

***Commentary on William Golding's  
Lord of the Flies***

By Mojgan Jalali

With the veneer of civilization cast off and done for, man retrogresses to a primordial state where naught but the gratification of animal instincts matters. Such a standing naturally tempers a return to the pre-natal state where no distinction or identity exists. Just how long such a regressive journey takes depends by far on the susceptibility of human nature. And this is what William Golding moots in the ***Lord of the Flies***.

Marooned on an island away from the enchanting tunes of civilization, "a pack of British boys" revert to a bestial mode of existence, ripping asunder their supposedly civilized selves and leading an essentially cannibalistic life. The struggle for power on the island and the division of the boys into opposing groups echo the dominance of the law of the jungle. What the boys experience is a stark reminiscence of Darwin's theory of the "survival of the fittest". The center-piece of the boys' undeclared battle is to kill or to be killed. If a boy is not strong enough to be

a victimizer, he is sure to become a victim, and once a boy becomes a victimizer, he must incessantly and ruthlessly kill. Once such a code of values is imposed on their small society, the last shreds of civilization are either broken off or misused. Ralph's pressing demand to keep a fire, build huts, and hold the conch falls on deaf ears, as the fire -- standing for knowledge -- is initially put out and finally started to serve vile purposes, as the huts -- standing for a civilized, orderly, and harmonious society -- are demolished, and as the conch -- standing for order and authority -- shatters "into a thousand white fragments". Even Piggy's glasses which provided an enlarged view and represented intellectualism averse to the predominance of savagery on the island are first partially broken and later stolen by the savages, for the knowledge they bring is a threat to the animalistic existence of the savages. The glasses enable Piggy to attack the orders and institutions of such a society:

*What are we? Humans? Or animals? Or savages? What's grown-ups going to think? Going off-hunting pigs-letting fires out - and now!*

As a consequence, the glasses and their owner question and undermine the bases and tenets of this savage society. Thus the glasses and their owner must be gotten rid of to promote the

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smooth flow of the barbaric doctrines of the savage community.

Even the taciturn yet insightful Simon poses a peril to the operations of this savage community. Peaceful and quiet, Simon is the first person to recognize and express "mankind's essential illness", but his efforts apparently fall into "ruins". Yet Simon's initial conviction that "maybe there is a beast" and "maybe it's only us" is ascertained in his symbolic encounter with the *Lord of the Flies* when the "ancient, inescapable recognition" assures Simon that the beast is actually inside man's soul, as echoed by the beast itself: "I'm part of you". As this "recognition" is too hard for the savages to accept, they ironically kill Simon as the beast-personified, thus relieving themselves of a threat to their community and feigning good riddance to the beast, while actually the beast inside becomes more vigorous than ever. Simon surely undergoes a sad plight, but despite his inability to communicate his message, Simon reaches a precious understanding not accorded to all.

The simultaneous crash and obliteration of Piggy and the conch symbolize the loosening of the final chord of civilization. The two crumble together because law and order, intellectualism and insight are interdependent and feed on one another. With the collapse of one, the other cannot exist. On another level, Piggy cherishes traditional authority as represented by the

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conch. As Piggy originally discovered the conch, his existence hinges on it, and when the conch smashes, Piggy's life will be to no avail. He is, therefore, killed simultaneously, as he cannot tolerate a life devoid of order and rule. The two, posing a harmonious threat to the status quo, are disposed of together to give the savages more elbow room to wipe off the last vestiges of civilization from the island (as Jack marks):

***See? See? That's what you'll get! I meant that! There isn't a tribe for you any more! The conch is gone-***

In actuality, the position of Jack and the savages is firmly established at this point and he speaks from a vantage point of authority, as every sign of civilization is demolished and only Ralph is left, but he is not to be left "alone":

***The breaking of the conch and the deaths of Piggy and Simon lay over the island like a vapor. These painted savages would go further and further. Then there was that indefinable connection between himself and Jack; who therefore would never let him alone; never.***

The appearance of the naval officer, as an emissary of the adult world, works as a purple patch. Coming from a world destroyed by atomic bomb, the officer seems to seek a

paradise--and a safe haven too--on the island. He falls short of realizing the corruption and evil prevalent on the island and takes everything as a "jolly good show". Even this grown up is blind to the reality and fails to see the beast dominant in the psyche of mankind--children and grown - ups alike. He is so naive that he feels children are incapable of vice and violence, thus interpreting their life on the island as a "show", a facade, a mask that hides the bitter reality of the savagery lurking in his heart and soul:

*I should have thought that a pack of British boys --  
you're all British, aren't you? -- would have been able to  
put up a better show than that...*

Finally, it is only Ralph who lives on with the knowledge of the end of innocence. Pungent and bitter, this knowledge gnaws at his heart, prompting him to weep "for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy". Even before weeping, Ralph had made "a scream of fright and anger and desperation" but the officer's short-sightedness precluded him from realizing the real reason why Ralph was weeping. He only interpreted it as a sigh of relief on the part of an innocent child marooned on an island away from adult control. He believed that Ralph was crying

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because of nostalgia for his former life. Not for a minute does he realize that Ralph's weeping is prompted by his terrible knowledge and actual experience of man's essential depravity and bestiality hidden behind a visage of civilization and humanity.

Pungently ironic, "rescue" after acquisition of this knowledge no longer bears any weight. Rescue is finally stripped of its initial euphoria, as formerly marked by Ralph:

***The best thing we can do is to get ourselves rescued.***

The appearance of the naval officer does not alleviate the pang of sorrow clutching at Ralph's heart. Ralph ultimately comes to grips with the fact that rescue is but an illusion, a mirage-- tempting yet unattainable. Ralph realizes that so long as the beast lurks in man's psyche, no rescue whatever is feasible. Even the rescue offered to him by the officer seems illusory: How could Ralph be certain that his future life in a war-ravaged civilization will be better than the bestial life he experienced on the island? Nothing is certain any more, as humanity devoid of spirituality is enmeshed in savagery:

***He knelt among the shadows and felt his isolation bitterly. They were savages it was true; but they were human, and the ambushing fears of the deep night were coming on.***

At last, man's bestiality turns him into "striped and inimical creatures". Ralph is pursued and persecuted only for his desire to keep the torch of knowledge aflame:

***"But I've done nothing," whispered Ralph urgently. "I only wanted to keep up a fire!"***

Notwithstanding the staunch animosity he faces, Ralph is bent on firmly holding on to the knowledge he has obtained, even at the cost of his life:

***Most, he was beginning to dread the curtain that might waver in his brain, blacking out the sense of danger, making a simpleton of him.***

All in all, the *Lord of the Flies* resonates human bondage and depravity. The boys' tragic fall is in the manner of Greek tragedies, but the difference lies in the fact that for the boys, there is no redemption and no restoration of order. The post-lapsarian Adam must bear the consequences of his own deeds in silence and submission. And if the tragic "recognition" is too unbearable, he must either die literally or symbolically kill his civilized self to adapt himself to the dark urges and instincts of

his psyche. Any person who, like Ralph, falls short of seizing one of these choices will suffer disintegration and individuation.

The failure Ralph ultimately experiences reflects humanity's inability, when devoid of spirituality, to establish good and stave off evil. It further evinces the victory of the forces of corruption and evil not only in nooks and corners of the world but also in the recesses of the human psyche, if moral and spiritual values are not kept alive. Man's last cry against this plight is only a "desperate ululation" with no power to destroy the beast firmly ingrained inside:

*"Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill!" said the head. For a moment or two the forest and all the other dimly appreciated places echoed with the parody of laughter. "You knew, didn't you? I'm the reason why it's no go? Why things are what they are?"*

Yes, the Beast is inside, and there is no fighting it in case spiritual values are not adhered to.