys divide into two hostile groups. One group including Piggy, Simon and Sam and Eric, the twins are led by Ralph who is representative of the principle of good. Ralph blows the conch. Builds shelters, stresses on the lighting of the fire on the top of the mountain and hopes to be rescued. On the other hand, Roger, Maurice and Robert are led by Jack who represents evil in the novel. They are always after hunting. Thus from the very beginning, the seed of rivalry is sown that would come out in course of time in the form of viciousness and homicide. With the death of Piggy and Simon, Ralph remains all alone. Sam and Eric are also forced to side with Jack. The vengeful Jack and his merciless group being in pursuit of Ralph set all the forest on fire. Eventually, when the skirmishes are out of control, Ralph tumbles down on the sea beach where the naval officer sailing by gets hold of them. The naval officer takes them back to their homeland.

Lord of the Flies may be classified as a thesis novel, sociological novel or allegorical novel. It calls our attention to the evil inherent in human nature in particular and in the society at large. It symbolically reflects the author's notion of the breakdown of civilization and the ultimate triumph of evil over the good. Indu Kulkarni, in his *The Novels of William*

Golding puts this phenomenon as; “Golding presents the conflict between good and evil with the intention of reforming human nature like most other allegorists” thus the author’s purpose is reformatory and wants to attract the attention of the contemporary masses to the ills of the society. In the words of Indu Kulkarni, “Golding examines the phenomena of social rebels, deviant behavior, terrorism and chaos symptomatic of a diseased society, unloving, inhuman and intolerant”. Ralph, Piggy and Simon who are said to be representative of the principle of good while Jack, Roger Robert and even Maurice are the embodiments of evil in the novel. As the story progresses, most of the characters forget about their civilized behaviors and turn into savages. The Jack’s tribe overpowers that of the Ralph. Consequently, Simon and Piggy are also put to death. Even the conch, the symbol of authority, democracy and discipline is also smashed.

THEMATIC EVALUATION

The Emergence of Evil

“Without the bounds of civilization, without an imbedded natural morality, the boys regress. Ralph’s initial leadership is marred by his uncertainty and inadequacy” (Encyclopedia of Censorship, p 331). William Golding is of the view that evil is an intrinsic part of human being and that it gradually comes into view when he is put in a natural and unrestricted milieu. In the very start of the novel, obviously there seems to be no evil on the island. All the boys were in a state of euphoria when they found themselves away from the adult supervision. We can hear the words “Sche-aa-owl” and “Whizzoh” from their mouths. In the words of the author, “A storm of laughter arose and even the tiniest child joined in; they laughed and tumbled and shouted on the mountain,” (LOF, p 23 & 32). As the story moves along, the evil comes to the surface in most of the major characters with the exception of Ralph and Piggy who are said to be the bright side of humanity in the novel. When Ralph is elected as leader of the boys, a sort of antagonism arises between Ralph and Jack. It is out of this ill will that Jack becomes an evil incarnate. Although, at the school he used to be the symbol of discipline and the in charge of the Choir-boys, but on the island he becomes so relentless that he sets the entire island on fire.

The killing of two innocent figures, Simon and Piggy, indicates the culmination of emerging evils in the novel. The first two episodes of mock-hunt put forth a kind of prelude to the death of Simon. During the third mock-hunt, Golding describes the death of Simon as,

-----The beast (Simon) was on its knees in the centre, its arms folded over its face. It was crying out against the abominable noise something about a body on the hill. 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.

(LOF, Chapter 9, p 168)

As Simon was coming out of the forest to inform the boys about the dead body of a man on the top of the hill. The hunters thought of him to be the beast, stabbed him with their spears and thus put him to death. Similarly, the way for the Piggy’s death is also paved when the blood thirsty Roger being out of his sanity, pushed down a huge rock which struck Piggy on the head and killed him on the spot.

Loss of Civilization

“*Lord of the Flies* is a philosophical allegory about the nature of evil and the precariousness of civilization”.

(Ifor Evans, p 363) Golding has explicitly revived the notion of an English philosopher Thomas Hobbes who says that man in a state of nature would be corrupt, brutal and antisocial. He suggests that civilization provides us with a kind of sanctuary where we can peacefully promote our social values. When this veil of civilization is taken away, man morally and socially degenerates and his brutal qualities come to the surface. This deterioration and loss of social values increasingly appears in *Lord of the Flies*. As soon as the boys find that they are on the island, they immediately start thinking about the constructive activities. They call the assemblies, lay down rules, assign duties, making huts and so forth. Long before, they find themselves indulged in destructive activities. They start throwing stones, calling names and even killing each other. Jack out of his negligence, discontinues his duty of lighting fire on top of the mountain. It is in the absence of social taboos that the mock-hunt turns into the pig-hunt and ultimately into the man-hunt. Being unaware of their action, Simon is killed by the frenzied hunters. Similarly, the lighting of fire, the only hope of rescue is transformed into the burning of the entire forest.

The character of Ralph has been fortified by Golding as an astute politician of the Post War era, who is sanguine about the future of the boys. Ralph strongly believes that one day they would be rescued from the island. Even the Ralph's unconscious has also apprehended the loss of civilized life on the island. One night, when he was sleeping in his hut, he dreamed about the life he once used to enjoy in England. Golding has exquisitely given an account of that childish experience in the following words.

Supposing they could be transported home by yet, then before morning
they would land at that big airfield in Wiltshire. They would go by car;
no, for things to be perfect they would go by train; all the way down to
Devon and take that cottage again. Then at the foot of the garden the
wild ponies would come and look over the wall.....

(LOF, Chapter 10, p 181)

Contrasting with that ingenuous phenomenon undergone by Ralph, we can hear a desperate cry from the Ralph's mouth when he finds himself fallen at the feet of the naval officer. Tears rolled down from his innocent cheeks when Ralph looked at the officer and his friends around him. This state of nostalgia reminded him of that nasty game they had played on the coral island.

Ralph looked at him 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—His voice rose under the black smock
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.

(LOF, Chapter 12, p 223)

The Motif of Power

Almost all the principal characters in *Lord of the Flies* seem to possess in a way, a gifted power. They may be termed as the embodiments of different powers existing within a society.

Golding has attributed democratic power with Ralph. On the island, a twelve years old boy with fair hair is selected as a chief by the majority of the boys. Since then he tries to maintain discipline on the island. He calls meetings of the boys and also assigns them various responsibilities. He suggests the lighting of fire on the top of the mountain. It is he who explores that they have got on the uninhabited island. He also proposes for the shelters on the beach. He encourages the Littluns who are afraid of the beastie. In fact, he can be called the hero of the novel. As a democratic chief he is assisted by Piggy and Simon. Later he is embarrassed by the fact when the boys ignore him as a chief and no more cooperate with him. On the other hand, Jack and his group of hunters challenge his authority. They chase him till the arrival of the naval officer.

According to Santawana Halder, "The changes in Jack's character display the truth that 'all power corrupts' Jack's hankering for power and obsession for hunting attach him to the evils of materialism" (William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, p 112). Jack is representative of the autocratic power in the novel. Apparently, he promises to obey all the decided rules and conventions of the island but violates them when his authority is on the stake. Once he said,

"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."

Contrasting with the above words spoken by him, Once he spoke to Piggy regarding the significance of the conch as a symbol of authority on the top of the mountain "*The conch doesn't count on top of the mountain*, "said Jack, "so you shut up." This affirms the evil of hypocrisy ingrained in him. We can obviously observe his domineering behavior when he proposes to be the chief of the boys but he is disheartened when majority of the boys vote for the Ralph. He is no doubt an adventurous-minded person and is busy all the time in the pig-hunting. He is bold, reckless and brutal in his actions. He defies the authority of the Ralph by neglecting the lighting of the fire on the mountain top. He machinates against the position of Ralph. Even he also threatens Sam and Eric not to side with Ralph. Although he does not believe in the existence of beast yet he is obsessed with the fear of the unknown. Once he gets scared by the dead parachutist when he climbs up the top of the mountain in search of the beast. He soothes the Littluns by offering the head of the Pig as a sacrifice to the beast.

The spiritual power is vested in the character of Simon. He is a Christ-like figure and is helpful to all those who are in need. It is his farsightedness which helps the boys in the discovering of the real truth about the beast seen by the twins. He further ensures the boys that there is no beast on the island. Although he himself is victim to some sort of hallucination, yet he does not believe in the existence of beast." *I don't believe in the beast.*" Simon mumbled confusedly (LOF, p 115). Simon believes that the real beast exists within the man himself.

"Roger edged past the Chief, only just avoiding pushing him with his shoulder. The yelling ceased, and Samneric lay looking up in quiet terror. Roger advanced upon them as one wielding a nameless authority." (LOF, p 201). The above lines refer to the brutal power exercised in the novel. The most brutal action ever taken in the story is the death of Piggy at the hands of the unsympathetic Roger. After killing Piggy, he turns to threaten Sam and Eric to side with Jack's tribe. It is because of the Roger's vicious authority that Roger and his fellows forcibly bring Sam and Eric to their side. Hence, the

author has presented Roger as a concrete manifestation of the brute force.

The intellectual power in the novel rests with the fat boy, Piggy. We first meet him when he comes out of the undergrowth and guesses with his insight about the other boys who may be lying scattered on the island. As after his first meeting with Ralph, Piggy said "I expect there's a lot of more of us scattered about" (LOF, p 09). Piggy is scientific in most of his designs. It is he who introduces the conch to the Ralph and also teaches him how to make a sound out of it. He also advises the boys for building huts on the beach. He is very much anxious about the Littluns. He tries his best to calm them and also tries to manage for their safety. When the Littluns feel afraid of the existence of beast on the island, Piggy answers them that there is nothing to be afraid of on the island. The death of Piggy at the hands of Roger implies that intellectual power cannot withstand the brutal power.

The Fate of the Intellectual

The tragic and unexpected deaths of the noble men also seem to have a thematic interest in the novel. It is the intellectual who have always brought the humanity out of the abyss of ignorance and barbarism in every society. Unfortunately, they have never been given their rightful prestige and honor in the society. William Golding has realistically depicted that true condition of the contemporary intellectual in *Lord of the Flies*. Both, Simon and Piggy are men of knowledge and understanding. It is because of their sagacity that they contested against the evil forces on the island. It is with the tragic deaths of Simon and Piggy, the evil overwhelms the entire island. E.M. Forster in his famous novel 'Howard's End' also corroborates this point of view by saying that civilization depends on those people who are gifted with insight and understanding.

The Uncertainty of Life

After the World War Second, people began to think whether life is good or bad. This element of uncertainty may be seen in most of the Post War literary masterpieces. *Lord of the Flies* also reflects the contemporary approach to life. The plot of the novel has gorgeously been saturated with uncertain events. The dramatic air crash seems to be the first unexpected event which gives further impetus to the uncertain situations on the island. The sudden deaths of Simon and Piggy are unexpected dealings. All the boys give the impression of hopefulness and despair. The head of the slain pig looks to Simon as if Lord of the Flies. The mock-hunt displayed by Jack and his hunters turn into the man-hunt and ends at the Simon's death. Ultimately, the arrival of the naval officer at the eleventh-hour is the last unexpected happening that leads the boys to the world which is more uncertain than the coral island. Further, the fear of the unknown and the existence of beast have enhanced the atmosphere of uncertainty on the island. In the words of the author,

"They talk and scream. The Littluns. Even some of the others.

As if-----"

"As if it wasn't a good island."

Astonished at the interruption, they looked up at Simon's serious face.

"As if" said Simon, "the beastie, the beastie or the snake-thing, was real.

Remember?"

Symbolic Manifestations

A number of symbols have been used by Golding to heighten and highlight his thematic concerns of the novel. The head of the pig killed by the hunters symbolizes the emergence of evil which is the most dominant theme in *Lord of*

the Flies. When a pig is killed by Jack and his hunters, Jack cuts off the head of the slain pig and stabs it with a wooden spear and then inserts that spear into a rock. It is believed to be a sacrifice to the beast. Meanwhile, Simon comes out and looks at the pig's head which is surrounded by flies. Simon, being a victim to hallucination, takes the pig's head as the Lord of the Flies. The Lord of the Flies scares Simon and tells him that he is present in all the boys. Thus the very title of the novel is also symbolic of the emergence of evil and its conflict with the saint-like figure Simon.

The sporadic mock-hunts and the fretful cries of the boys, *Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!* symbolize their deterioration into savages and their remoteness from the civilized life and behavior.

Fire and smoke have been presented in the novel as symbols of hope and rescue. Ralph, time and again, insists on the lighting of fire on the top of the mountain, so that the rising smoke would attract someone and thus come to their help.

The major characters chosen by the author also carry a symbolic significance. Ralph is a symbol of civilized life and behavior. He brings unity and discipline among the boys on the island. Jack represents brutality and evil. Piggy is an epitome of intellectuality and farsightedness, while Simon signifies saintliness in *Lord of the Flies*.

The Essence of Pessimism

As an allegory, *Lord of the Flies* depicts the Post-World War and its aftermath. Initially, William Golding was a school teacher. He was well aware of the child psychology. Later, during the War time, he gave up that profession and joined the Royal Navy. When the War came to an end, he once again returned to the profession of teaching. The experiences of the war and the bleak aspect of human nature have left a deep pessimistic impression on the mental personality of the author. The fictitious island manifests an atmosphere of warfare as well as the whereabouts of the English school boys. It is in view of the war that the boys have been evacuated by the pilot of an aircraft. At the end of the novel also we have an interruption from the British naval officer. The boys being rescued by the officer may not bring any drastic change in the behavior of the boys. If they are safely taken away from the coral island, there also, the war is already going on among the adults. Thus nobody can escape from the essence of pessimism at any point in the novel.

CONCLUSIONS

The theme in *Lord of the Flies*, like that of most of the other novels by the same author, revolves around the concept of the emergence of evil and its conflict with the good. This leitmotif has been made concrete through a well-knit plot, universality of the myth, realistic portrayal of characters, apt and perceptible symbolism, thematic imagery, sensible events, graphic and imaginative descriptions and last but not the least his unique narrative style which makes the story gripping and suspenseful. As the story ensues, the thematic concern of the novel is enhanced and integrated by so many motifs befalling in the novel including, loss of civilization, the motif of power, the fate of intellectuals, the uncertainty of life, symbolic manifestations, and the essence of pessimism prevailing till the end of the novel. The Encyclopedia of British Writers, 1800 to the Present, Volume 2, sums up the very crux of the novel as, "In Golding's novel, the society formed by his castaways is presided over by the "Lord of the Flies" or Beelzebub, and reveals the innate depravity of human nature. Ralph, a representative of reason, and Piggy, who stands for intellect are overcome by the brute violence and bloodlust of Jack and his henchmen before Ralph's last minute reprieve".

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