

The Conflict between Good and Evil in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*

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The problem of evil and the conflict between good and evil have been among the leading concerns of some of the 20th century British novelists. In one of the novels, for instance one of the characters says that there is “a real something called evil in this world.” The circumstances and events of World War II particularly supported the belief and the interest in the existence of “a real something called evil”. A female character in another novel says that what torments her is whether life is good or evil, and she talks of “good and evil coupling to make the world.” This uncertainty about whether life is good or evil is representative of the attitude of some of the post war novelists. Three novelists in particular have shown a deep concern with the divided moral forces in this world. They are Iris Murdoch, Anthony Burgess, and William Golding. Each of these lived through the Second World War. Golding admitted in an interview that he was profoundly influenced by the war and the post-war developments in his writing of *Lord of the Flies*.

Evil is one of Golding's major preoccupations in his novels. He does recognize the existence of good, but he seems to believe that evil is a more powerful force and, under certain conditions, would dominate human life. '**Lord of the Flies**' demonstrates, in Golding's own words, “**the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart**”. (These two phrases occur on the last page of *Lord of the Flies*). Grief at “**the fallen state of man**” is the principle emotion which a reading of this novel arouses in us. The novel is, on a superficial level, the story of the life of a group of British boys who find themselves marooned on an uninhabited island. But the story has a deeper meaning, and this deeper meaning is more important to the adult mind than the story itself. The novel is thus an allegory or a fable intended to convey Golding's view that evil is a powerful instinct in human beings and needs only a favorable environment to grow and flourish and to attain formidable proportions. In the novel evil seems to have triumphed over good, but Golding has himself expressed the view that the novel does not depict the triumph of evil over good but good rescued from the clutches of evil. The rescue comes, of course, in the shape of the naval officer at the end.

The title **Lord of the Flies** clearly shows that the novel was intended to have an allegorical purpose. The *Lord of the Flies* in Baalzebub or Beelzebub, mentioned in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Beelzebub, to adopt the more common spelling, is the prince of demons. Milton used this name for one of his fallen angels. For a novel to have this title evidently shows that the theme of the story would be evil, or a clash between the forces of evil and the forces of good. And, indeed such a clash is the principal theme of

this particular novel. The forces of good here are allegorically represented by Ralph, Piggy and, above all, Simon. While the forces of evil are represented chiefly by Jack and Roger. This does not mean that the characters who represent good are wholly good or good in an absolute sense, though Simon can almost be regarded as representing moral perfection. Similarly, the characters representing evil have their good points, though the good in them has been diminishing rapidly till it becomes almost extinct.

In the opening chapter the Island, on which the boys have been marooned, has been represented as a kind of paradise. Both Ralph and Jack find a certain glamour and a certain enchantment on this island. They, and Simon feel elated as they journey to the mountain-top to explore the island. Ralph stands on his head a couple of times to give an outlet to his feeling of joyous excitement, while the other two express a similar feeling in different ways. In their school slang all three give expression to their feeling of exultation. “Wacco”, “Wizard”, “smashing”, “like a bomb”, “whee-aa-oo” are the words and exclamations which they utter. The island seems to be a **Garden of Eden** where an atmosphere of innocence prevails and where evil seems to be unknown. The boys who unexpectedly find themselves on this island have brought with them the precious values of civilization and a sense of discipline which they had imbibed under their parental control and utter the authority of their teachers in the schools which they were attending. But in the last chapter on the last page, we read of “**the loss of innocence**” and of “**the darkness in man’s heart**”. The contrast between the atmosphere of the opening chapter and that of the final chapter is most striking. **The Garden of Eden**, depicted in the opening chapter, becomes a veritable hell in the final chapter when Ralph is being pursued relentlessly by Jack and his savages. The intervening chapters describe the process by which this unfortunate transformation takes place. The novel is thus strongly reminiscent of the Biblical story or “**original sin**” and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden after their loss of innocence.

As already pointed out, there seems to be no evil on the island in the early stages of the story. Although Jack would like to be elected as the chief, he does not show any malice or bitterness when Ralph is elected in preference to him. In offering himself as the chief, Jack mentions his qualifications, saying that he is “chapter chorister and head boy” and that he can sing C sharp. However, the boys have felt much impressed by Ralph’s physical appearance and even more by the conch which Ralph is holding in his hands and the sound of which had brought them all together. Jack feels quite happy when Ralph allows him to continue as the head of his choir-boys. Jack feels even more happy when he is allowed to designate his choir- boys as the hunters on the island. At this stage Jack, though he has become the leader of the hunters, is unable to kill a pig which has got entangled in the bushes. He raises his hand holding a knife in order to stab the pig but does not actually kill the animal because he realizes like his two companions “what an enormity the downward stroke would be.” However, even at this early stage his other instinct asserts itself and he experiences an incipient desire for blood so that he tells his two companions that next time there would be no mercy from him for a pig. He snatches his knife out of its sheath and slams it into a tree-trunk to confirm what he had said. And he then looks round fiercely, challenging his two companions to contradict him.

Soon afterwards we become conscious of two parallel instincts operating strongly in Jack. After returning from the mountain-top, both Ralph and Jack address an assembly of the boys. Jack at this time says that there are pigs on the island and that he needs an army of hunters. He then narrates the incident about the pig which he had refrained from killing and says once more that next time he would definitely kill a pig when he gets the opportunity. Once again he slams his knife into a tree-trunk and looks round challengingly. Now, there is nothing wrong with the desire to hunt pigs. The desire to hunt pigs by itself cannot be interpreted as showing an evil instinct in Jack. But the way in which he asserts his determination to kill the pigs and his slamming his knife into a tree-trunk are actions which show a tendency to violence and a desire for bloodshed. These actions are ominous, and yet Jack is still under the influence of his old school discipline and had not forgotten his role as the head of the school-choir. He announces to the assembly that he is in agreement with Ralph. What he says at this time is very significant as showing his state of mind at this early stage in the story. He seems at this time to represent the true nobility of the English characters. Says he:

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.

At this stage he even undertakes to keep the fire on the mountain-top burning, and he deposes two groups of his hunters to attend to this task. Thus he is fully cooperating with Ralph and showing due respect to the values of civilizations.

As days roll by, a change begins to come over Jack. He begins to differ with Ralph so far as the priorities of work on the island are concerned. Ralph has been emphasizing the importance of maintaining the fire and building huts or shelters for the boys. Jack, on the other hand, has been exploring the forest and the mountain-side to find the pigs though without any success so far. The difference as regards the priorities leads to the first quarrel between the two boys, and the author here remarks: "**Now the antagonism (between Ralph and Jack) was audible**". Then Jack succeeds in killing his first pig, of course with the help of his hunters. But in the meantime a golden opportunity of being rescued has been lost because Jack's hunters have allowed the fire on the mountain-top to go out with the result that a ship has passed close to the island without the sailors having observed any smoke on the island. This incident leads to another quarrel between Ralph and Jack, and when Piggy supports Ralph, Jack attacks Piggy, breaking one of the glasses of Piggy's spectacles. Thus Jack is now becoming intolerant and violent. The quarrel is followed by a mock-hunt and the cry; "**Kill the pig. Cut her throat. Bash her in.**" Jack is now full of hatred for not only Piggy but also Ralph, as Piggy has rightly observed.

In connection with the treatment of evil in this novel, another development also now deserves our attention. One of the little boys has expressed his fear of a beastie or the snake-thing and indeed, the twisted branches of the trees and the hanging boughs do look like interwinding snakes. The talk about a beastie or the snake-thing persists among the Littuns, even though Ralph dismisses this talk as foolish and although neither Ralph himself nor Piggy nor Jack believes in the existence of a beastie. Another development is Roger's

throwing stones in the direction of a little boy, Henry, just to tease him. Roger, we are told, is prevented from actually hitting Henry with the stones by the sense of discipline which so far is quite strong in him. Soon this sense of discipline will begin to dwindle rapidly. Then there is another little boy who says that he too has been a beast and that the beast had come from the water. This talk about the beast is significant even though at this point it is only the Littluns who claim to have seen the beast. The beast allegorically represents evil, and in course of time the beast will acquire a concrete shape and will then manifest itself through the actions of Jack and Roger.

Jack now becomes ambitious of displacing Ralph and becoming himself the chief. He temporarily succeeds so that Ralph feels like resigning his position as the chief but is dissuaded from doing so by Piggy and Simon. Then the twins come and report having seen a beast on the mountain-top. The existence of the beast is subsequently confirmed by Ralph, Jack, and Roger. Meantime another mock-hunt, accompanied by wild dancing, takes place. This time the mock-hunt is less playful and more wild. There is a brief lull in the enmity between Ralph and Jack openly revolts against Ralph and wins the support of the majority of the Biguns partly by his disparaging remarks against Ralph and partly by his tears of desperation and self-pity. This development is followed by an actual pig-hunt, and by Jack's offering of the slain pig's head as a gift to the beast. Jack has now become a primitive tribal chief, with his face painted red and white and black all the time. He has now begun to believe in the existence of a beast, and he has even employed a primitive method of raid on Ralph's camp in order to snatch away a couple of burning branches from the fire lighted by Piggy close to the platform. Jack is now losing sight of all the values and civilization and is becoming more and more cruel. In the course of yet another mock-hunt Simon is killed. Although Jack at first gives out that the beast has been killed, he inwardly knows that it was Simon who had been killed. But Jack experiences no remorse and no pang of the conscience. Then Jack leads a second raid upon Ralph's camp, and this time he snatches away Piggy's spectacles in order to use them as a means of lighting a fire whenever the savages need a fire. The next act of barbarism committed by Jack and his savages is the murder of Piggy when Roger releases from the top a rock which comes thundering down and kills Piggy, shattering the conch into a thousand pieces. Roger is now the hangman or executioner working under Jack's orders. At Jack's bidding Samneric are seized and tied up. Soon afterwards Roger tortures the twins in order to subdue them, with the result that the twins feel compelled to join Jack's tribe. Jack has now become evil incarnate, and so has Roger. All the good in them has been extinguished. The manner in which Jack orders the relentless search for the fugitive Ralph through the thicket and the forest shows Jack to be a real devil. Jack has already got a stick sharpened at both ends in order to torture Ralph after catching him. Jack's savagery bestiality is now beyond any doubt. Jack himself is now Beelzebub or the **Lord of the Flies**. Evil is not something external, but dwells within the human heart. Such is Golding's message through this novel.

Golding's message is reinforced through his delineation of the character of Simon. In the course of a discussion, when Simon is asked by Ralph whether Simon believes in the existence of a beast on the island, Simon gives a vague reply, saying that, if at all there is a beast, it must be within the boys themselves. Later

in the story Simon, who has witnessed from his hiding-place Jack's ritual in offering a pig's head as a gift to the beast, begins to stare at the pig's head which is now surrounded by a thick swarm of flies. The pig's head now begins to assume, in Simon's eyes on seeing the Lord of the Flies grinning at him. The Lord of the Flies then calls Simon a silly little boy and warns him to go away from this spot and join the other boys. The Lord of the Flies says that the beast is not something which can be killed by the boys. The Lord of the Flies further says that he is part of the boys. He then again warns Simon to go away and join the others. Now this experience of Simon's in the forest is no doubt a hallucination, but it is a significant hallucination. Simon has already said that the beast exists within the boys themselves. That view of Simon's is now confirmed by having been objectified and externalized. The Lord of the Flies is merely a visible personification of the evil within human beings. This experience clearly brings out the allegorical significance of the novel and explain its title.

If evil is uppermost in the minds of Jack and Roger and if subsequently it takes complete possession of them, goodness is uppermost in the minds of Ralph, Piggy, and Simon. Ralph is an upholder of democracy, but democracy must be regulated by discipline and so Ralph declares that they must obey the rule about the conch and that anyone who wishes to address the assembly must hold the conch in his hands. Ralph also has the right priorities on which he insists. His main aim is to be rescued and, to that end, he wants the fire on the mountain-top to be kept burning all the time so that smoke from it may keep rising. He also insists upon huts being built to provide shelter to the boys against rain. Ralph also protects Piggy when Piggy is roughly handled by Jack. Ralph is willing to cooperate with Jack as regards the hunting of pigs; but he insists that the first priorities are the fire and the huts. The rift between the two boys go on widening till Jack breaks away from Ralph altogether taking all the Begins (except Piggy and Simon) with him. Jack now becomes fiercely hostile to Ralph. Ralph would like to keep away from Jack. But Jack once again raids Ralph's camp, this time to get hold of Piggy's spectacles which he wants to use as a means of lighting a fire whenever a fire is needed by him and his savages. Jack succeeds in taking away Piggy's spectacles and when Ralph, accompanied by Piggy and the twins, goes to Jack's camp to get back the spectacles. The confrontation leads to the murder of Piggy, the arrest of the twins and the flight of Ralph whose life is now in danger but who is ultimately saved by the timely arrival of a naval officer. However, all this does not mean that Ralph is an embodiment of goodness and a representative of moral perfection. He has his weakness and deficiencies. He tries to deceive himself about the circumstances of Simon's death though he does ultimately express his view that Simon had been murdered. Also, when Ralph imagines that his camp is being raided by the beast, he hopes that the beast would devour one of the Littluns instead of attacking him (Ralph). In the beginning Ralph's attitude towards Piggy is also far from sympathetic. But, on the whole, it cannot be denied that Ralph represents goodness.

Piggy too is on the side of the good as against the evil, Piggy emphatically supports Ralph in all his decisions and Piggy is a champion of the values of civilization. Piggy is even more vociferous in upholding the authority of the conch than Ralph. Piggy insists also on the need of maintaining a fire on the island in

order to attract the attention of the sailors of a passing ship. Piggy is always making sensible suggestions. It is true that he is timid by nature, but there is no doubt at all that he is kind-hearted and gentle. His speech to the savages, when he demands the return of his spectacles, is wonderfully cogent. The logic behind the questions which he puts to the savages on this occasion is irrefutable. He tells them “**they are acting like a crowd of kids**” and then goes on to ask the following questions by means of which he seeks to put them all in the wrong.

Which is better-to be a pack of painted niggers like you're or to be sensible like Ralph is?

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?

The murder of Piggy, like the previous murder of Simon, is an example of the triumph of evil over good.

Simon is another character who is on the side of good. He is a Nature-lover and a mystic who holds a spiritual communion with the life of Nature. Like Piggy, he shows a maturity beyond his years. He is an embodiment of the spirit of self-sacrifice. He proves helpful to the Littluns by plucking fruit for them from the higher branches of the trees. He defends Piggy whenever he can. He remains loyal to Ralph even though he was originally a member of Jack's choir. He climbs to the mountain-top fearlessly in order to discover the truth about the beast, and he makes a valuable discovery which he is now anxious to communicate to the other boys in order to rid them of their fear of the beast which does not actually exist. But he is killed before he can communicate his discovery. Simon dies a martyr. He is a Christ like, saintly figure who dies in the service of the community to which he belonged. Even though Simon had an encounter with what he thinks to be the Lord of the Flies, he remains untainted by evil. Morally he stands even above Ralph and Piggy.

The twins too are on the side of the good. They remain loyal to Ralph as long as they can. There is certainly a touch of dishonesty in their nature. For instance, they invent certain details in the account which they give to Ralph and the others about their experience of the beast which they imagine having seen. Later, they put up the pretence that they know nothing about the murder of Simon because they had left Jack's camp very early. But, on the whole, they are to be regarded as representatives of the principle of goodness. They become members of Jack's tribe only under a threat of torture. In fact, they join Jack's tribe after they have been tortured by Roger. Even as members of Jack's tribe, they prove helpful to Ralph by informing him that his life is in danger and by giving him a chunk of meat when Ralph says that he is feeling hungry.

References:

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