William Golding and *Lord of the Flies*

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Abstract
This paper focuses on the a brief review on life, writing features displayed in his latter major work of William Golding and focus on the interpretation on symbolism in *Lord of the Flies* compared with other “deserted island” literature.

**Key words:** William Golding; *Lord of the Flies*; Symbolism; Deserted island

INTRODUCTION
While the Angry Young Men were starting a literary movement that emphasized unadorned realism and a revolt against intellectual culture in the middle 1950’s William Golding began writing novels of a very different kind. Unlike the Angry Young Men, who were nearly all under 30 years old, Golding was 43 when his first novel appeared. He disregarded the “kitchen sink” realism of daily life, but turned instead to symbolism to express his view of life. He was just as pessimistic about condition in Western societies as were most other writers at that time, but he differed from them in trying to find and clearly identify the cause. He did not look for it in political or economic systems, but in the actual nature of human beings, which he believed to be basically bad and impossible to reform. He thought man’s worst tendencies could be controlled by civilization but not changed, and he believed that man’s anarchy nature eventually caused the downfall of orderly societies. Golding’s works attracted a wide following among young intellectuals during the 1950’s.

1. BIOGRAPHY
William Golding was born before the First World War in Cornwall, on the south-western tip of England. He was educated at a famous boys’ school in the 1920’s. His parents expected him to become a scientist and sent him to Oxford University with this purpose in mind. However, after two years of studies in science Golding changed his major to English literature and the study of Anglo-Saxon. He graduated in 1935, published a book of poetry, and became a school master at a boy’s school, an occupation which he considered to be mostly a waste of time.

In 1940 he joined the Royal Navy and entered the Second World War. During the next five years he took part in many battles and saw the sinking of the German battleship Bismarck. He commanded a rocket-launching ship during the Allied invasion and liberation of France in 1944. He fought fiercely because he was bitterly opposed to the Nazi philosophy, with its cruel intention of making Germans the “master race” of the world and the resulting death camps for murdering and distortions of culture. Golding wrote what he learned from his hard naval service against the Nazis: “The basic point my generation discovered about man was that there was more evil in him than could be accounted for simply by social pressure.” From this he got the idea which underlies all of his books: that human beings constantly spoil their opportunities to make a good world, not by conscious intention but because the bad qualities in their nature overwhelm them.

After the war, Golding went back to teaching and started writing novels. His first novel, *Lord of the Flies*, was published in 1954 and it aroused widespread interest from both critics and the public. It is the story of a group
of English school boys who, when isolated on a tropical superstition. Its violent and unexpected treatment of a popular type of story showed that the English were not superior to less civilized people of the world. The implication of the book was the humans can only form good societies when the restriction of civilization forces them to do so.

*Lord of the Flies* takes its basic situation from a famous 19th Century adventure story for boys entitled *Coral Island* by R. M. Ballantyne. In this tale, a group of shipwrecked English boys reach a tropical island and soon organize themselves into a reasonable imitation of pious—Victorian English society. The boo encouraged its readers to believe that English people had reached the highest point of evolution in the world, that they were a splendid example to all others because of their “natural” superiority. The boys in Golding’s story quickly relapse into savagery, invent a depraved kind of religion based on their fear of the jungle, and they try to kill the two boys who continue to represent intelligent reason and civilized behavior. The irony of the contrast is reinforced by the fact that Golding’s main heroes have the same name as Ballantyne’s young characters. The next year, 1955, Golding wrote another imaginative parable, *The Inheritors*. This story also takes place in an unrealistic setting, this time an ancient period at the beginning of human history. Homo sapiens, our own intelligent species of man overran the innocent world of Neanderthal man, a primitive, peaceful species, and used their superior abilities to conquer the gentle Neanderthals. Like the boys in the earlier novel, the intelligent humans spoiled their chance to make a good, new world. It is Golding’s opinion that humans bring evil with them wherever they go, as part of their nature, so in the end they are incapable of maintaining their civilizations as history continues. Human intelligence is too often misused to invent methods by which the strong oppress the weak and create superstitions.

Golding wrote the third book *Pincher Martin*, about the guilty of state of mind of a naval officer whose boat has been torpedoed. He clings tenaciously to this condition and prefers to die on a rock, full of memories, rather than try to regain civilization. The main character of *The Spire* is the dean of a cathedral in the Middle Ages who becomes very proud and dreams of adding an enormous steeple to his great church. In the end, he sees the spire completed but only as the result of many acts of cruelty and wickedness. He has also lost his belief in God. His success in this wrong-headed scheme stood for his belief in God. His success in this wrong-headed scheme stood for his failure as a civilized human being when pride and ambition overwhelmed him. Golding likes to set his books in strange or primitive locations, and some of his best writing is in his excellent primitive locations, and some of his best writing is in his excellent descriptions of natural scenery. The people that inhabit these landscapes have the chance to create a new and perfect way of life amid ideal surroundings. this is the same sort of fable that is told in the Bible about the Garden of Eden. In the Bible story, God put Adam and Eve, the first man and the first woman, into a beautiful garden and told them to live in peace with Nature and with one another. But in every such case, the people fail, starting with greed and selfishness, then the desire to dominate others and finally end by killing their fellow men. Golding wrote several more novels in 1960’s he personally considered *The Inheritors* to be his best book but the greatest impact was made by his first one, *Lord of the Flies*.

After twelve years when he published nothing, Golding has now written a new book *Darkness Visible*. It tells the life of Matty, who was so badly burned as a child during the wartime bombing of London, that he remains forever scarred and disfigured. The invisible scars on his face and body symbolize invisible scars on his conscience caused by his betrayal of a teacher. Every character he meets in post-war, multi-racial Britain, and among international terrorist, carries a symbolic meaning. Like all of Golding’s books, it is meant to be understood in more than one way.

Golding’s works appealed very much to the restless, disillusioned young generation after the Second World War. Two different books about young people enjoyed the greatest popularity with English-speaking intellectual youth; they were the *Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger, an American author, and Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*. It is interesting to compare the themes of the two books. The American novel tells the story of a good, generous-minded youth in New York trying to find something decent in a rotten society; it encouraged like-minded young people to drop out of their parents’ way of life and form a “counter-culture” more to their liking. The English novel, just the contrary, shows rotten youngsters successfully destroying a good and decent society. It encouraged a feeling of hopelessness about the chances of improving conditions in the world. Perhaps the two books reflect the optimism with which America, a young country, tends to view life and the pessimism that has gripped England in this century, seeing itself in decline at the end of a long and glorious history.

### 2. MAJOR WORKS

Golding has written eight novels, many short stories, a book of poems, and one play.

His major works are summarized as follows:

*Lord of the Flies* (1954), his first and most important book, tells about a group of English school-boys alone on an island that turned into savages and denies the value of civilization.

*The Inheritors* (1955), set in the fat distant past, shows how the first intelligent men destroy the harmonious life of the more primitive Neanderthal men and introduce many bad ways.

*Pincher Martin* (1956), tells of a naval officer’s life
and death after his boat is sunk in the war, and how bravery can become destructive.

*The Spire* (1964), concerns the building of a mediaeval cathedral whose dean is led by ambition and pride to add an enormous spire at the cost of his faith and his character.

*The pyramid* (1967), Golding’s most light-heated book, showing man’s propensity for evil in a humorous light.

*The Darkness Visible* (1979), Golding’s most recent book, returns to heavy symbolism, giving a darkly pessimistic view of contemporary England and man’s impossible task of overcoming his own savage nature.

### 3. ON LORD OF THE FLIES

In the midst of an unnamed war, a plane carrying a group of British boys who are being evacuated from a war zone crashes on an isolated island. At the beginning, holding the conch which is the symbol of authority, Ralph is elected as the children’s chief. And then Ralph points another older boy, Jack, the leader of the choir, to be in charge of the boys who will hunt food for the entire group. A mini mimic ordered world seems established as their coming society. Actually a union group comes to divide into two parts. On one side, convinced to get rescued, Ralph directs children to maintain signal fire on the top of the mountain, and make shelters and find foods (mostly fruits). Besides Piggy, Simon is another boy who feels an instinctive need to protect “littluns” (younger boys) from “biguns” (older boys). On the other, Jack who is engaged in hunting wild pigs controls most children by delicious meat or strong power. Distinct from Simon, Roger is Jack’s close companion and often abuses “littluns”. When Jack builds his fort, the initial group completely splits into two parts. Ralph’s group shrinks rapidly with the death of Simon and Piggy. At last, Ralph himself is abandoned and even hunted as a pig by the others, which means Jack’s group has overwhelming Ralph’s group thoroughly. At the end of the story, an officer rescues Ralph. However, has he saved the stray soul of these boys? Obviously this is not a simple adventure story of boys cast away on a tropical island. Golding has combined the typically 20th Century methods of analyzing human beings and societies and has created a theoretical situation in which to test them.

The fear and frustration provoke the darkness of man’s heart. Without any law and order, man will turn into savagery. The title, *Lord of the Flies*, with a rhetorical meaning of “devil”, originating from an early mistranslation of Hebrew and Greek versions of the Bible, does not enter this book in any religious sense but the name, which is nonetheless appropriate in that it denotes decay, dirt and destruction. Golding sees a modern equivalent of the Devil’s evil force in anarchy, disorganization and the discarding of morality, anti-social forces that can manifest themselves so strongly in some individuals that they become uncontrollable in the world. Then the civilized restraints of social consciousness, reason and intelligent order can no longer hold their own. The emergence of this wild, anti-social force is the theme of *Lord of the Flies*.

Golding himself explains it this way:

> The theme is an attempt to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human nature. The whole book is symbolic in nature except the rescue in the end when adult life appears, dignified and capable, but in reality enmeshed in the same evil as the symbolic life of the children on the island. The officer, having interrupted a man-hunt, prepares to take the children off the island in a cruiser (warship) which will presently be hunting its enemy in the same implacable way. And who will rescue the adult and his cruiser?

Thus, we could make a conclusion the implications of the story go far beyond the deterioration of the children but an evil but authentic image of civilized world. The island Golding displayed initially for the reader is the abundant and fantastic wonderland filled with life and energy, “Flower and fruit grew together on the same tree and everywhere was the scent of ripeness and the booming of a million bees at pasture”, while finally, turned out to be “scorched up like dead wood” in which “Nothing prospered but the flies who blackened their lord and made the spilt guts look like a heap of glistening coal”.

The three main characters, Ralph Piggy and Jack, along with an uncounted number of other boys, enact a savage human tragedy of hunting and killing when they have the chance to create a perfect life for themselves.

Ralph is the representative of civilization, with its symbols of law and social organization. The conch shell, with which he claws to call the boys to meetings and puts into the hands of any boy who wishes to speak, while others must keep silent and listen to him, is representing an authority balancing a democratic society with equal rights and freedom. Everyone in this society works for the benefit of the whole group. Building shelters, looking for food and keeping the fire alive are the three most important things.

The collapse of this society as well as the fear of the beast brings about the death of Simon and Piggy. The accidental death for Simon and deliberate assassination for Piggy displays the darkness inside human heart, being exposed while mankind is conquered by savages. Fear is what provokes savagery. Authority and civilization was smashed as deterioration of Roger. The destruction of the conch along with the death of Piggy means.

Piggy, a fat, clumsy boy, represents the necessary power of logical thought and intellect existing only in an adult world which could be disposed from his attempt on conditioning the island as in England they all lived in and the continual references to reason-oriented side of human nature, along with the obsession with the signal-fire. His eye-glasses are both a tool for the boys setting fire and a symbol of reason. The shattering of his glasses, one lens at a time, marks the decay of rational influences as the story progresses. The signal fire is one of the only symbols of order on the island. The extinction of the
fire shows a mental disintegration of Piggy. The death of Piggy demonstrates that the evil in humanity can never be controlled under any of civilized systems in western world. The democracy is doomed to collapse under the power.

Jack, the leader of the forces of anarchy on the island, is a symbol of the inherent evil inside human nature. His talent for hunting and killing pigs lures all boys except Ralph and Piggy. The followers paint their bodies and give up the habits of civilization for the sake of meat. Jack rules the “tribe” of savages by encouraging their fear of a terrible, imaginary “beast” that they believe to be roaming the island. The tribe murders Simon, a strange, solitary boy, when they are whipped up into a state of wild excitement and told that he is the Beast. The tribe kills Piggy next. Ralph is then alone and he is made the object of a fierce man-hunt. Hiding and escaping through the jungle of the island like a hunted animal, he is saved by the arrival of a naval ship and its officers, who takes charge of the children.

The world depicted in the fiction is symbolically reflecting the modern civilized world: facing enormous survival threat, people could barely endure fission and the evil expansion of humanity along with war and massacre from the two world wars, Hitler, the militarism, to the barbaric bombardments. The brutish nature of modern human beings can never be denied. While reading the barbaric fighting on the deserted island, has anyone associated with the ongoing atom combat which is more brutal and fierce? The congruent relationship between the illusion and reality is the delicate arranged to present a symbol of modern society filled with decay, destruction, demoralization, hysteria and panic.

**CONCLUSION**

*Lord of Flies* is a vivid demonstration of Golding's talented controlling of the length and types of sentences, the exquisite mirroring techniques, the deliberate use of imagery to enhance the meaning of the story. To appealing to the senses of one of the central problems of western thought: the nature of human personality and its influence on society, he draws upon Western studies of psychiatry, anthropology, and social psychology. His classic, startling, and perennially bestselling portrait of human nature remains as provocative today as when it was first published. Constructing a concrete and sensible theoretically palace which, on the other hand, is the reflection of the brutal, barbarous and immoral human nature and society.

**REFERENCES**


