

## Personal Accountability to Evil in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*

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### Abstract

World War I & II taught the world about the ugliness of war and hatred, and the dichotomy between good and evil. We often blame the political system or the society for the evils that are being perpetrated in the world. But a close analysis will tell us that it is not the political system or the society that is responsible for the evil, but some individuals within the society or in the political system that perpetrates evil. Therefore, it is the individual who needs to bring-forth the change in oneself which leads to change in society, and not any political system however apparently rational or reputable they may be. This idea is powerfully brought out in the novels of William Golding, particularly in *Lord of the Flies* (1954). This paper will make an in-depth research into *Lord of the Flies* written by Sir William Golding and cull out the elements that trace the individual accountability to evil. Golding states in his essay *Fable* that "man produces evil as a bee produces honey". Evil is a part of man's nature. In *Lord of the Flies* Golding shows us that this evil must be accepted, not ignored, and we can't pass the buck to the society or to anyone or anything else. No society is bad in itself, it is the defective human nature that makes the defective society.

**Keywords:** William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, Evil, Good.

### 1. Introduction

Modern Literature was coloured by the experiences of World War, with its human and social themes. Poems of T.S. Eliot & W.H. Auden, works of E.M. Forster, William Golding etc., bring out powerfully the pain, agony and confusion of the society. Golding belonged to that generation which had its roots in the post war period-a period of disillusionment and disenchantment. The end of World War II gave rise to another war in the minds of people like William Golding. The dreadfulness of war troubled him and he was appalled to see that the heartless act was not done by some primitive tribes in some remotest corners of the world but they were done skilfully and coldly by educated men of civilized world. Man's true nature stood revealed before him, and out of this grew his conviction that man's nature was inherently evil. He doesn't attribute evil to the surroundings of man but puts the locus of all evil in the 'will' of man. Golding is disturbed by the inability of man to understand and control this nature of his, which ultimately results in disaster for mankind. Golding is unique in comparison to his contemporaries in handling of the form of the genre and its content. In his obsession with the human tragedy he resembles the great Greek writers Euripides and Aeschylus, and in his emphasis on the natural chaos of existence and his thematic concerns with man's alienation, guilt, free will, primacy and universality of evil, he is close to Melville and Conrad.

### 2. Objectives

There is a constant tension or conflict between good and evil in the world. At times evil appears to be so dominant and powerful that we may even think evil to be supreme. But, sooner or later the momentary supremacy of the evil gives way to the ultimate triumph of good. We often blame the society or the political system for the evils that are being perpetrated in the world. But a close analysis will tell us that it is not the political system or the society that is responsible for the evil, but some individuals within the society or in the political system that perpetrate evil. Therefore, it is the individual who needs to bring-forth the change in oneself which leads to change in society, and not any political system however apparently logical or respectable they may be. This idea is powerfully brought out in the novels of William Golding, particularly in *Lord of the Flies*. Golding insists that evil is inherent in man; it is a terrifying force which mankind must recognize and control. Hence, through a critical analysis of the novel *Lord of the Flies*, this study aims to fix the individual

responsibility towards evil and tries to show how a society can be changed by transforming the individuals.

### 3. Methodology

*Lord of the Flies* is the most popular and highly successful novel of William Golding who was the winner of Nobel Prize in Literature in 1983. This novel was rejected by several publishers and one literary agent. Finally it was rescued from the slush pile by a young editor at Faber and Faber and published in 1954. I have first analysed the mind of the author to understand the circumstances that lead to the writing of the novel. In this article I have done a threadbare analysis of the novel *Lord of the Flies* by selecting appropriate passages and incidents that would reveal the individual responsibility towards evil. A study of the critical writings done on *Lord of the Flies* by renowned critics is incorporated to substantiate the argument.

### 4. Our World is What we Make

Though stranded on a lonely island, the boys found the place, with its rich vegetation, attractive beach, cool and pleasant surroundings, delightful. They could have lived peacefully and happily till being rescued. But, they were prone to create problems, where none existed and make life miserable. Jealousy, selfishness and greed govern their actions, disturb their minds and give way to likes, dislikes, envy and hatred. They become restless, ill at ease and make a mess of their lives. They become their own enemies. But they also believe in an enemy outside of them and hence feel threatened, highly insecure and become nervous.

William Golding was convinced that humanity is suffering from a terrible disease and his aim as a writer was to examine that disease and rouse the consciousness of people. Love and charity have ceased to have any meaning in the present day. Man has fallen to the level of animals in the ruthless pursuit of his wants. All life's values have been buried in the process. There is little respect for ideals, mutual affection or sense of fellow-feeling.

We pride ourselves in the thought that we are cultured, sophisticated and enlightened race unlike the natives and tribes. But, in truth, we are no better than them. Vain and proud, we breed hatred, preach the gospel of truth and practice a life of falsehood. We are not true even to ourselves. We are not able to look back and retrace our steps. We are helpless. We must learn to be humble and pure of heart. We should conquer our own weaknesses, overcome our sense of pride and feel for ourselves. We have the capacity to counteract our fear and hostility with love.

Children, particularly the younger ones were terrified in *Lord of the Flies*, that the island was being haunted by a beast that was 'big and horrid'. Ralph called together the boys to tell them that there was nothing to fear but it was not convincing. Piggy adopted a scientific approach and gave a rationalistic answer: "I know there isn't no beast-but I know there isn't no fear, either...Unless we get frightened of people." (*Lord of the Flies* p.91). Simon too tried to help the children to get over their irrational fear: "'Maybe,' he said hesitantly, 'maybe there is a beast....'What I mean is ... maybe it's only us.'" (*Lord of the Flies* p.97) Both Piggy and Simon had, in their own way tried to bring out the bitter truth that man himself was the beast; having fallen to such a low level because of his corrupt nature, and more frightening than any other living thing. But, the children, like their elders, were not prepared to acknowledge this fact, and, continued to debate.

The children in the *Lord of the Flies* had to suffer because of the doings of Jack and his followers. They made hell out of a lovely island and reduced it to ashes. Their mutual disagreements, misunderstandings and conflicts split them apart. Jack and his boys had spelt their own doom - they had set the island, where Jack wanted to rule supreme, itself on fire. The children had repeated the acts of their elders, who themselves, with the aid of their new found skills, were engaged in a self-destructive war. When rescue arrived at last, Ralph could not help recollecting their days in the island and the sad events that had taken place, all because they had failed to remain together, as they had been when they crash landed, on the island:

*"Ralph looked... 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 - Simon was dead - and Jack had... The tears began to flow and sobs shook him... Ralph wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy." (Lord of the Flies p.230).*

Being sweet or bitter is entirely upto us. Our actions are our own and no third person is responsible for them. Our relations with others are shaped in the manner in which we behave. If violence, oppression and hatred rule the society today, it is because of our own failings and our own weaknesses. Notwithstanding our technological achievements, we

find our insatiable desires unfulfilled. Our cravings continue and a kind of terror has taken hold of us. This has led to a type of competition in which only the fittest can survive.

## 5. Jack Merridew - An Embodiment of Evil

William Golding was convinced that without the restraint of social order the human being will sink below the level of a beast. This is exactly what happens to Jack. There was something sinister about Jack, even as we come across him for the first time in the novel. The following passage suggests that evil exists as a potentiality in Jack:

*"Within the diamond haze of the beach something dark was fumbling along...The creature was a party of boys...Their bodies, from throat to ankle, were hidden by black cloaks...The boy who controlled them was dressed in the same way..."(Lord of the Flies pp.15-16)*

The blackness of his heart stood revealed in the black dress that he and his followers sported. That he was proud and arrogant and believed in dominating over others was evident from the harshness of his behaviour, the moment he reached near the platform on which Ralph was standing and ushering the other children: "The boy himself came forward, vaulted on to the platform with his cloak flying... The boy came close and peered down at Ralph, screwing up his face as he did so."(*Lord of the Flies* p.16).

Jack Merridew is described at the beginning of the novel: "tall, thin and bony" boy whose "face was crumpled and freckled, and ugly without silliness." He had "light blue eyes, frustrated now and turning, or ready to turn, to anger."(*Lord of the Flies* p.16). He was in charge of a group of uniformed choir boys. He seemed to be cruel and a boy without mercy. His lack of sympathy and consideration for other's sufferings could be seen from the way he was treating the boys under his charge and his unconcern for the boy who had fainted. Rather, he accused the boy of putting up an act: "He's always throwing a faint... He did in Gib.; and Addis; and at matins over the precentor." (*Lord of the Flies* p.17). Jack persecuted the children on the Island. Piggy felt threatened by his very presence, and so tried to avoid him. "Piggy asked no names. He was intimidated by this uniformed superiority and the offhand authority in Merridew's voice. He shrank to the other side of Ralph and busied himself with his glasses." (*Lord of the Flies* p.17). Jack's instant dislike for Piggy was in full display when he roughly silenced him: "You're talking too much... Shut up, Fatty." (*Lord of the Flies* p.18).

His taste for power and blood was revealed in every act of his. Jack wanted to be the chief among the boys, "because, I'm chapter chorister and head boy. I can sing C sharp."(*Lord of the Flies* p.19) This, however, was not agreed to and a vote took place. Ralph was elected unanimously, thwarting Jack's attempt to assert himself. Though subdued for the moment, Jack's pride was hurt beyond measure. His distinction as an outstanding choir boy could be attributed more to an accident than choice. He did not hesitate to display his prowess with the knife on the least provocation. Jack missed an opportunity to kill a piglet during the first exploration into the forest with Ralph and Simon. To assert his supremacy he "snatched his knife out of the sheath and slammed it into a tree trunk. Next time there would be no mercy. He looked around fiercely, daring them to contradict."(*Lord of the Flies* p.30) Jack's ungovernable energy and perpetual restlessness is indicated through the slamming of knife into the tree trunk and looking around challengingly, the discourteous authority in his voice, and such other postures.

He was essentially wicked, within and without; and had an uncontainable nature that could turn its wrath on anyone and everyone. He terrorized everyone into submission. Piggy was his particular sport. Piggy was afraid of him and relied on Ralph's protection. Jack was at ease only when he enjoyed absolute power and his ego and vanity stood fully satisfied. The infernal incantation- "Kill the pig. Cut her throat. Bash her in."(*Lord of the Flies* p.81) - is but a disguise, like the paint on his face, for his emotional self-indulgence. When he finally breaks away from Ralph and becomes the chief of his tribe, he shows himself susceptible to the totalitarian temptation and empowers himself with titanic evil: "Power lay in the brown swell of his forearms; authority sat on his shoulder and chattered in his ear like an ape." (*Lord of the Flies* p.169)

Jack was brutal in his approach. Jack knew that Piggy's glasses were the only source of building a fire and it was necessary to gain possession of it. Hence, he and his hunters, who had transported the evil designs of men to the island and infected even others with it, attacked Ralph and his boys in the dark, and in the confusion that prevailed, escaped with the glasses of Piggy. Piggy was sightless without it. Ralph and others had lost their source of fire and hope. It had fallen into the hands of Jack: "The Chief led them, trotting steadily, exulting in his achievement. He was a chief now in truth; and he made stabbing motions with his spear. From his left hand dangled Piggy's broken glasses." (*Lord of the Flies* p.191)

Jack displayed every sign of a threatened dictator and enviously safeguarded his throne. He was brutal and did

not hesitate to persecute persons who displeased him. One of the boys, Wilfred, had been tied and soundly beaten, without anybody knowing the reason. Simon was killed by them. Piggy met his end at the hands of Jack and his tribe, who were not the least upset, as they had turned into real savages. Jack turned his attention towards Ralph and decided to do away with him as well. Sam and Eric informed Ralph that Jack and Roger,

"... hate you, Ralph. They're going to do to you.  
They're going to hunt you to-morrow."(*Lord of the Flies* p.214)

True to the warning, Ralph found that Jack had begun the hunt in right earnest in the morning. The pig-hunt degenerates into man-hunt. The savages with their paint and spears spread terror. First he tried to crush Ralph with elephant sized rocks, if he were hiding in the tall grass. When that failed, he smoked him out and set fire to the island itself. Ralph is horrified at his own plight. With Piggy and his conch gone, all order and sense are lost. He finds himself an outcast, alienated and isolated. In trying to come to terms with the outer world, he discovers the horrible inner self of man. Ralph weeps "for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart..."(*Lord of the Flies* p.230)

Jack had inherited all the wretchedness of the adult world and he displayed them freely. When he found that he could act at will, without being challenged nor cautioned by a grown-up hand he unashamedly turned himself and his choir boys into savages and openly indulged in hunting and murdering, not only animals, but even fellow human beings. He thirsted for blood and lusted all the while for power and position. He could not face any disagreement and put them down mercilessly. He was happy only when he ruled supreme and had the abject obedience of all. He is an embodiment of evil both in man and society.

The constant fear of being annihilated and the need for self-preservation dominates the daily life of man. He feels himself secure only in mercilessly putting down all opposition, real or imagined, to his authority and being a master of his surroundings. He gains cruel satisfaction from the fact that he can control others and be their master. This cruelty inherent in human nature is pictured again and again by William Golding in his writings. Ralph is mercilessly hunted, and, in the process the island set on fire in the *Lord of the Flies*, because Jack felt himself insecure with Ralph around.

## 6. The Roger within Us

The confrontation between the representation of order and the forces of chaos takes place when Ralph, accompanied by Piggy and the twins, Samneric, visit the castle rock, the stronghold of Jack. Samneric are captured and forced to turn savages in the violent clash. It is as though civilization had been forced into subjugation by brute force. Piggy holds up the conch and appeals for order. But the fragile shell is nothing before the fierce anarchic tendencies of Jack and his men. Roger, Jack's henchman, lets fall a huge rock which strikes hard and drives him to his violent death with the talisman in his hands exploding into pieces. The evil of Roger is incomprehensible, in part because he is a vague character, about whose background we know virtually nothing. But Golding is determined that we should confront the Roger within us. There is no escape from the pain of being human, no prospect of erecting unrealistic political systems where all will go well. We have the very unpleasant feeling that we are being hunted by Jack and Roger. We fear and loathe their extravagant and insatiable evil.

Man has the choice to choose between good and evil according to the circumstances and environment he has to contend with. It is true that trying conditions or bad company lead men, especially the young, to evil ways, even before they are either able to understand the meaning of their wrongful deeds or resist them. But, one is great when one is able to quickly correct himself and follow the true path on knowing that what one has been persisting with is wrong. If one deliberately sticks to one's old ways, then one has wilfully chosen the path of evil. Spiritual regeneration lies in self-sacrifice and harmonising of one's impulses and desires for the good of the whole. The desire to think and do good and preserving one's character at all costs should be uppermost in one's day to day dealing.

## 7. Lord of the Flies

Lord of the Flies is a translation of 'Beelzebub' the Greek transliteration of the ancient Hebrew word for the 'Prince of the Devils', an incarnation of evil in both Judaism and Christianity. It refers to the bleeding pig's head that Jack poised on a stick in the forest clearing as a sacrificial gift for the beast. This becomes the most important symbol in the novel when Simon confronts the sow's head, he remained staring hypnotically at the head on the stake. On the ground, a pile of the animal's entrails was covered by a blob of flies and the head on the stick, 'the Lord of the Flies' seemed to beckon to him in mocking fashion and speak in the voice of a school-master, telling him that he was unwanted on the island. It spoke to

him grimly, "There isn't anyone to help you. Only me. And I'm the Beast" (*Lord of the Flies* 161). It continued, "Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill!...I'm part of you" (*Lord of the Flies* 161). It tells Simon that evil lies inside every human heart. Hence, 'Lord of the Flies' becomes a symbol of Satan and beast.

The children grow filthier and filthier in the course of the novel, an external manifestation of their internal state. Pig's head, representing 'Lord of the Flies' stands for Jack's group of hunters denoting evil and savagery. Ralph identifies the evil that surrounds him particularly in the person of Jack, and tries to destroy it. As an outward expression, with repugnance, he knocks the boar's head to the ground at the end of the novel and uses the stick as a spear.

Golding tries to convey the moral that the world is not a reasonable place and that power corrupts and a person has to live with the darkness of man's heart. What we realise is that once the restraints of civilisation are removed, the Lord of the Flies or Evil begins to rule over us. The grownups are engaged in a deadly warfare and the children on the island get into an open conflict. The vast majority of them paint themselves, throw off their clothes and turn into savages worshipping the Lord of the Flies.

Even when evil abounds all-around, there are still some persons in this world, who, not withstanding the adverse circumstances in which they are placed in, overcome all temptations in life, shrink from evil thoughts and deeds, and follow the spiritual path. They help others to see the invisible and the eternal, whatever be the factors that affect one's life. Simon in the *Lord of the Flies*, is one such outstanding figure. The children were under constant fear of the beast lurking in the dark. Only Simon is free of all such thoughts. He does not share the fear of the others. Simon believed in the evil within man and that goodness had to prevail in the end. If man is able to master the beast within him, the search for the devil outside would not arise. His own kind nature allowed Simon to understand the sweetness of things and the goodness that prevailed everywhere.

## 8. Conclusion

Golding states in his essay *Fable* that "*man produces evil as a bee produces honey*" (*Fable* 87). Golding's writings are meant to show us that evil is part of man's nature and this evil must be accepted, not ignored, or grave will be the consequences. Man is the author of his own troubles, which again, could be traced back to his own selfish nature. Man is never at harmony with himself - his thoughts and actions reflect his uneasiness and helplessness. He is in constant fear of being harmed by the unknown. This forces him, in a state of confusion, to be ever at war with his surroundings to satisfy his ego and exhibit his personality.

The forces of good, symbolized by Ralph, Simon, Piggy etc., in *Lord of the Flies* constantly struggle to maintain law and order in the society, however, few individuals like Jack, Roger etc., thwarts the efforts. This is the common story of the world irrespective of the political system that governs it. Hence, it is not the society or the political system that is responsible for the evil that we find in the world but few perverted individuals. No society is bad in itself, it is the defective human nature that makes the defective society. All is not lost, however. Notwithstanding the overwhelming majority the forces of evil enjoy, goodness will ultimately prevail. It is not that the world has come to such a pass that goodness cannot assert itself.

Just as evil cannot thrive in this world, goodness too will have to have its counterpart in vice. Goodness always implies something that is sinful. Neither can it exist by itself. If good develops within the system of culture, so does evil, and while virtue enters on new phases, vice assumes fresh forms. Without the existence of the various temptations in life, which draw man to his evil ways, it would not be possible for man to aspire for his spiritual salvation. In a way sin is a good in disguise and only through suffering, through experience, through failures and defeats, by coming face to face with evil in all its might, that man is able to appreciate the true values of life that lays in goodness. Thus, Plato was not wrong in concluding "that evil could not pass away from this earthly experience, for there must always be something opposite to the Good." (*The Philosophy of Religion* p.541)

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