

THE PROBLEM OF LEVEL IN WILLIAM GOLDING'S NOVELS



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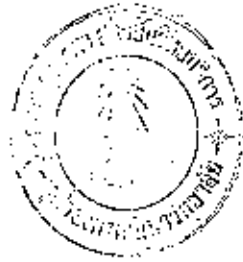
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## ABSTRACT

William Golding is one of the famous modern writers whose philosophy is involved only with the fundamental problems of mankind -- especially with the problem of evil. According to him man is free to choose either good or evil but in almost all of his books evil overcomes good since evil is part of man himself. He believes that the defects of society are caused by the defects of the individual, because man is corrupted by his own nature. The purpose of this thesis is to trace the development of Golding's main theme in his novels.



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## INTRODUCTION



"I think of myself," says William Golding, "as a religious man." This statement becomes clear after one has read his novels. All themes in his novels deal with the expression of religious ideas which have seldom been explored before by other English novelists. His themes, therefore, are called "un-English" "for the English novel has not been, traditionally, a medium for the expression of religious ideas; its strength has been rather in its representation of society. The English, it has been said, are afraid of metaphysics, and this is nowhere clearer than in their fiction: they have their Fielding and their Dickens, but they have no Dostoevski, no Melville, no Mann, no Camus." Like these writers, Golding is not concerned with society or with the present, but with the basic problems of mankind, problems which are relevant to any period of time, past, present or, one feels, future. According to him all problems and all dilemmas which man suffers do not come from society, politics or any outer environment of the moment; in fact they arise from the inner fundamental nature of man - of the whole human race. At an interview, when asked whether a writer should deal with the political and social problems of his time, he answered:

"I am very serious. I believe that man suffers from an appalling ignorance of his own nature. I produce my own view, in the belief that it may be something like the truth. I am fully engaged to the human dilemmas but see it as far more fundamental

than a complex of taxes and astronomy."<sup>2</sup>

The word "religious" does not mean that Golding belongs to any particular religion, nor that he subscribes to any set of doctrines, but that his novels are concerned with the disturbing presence of evil in mankind, a presence which all religions have consistently tried to explain and keep to the forefront of man's consciousness.

Christianity explains evil's existence in terms of the fall of man; man was originally good and innocent, but as a result of exercising his gift of free will, he chose evil and fell from grace. This is presented in the Old Testament myth, the story of Adam and Eve - the parents of the human race. Within six days God created Heaven and Earth and all earthly things and living creatures. "And the Lord God formed man of the slime of the earth, and breathed into his face the breath of life; and man became a living soul."<sup>3</sup> Then God created a woman, Eve, of one of Adam's ribs. God put man in the earthly paradise where he could eat any kinds of fruits or herb except the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The serpent tempted Eve to eat a fruit of that forbidden tree by saying, "For God doth know that in what day soever you shall eat thereof, your eyes shall be opened: and you shall be as Gods, knowing good and evil."<sup>4</sup> Eve then ate the fruit and offered it to Adam who also tasted it. Suddenly, having lost their

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William Golding; Samuel Hynes, William Golding (New York & London: Columbia University Press, 1964), p. 3.

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The Holy Bible. Douay Version (London and Beccles: William Clowes and Sons, Ltd, 1956), Genesis 2:7.

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Ibid., Genesis 3:5.

innocence, they perceived that they were naked and covered themselves with leaves and hid themselves. God banished them from Paradise and condemned them to toil for their living. Their crime infected the whole human race. Their destiny was to be eternal damnation, from which only a redeemer could save them.

Golding uses the idea of man fallen from grace, of man in a state of original sin - and in this sense, he is very close to Christianity. Yet his dominant theme is that evil, irrespective of its origins, is part of man's nature. "The fundamental sin according to the Bible is pride, egocentricity, self-deification, and the insistence that each of us is the final arbiter of what is good for him."<sup>5</sup> So Adam and Eve succumbed to their own pride and self-deification. The serpent is the symbol of evil that is in man - is a part of man himself. Adam and Eve are just prototypes of all human beings; they are allegorical characters who dramatize "the eternal human situation."<sup>6</sup> The original sin is caused by their first crime, and is passed on as a heritage to all future generations. Golding's moral purpose is to make men aware that evil exists, not in social circumstances or environment, but in men themselves.

In his first novel Lord of the Flies (1954), "the theme is an attempt to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human nature." The theme of his second novel The Inheritors (1955) is the

<sup>5</sup> W. Burnet Easton, Jr., Basic Christian Belief (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), pp. 89-91.

<sup>6</sup> William Golding, "Notes on Lord of the Flies," Lord of the Flies (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1959), p. 189.



deplacement of Neanderthal man by Homo Sapiens in which there is a conflict between civilization and primitivism. In Pincher Martin (1956) he works on the themes of the individual struggle for survival and salvation and the meaning of death. Free Fall (1959) is about guilt and responsibility and free will. He dramatizes the theme of strong vision and faith corrupted by evil in his latest novel The Spire (1960). In spite of their differences in emphasis and setting, it is obvious that all of his novels are variations of the same fundamental idea - that evil is predominant in man's nature.

It is not possible to classify Golding, or to assign him to any particular group or literary trend. He is the exception rather than the rule. This is what he wants. "It seems to me that there's really very little point in writing a novel unless you do something that either you suspected you couldn't do, or which you are pretty certain nobody else has tried before."<sup>7</sup> This is perhaps one reason why he has attracted such a large readership in the last few years.

"In all my books," said Golding, "I have suggested a shape in the universe that may, as it were, account for things." That shape he uses as the fictional form in which he puts "unusually tight, conceptualized, analogical expressions of moral ideas."<sup>8</sup> Thus his books are called fables. In this respect he can be compared with George Orwell, who in his 1984 and Animal Farm uses the fable as fictional

form. Orwell's 1984 achieved "worldwide fame as an awful warning of a possible totalitarian future."<sup>9</sup> His purpose is to point out the dangers in the possible spreading of a dangerous situation which he has observed developing in Russia, America and above all in England. Lord of the Flies is in fact closer to Animal Farm, Orwell's finest fable, a timeless allegory of totalitarian government. These two fabulists use the novel to expound the embodiment of a moral principle which they have worked out beforehand.

As far as Golding's themes are concerned, he can only be compared to isolated English writers: two such writers are Joseph Conrad and Graham Greene. Like Golding, Conrad also has a vision of evil as a fundamental element in human nature. In his Heart of Darkness Marlow, the narrator, makes a journey to the Congo into the heart of Africa. This journey symbolizes the journey into the darkness of the human heart. The story is about a powerful, intelligent British man, Mr. Kurtz, who is assigned to take charge of an isolated native trading post in the ivory country, and a steamer captain who is drawn to meet Kurtz by his wanderlust. Marlow has viewed Kurtz's deterioration of morals and his reversion to savagery. Wholly devoured by the forces of primitive darkness, he does not want to leave that place when his countrymen come to get him. Since darkness is in his soul, and to take him away from the dark Congo is to separate his body from his soul, without which one cannot live, he dies on his journey out of the heart

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Walter Allen, The Modern Novel (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1964), p. 238.

of darkest Africa. Similarly, in Golding's 'Lord of the Flies', the boys are terrified by the "Beast", the darkness, which is in themselves.

In the novels of Graham Greene, the idea of good and evil is more important than that of right or wrong. According to him, a man may observe all the rules of social conduct, he may obey the commandments of the Church to the letter, but still be evil. He is like Golding in the sense that in his books the outer violence reflects the violence inside the characters. He uses the contemporary setting as the element to express what seems to him the truth about man's fate. A convert to Roman Catholicism, "he has been obsessed with the plight of fallen man, with the split in man's mind, the insidious attraction of evil, the insidious attraction of good."<sup>10</sup>

Many possible reasons can be traced in order to find out why Golding is aware of evil so much more extensively than his contemporaries, except Greene, whose awareness stems partly from his conversion to Roman Catholicism. Golding accepts that his main literary influence was Greek tragedy. The Greek plays were originally religious, all concerned with the conflict between good and evil. It can easily be seen how these 'religious' plays are sources of Golding's work.

'Lord of the Flies', which is the story of the development of civilization in reverse, with civilized man going backward to the primitive way of living, is the parallel of the history of creation of man's civilization. Ralph's fire for rescue and security is in fact the fire stolen by Prometheus from Olympus for mankind. With Prometheus'

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Ibid., p. 203.

fire, man gets civilization and all knowledge and becomes superior to other animals. He becomes proud and intelligent. It is pride and intelligence that ultimately bring destruction to man. Ralph's fire is the symbol of civilization and intelligence. Yet although this fire brings rescue at the end it is in fact the fire of destruction, the fire which forces Ralph from his hiding place.

Pincher Martin is an allegory of man's struggle for survival and salvation in which Golding uses many classical allusions in order to symbolize the struggle of the whole human race since its beginning until now. Here Pincher Martin, washed up alone on a barren rock in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, compares himself with Atlas, Prometheus and Ajax. He carries the worldly burden of Atlas, he has the daring of Prometheus, and he suffers the fate of Ajax. At last, he is representative of the discarded warrior whose recompense is pain, dissipation, and the cumulative torment man has caused himself. He is Prometheus, since with his attempt to save the human race he is punished by being left alone struggling on this indifferent isolated rock. He is gradually beaten down until he becomes like Ajax, an outcast, who was seized by delirium and committed many shameful crimes. Martin's failure seems to prophesy mankind's perpetual damnation.

With Tree Fall Golding obviously traces the Greek idea of fate - that no matter how hard man tries, he can never escape from his own fate. At the beginning, Samuel Mountjoy contemplates how and when he has lost his freedom. Here he is already doomed before the beginning of the story like Oedipus who was doomed to kill his father and marry his mother even before he was born. Samuel has already fallen. There

is no question of his being free and happy. He is a marked man. He claims that once he had free will to make his own choices. Since it is his own choice, if he falls, it is a free fall. The problem is, has man really free will? Oedipus is accused of making a free choice that causes the fatal flaw. He can choose to marry Jocasta, the queen of Thebes, or not to marry her. Yet he chooses to marry her in spite of her old age. And from his own choice he has made a sinful error that inevitably leads him to catastrophe. Yet how can one blame him since he has done it in innocence? In fact when he hears the oracle, he runs away from his country in order to escape from his own fate but is rushed to it by that escape.

Another inspiration for Golding, at least in Lord of the Flies, is his former career as a schoolmaster. Nineteen years of teaching is long enough to enable him to observe children at close quarters. Children's conduct, make-up, seems to be a striking admixture of good and bad; they are less self-conscious and guarded than adults. Whether his judgement was right or wrong, Golding probably noticed many signs, as a schoolmaster, of humanity's inherent evil, but this part of his experience must also have influenced his general outlook. That is why in Lord of the Flies, he challenges the optimism of Ballantyne's The Coral Island.

During the Second World War Golding served as a naval officer for five years. His experience in the war must be partly responsible for his pessimism towards mankind. His disgust towards war was expressed in his notes on Lord of the Flies -- "Before the war, most Europeans believed that man could be perfected by perfecting his society. We all

saw a hell of a lot in the war that can't be accounted for except on the basis of original evil." Besides the Second World War, the general climate of the age - the cold war, the manufacture of weapons of mass destruction may help to explain his awareness of the evil nature of man.

The purpose of this thesis is to trace the dominant, controlling themes through each novel, to examine in detail Golding's technique of dramatizing the themes, and to discuss his work in relation to some of his literary influences.