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REVIEW ARTICLE

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Flashback Technique in Novels of William Golding

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Golding uses the flashback technique of Pincher Martin more extensively in his next novel, Free Fall (1959). Unlike his first three novels, Free Fall is told with a first person narrator, an artist named Samuel Mountjoy. The novel takes as a model Dante's La Vita Nuova, a collection of love poems interspersed with Dante's own commentary on the poems. Golding uses the character Mountjoy to comment on the conflict between rationalism and faith.

Issues of faith are addressed in The Spire (1964) as well. A fourteenth-century Dean of Barchester Cathedral decides that God wants a 400-foot-high spire added to the top of the cathedral, although the cathedral's foundation is not sufficient to hold the weight of the spire. The novel tells the story of the human costs of the spire's construction and the lessons that the Dean learns too late.

The Pyramid (1967) provides an examination of English social class within the context of a town ironically named Stilbourne. A primary issue in this story is music, and the novel utilizes the same structure as the musical form sonata.

Golding's next publication was a collection entitled The Scorpion God: Three Short Novels (1971). Each story explores the negative repercussions of technological progress — an idea that was in sharp contrast to the technology worship of the space age. One of the novellas had been originally published in 1956; Golding then turned the story into a comedic play titled The Brass Butterfly, which was first performed in London in 1958.

Golding's next novel, Darkness Visible, appeared in 1979. It addresses the interdependence of good and evil, exemplified in the two main characters: Sophy, who plots to kidnap a child for ransom, and Matty, who gives his life to prevent it.

Golding's 1984 publication, The Paper Men, was condemned by reviewers as his worst work, partly because the novel seemed to condemn literary critics. The plot concerns an elderly novelist trying to elude a young scholar who wants to write his biography.

One of Golding's most ambitious works is The Sea Trilogy, three full-length novels that follow the emotional education and moral growth of an aristocratic young man named Edmund Talbot during an ocean voyage to Australia in 1812. Rites of Passage (1980) shows Talbot's spiritual growth, Close Quarters (1987) depicts his emotional and aesthetic development, and Fire Down Below (1989) covers his political enlightenment.

Golding's work is not limited to fiction: He published three collections of essays which are often comic and expand upon or illuminate his novels. The Hot Gates and Other Occasional Pieces was published in 1966;A Moving Target appeared in 1982; and An Egyptian Journal followed in 1985.

Following the publication of his best-known work, Lord of the Flies, Golding was granted membership in the Royal Society of Literature in 1955. Ten years later, he received the honorary designation Commander of the British Empire (CBE) and was knighted in 1988. His 1980 novel Rites of Passage won the Booker Prize, a prestigious British award. Golding's greatest honor was being awarded the 1983 Nobel Prize for Literature.

Lord of the Flies was driven by Golding's consideration of human evil, a complex topic that involves an examination not only of human nature but also the causes, effects, and manifestations of evil. It demands also a close observation of the methods or ideologies humankind uses to combat evil and whether those methods are effective. Golding addresses these topics through the intricate allegory of his novel.

When Lord of the Flies was first released in 1954, Golding described the novel's theme in a publicity questionnaire as "an attempt to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human nature." In his 1982 essay A Moving Target, he stated simply "The theme of Lord of the Flies is grief, sheer grief, grief, grief." The novel ends of course with Ralph grieving the indelible mark of evil in each person's heart, an evil he scarcely suspected existed before witnessing its effects on his friends and supporters. The former

schoolboys sought unthinkingly to dominate others who were not of their group. They discovered within themselves the urge to inflict pain and enjoyed the accompanying rush of power. When confronted with a choice between reason's civilizing influence and animality's self-indulgent savagery, they choose to abandon the values of the civilization that Ralph represents.

This same choice is made constantly all over the world, all throughout history — the source of the grief Golding sought to convey. He places supposedly innocent schoolboys in the protected environment of an uninhabited tropical island to illustrate the point that savagery is not confined to certain people in particular environments but exists in everyone as a stain on, if not a dominator of, the nobler side of human nature. Golding depicts the smallest boys acting out, in innocence, the same cruel desire for mastery shown by Jack and his tribe while hunting pigs and, later, Ralph. The adults waging the war that marooned the boys on the island are also enacting the desire to rule others.

Ironically, by giving rein to their urge to dominate, the boys find themselves in the grip of a force they can neither understand nor acknowledge. The Lord of the Flies tells Simon "Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill!" and then laughs at the boys' efforts to externalize their savagery in the form of an animal or other fearsome creature. Simon has the revelation that evil isn't simply a component of human nature, but an active element that seeks expression.

Most societies set up mechanisms to channel aggressive impulses into productive enterprises or projects. On the island, Jack's hunters are successful in providing meat for the group because they tap into their innate ability to commit violence. To the extent that this violence is a reasoned response to the group's needs (for example, to feed for the population), it produces positive effects and outcomes. However, when the violence becomes the motivator and the desired outcome lacks social or moral value beyond itself, as it does with the hunters, at that point the violence becomes evil, savage, and diabolical.

Violence continues to exist in modern society and is institutionalized in the military and politics. Golding develops this theme by having his characters establish a democratic assembly, which is greatly affected by the verbal violence of Jack's power-plays, and an army of hunters, which ultimately forms a small military dictatorship. The boys' assemblies are likened to both ends of the social or civil spectrum, from pre-verbal tribe gatherings to modern governmental institutions, indicating that while the forum for politics has changed over the millennia, the dynamic remains the same.

Consider the emotional basis of the boys' choice of leaders: Initially they vote for Ralph not because he has demonstrated leadership skills but because of his charisma and arbitrary possession of the conch. Later they desert him — and the reasoned democracy he promotes — to join Jack's tribe because Jack's way of life, with the war paint and ritualized dance, seems like more fun. Choosing Jack's "fun" tribe indicates a dangerous level of emotionally based self-indulgence. By relying on emotion to decide the island's political format, the boys open themselves up to the possibility of violence because violence lies in the domain of emotion.

Yet Jack's mentality on a larger scale is not fun and games but warfare, a concept made clear at the end: When Ralph encounters the officer on the beach, he notices first not the officer's face but his uniform and revolver, which are the markings of the officer's tribe. The decorative elements of his uniform symbolize his war paint. His ship will be enacting the same sort of manhunt for his enemy that Jack's tribe conducts for Ralph.

Golding addresses the effects of fear on the individual and on a group. For individuals, fear distorts reality such as when Samneric's terror at spotting the dead paratrooper magnifies their experience from merely seeing movement and hearing the parachute to being actively chased down the mountain as they flee. When the other boys hear Samneric's tale, the group dynamic of fear comes into play. The boys do not band together to overcome this fearful situation through unity but allow their own worst impulses to surface and dominate, fragmenting into opposing groups and killing one of their own in a frenzy of fear and savagery.

Golding gives a more subtle treatment to the theme concerning speech's role in civilization. He repeatedly represents verbal communication as the sole property of civilization while savagery is non-verbal, or silent. Despite the animal noises in the jungle, as an entity, the jungle emanates a silence even the hunter Jack finds intimidating. In fact all the boys find silence threatening; they become agitated when a speaker holding the conch in assembly falls silent.

The conch plays a key role in this theme because it symbolizes not only to the power to speak during assembly but also the power of speech, an ability that separates humans from animals. Following the death of Piggy and destruction of the conch, "the silence was complete" as if Piggy provided the last bastion of human intellect — or humanity itself — on the island.

Verbal communication is crucial to the development of abstract thought. "If only one had time to think!" Ralph laments. Civilization provides institutions where the individuals can devote themselves to mental activities. Simon created such a place in his hidden spot in the jungle. He found silence necessary to contemplate his vision of the beast. He

was the only boy to understand the true identity of the much-feared beast and the only boy to whom the Lord of the Flies speaks. To bring about that conversation, the sow's head had to break the ultimate silence of death. Golding may depict silence as tremendously threatening because death does signify absolute silence, and the end of all hope.

While the conch's symbolic power remained alive to the boys, there was hope that they could continue with their small society peacefully and productively. With the loss of regulated discourse came the end of Ralph's humane influence on the boys.

Golding uses the boys' fear of a mythical beast to illustrate their assumption that evil arises from external forces rather than from themselves. This fearsome beast initially takes form in their imaginations as a snake-type animal that disguises itself as jungle vines; later, they consider the possibility of a creature that rises from the sea or the more nebulous entity of a ghost. When they spot the dead paratrooper who has landed on the mountain, the boys feel sure that they have proof of a beast's existence. In fact a beast does roam the island, but not in the form the boys imagine.

Golding wanted to illustrate in this novel the dark side of human nature and make the point that each member of humankind has this dark side. The boys conceptualize the source of all their worst impulses as a beast, some sort of actual animal or possibly supernatural creature inhabiting the island. Yet all along the boys take on the persona of the beast when they act on their animal impulses. There is no external beast.

Golding conveys the beast's identity through the literal actions of Jack and his tribe and through the abstract concept conveyed in Simon's vision. Simon's revelation about the beast comes upon him after he witnesses the sow's death and beheading. As an observer instead of a participant, Simon is able to comprehend the brutality of the act. The sow's head becomes covered with flies, creatures that lack the capacity to feel compassion for or empathy with the dead sow, occupied entirely by their need to eat and multiply. That compassion is one of the key dividers between humanity and animality; tellingly, Jack lacks compassion for the littluns and the vulnerable Piggy. Soon his hunters lose their compassion as well, seeking only to hunt meat and increase the numbers of their tribe or kill those who will not join.

When Simon hallucinates that the staked head is speaking to him, his perception of the other boys as the island's true threat is confirmed. The Lord of the Flies confirms that "You knew, didn't you? I'm part of you? Close, close, close! I'm the reason why it's no go? Why things are what they are?"

Note that the literal translation of the Greek word Beelzebub, a term used for the Judeo-Christian idea of Satan, is "lord of the flies," and flies feast on dead animals and excrement. When Simon asks the assembly "What's the dirtiest thing there is?" he looks for the answer "evil" but also included in that answer is decay and death. Ironically, Jack's excretory answer is partially correct.

Jack provides more insight into the beast's identity when he asserts that "The beast is a hunter," unwittingly implicating himself as part of the problem, a source of the boys' fears. His lust for power and authority causes him to commit and encourage savage acts against his own kind — an accurate measure of his depravity. Sitting in front of his tribe, "Power . . . chattered in his ear like an ape." The figurative devil on his shoulder is his own animality, looking to master other creatures.

Golding pairs the devolution of Jack's character with Simon's hallucinatory revelation to paint a complete picture of humankind's dark side — that which the boys call "the beast."

Part of Golding's intent was to demonstrate that the evil is not restricted to specific populations or situations. On the island, the beast is manifest in the deadly tribal dances, war paint, and the manhunt; in the outside world that same lust for power and control plays out as a nuclear war. Prior to the war, some of the boys, such as the perpetually victimized Piggy, experienced the brutality of others on the playground, an environment often idealized as the joyous site of a carefree childhood. Within civilized society the beast expresses itself in various ways: through acceptable venues such as the military; in unacceptable forms such as madness or criminality, which carries punitive repercussions; or concealed in the maneuvers of politics and other nonviolent power plays. In Lord of the Flies Golding illustrates that evil is present in everyone and everywhere; humankind's work lies not in the impossible mission of eradicating it but in the struggle to keep it from becoming the dominant force in our lives.