

THE APPEAL OF GOLDING

LUKE M. GRANDE

Despite its dismissal by one reviewer as a "well-written but completely unpleasant story," William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, published with little fanfare back in 1954, has since that time become a much-heralded best-seller. Its great popularity may be attributed largely to the tremendous and unforeseen interest in it on the part of college and high school students throughout the country.

College campuses in the late fifties and early sixties have been stirred by discussions over it in much the same way that they were stimulated in the early fifties by J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*—and perhaps for the same reasons. Undoubtedly there is an aspect of modishness about the book's success, but the students' involvement with it actually goes much deeper.

In fact, the adoption of Golding's book by today's youth may be an implicit judgment on much of what has passed in the last ten or twenty years for significant literature. The crop of novels that appeared after World War II was characterized by a type of pessimism and spiritual fatigue that, upon rereading, seems strangely dated.

To students, some of whom were not yet born when the war ended, the themes of the war are for the most part dead, living only in American History courses and on television shows like *Twentieth Century*. They are a bit incredulous (even bored by the fact, perhaps) that we who were living during World War II could be torn by anxieties centered around a German paper-hanger or could take the goose-step seriously. Their reading of the literature of the period is simply not colored, sharpened, and enriched by personal memories, as is their elders'.

Then, when battle memoirs and novels about civilian adjustment had actually reached a dead end, the new wave of the European anti-novel came into its own. Conceived in a depersonalizing milieu, the anti-novel necessarily substituted a rather sterile super-cerebral literary exercise for the formerly action-packed studies in realism.

Although these later experiments frequently proved to be fascinating, often brilliant, *tours de force* that pleased readers intellectually, when compared with the great literature of the past they yielded,

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for many, rather meager insights into the human condition. In them, form as an end in itself tended either to obscure totally the communication of experience or to provide shabby and inconsequential material with a mere penumbra of importance. /457/

The anti-novel may indeed continue to evoke from professional critics and litterateurs esoteric monographs on the anti-novelists' contribution to literature. But it has failed to touch the vital center of the student, who, with a naive but surprisingly trustworthy instinct, seems to sense the vacuum behind such fiction and turns rather to the more traditional humanistic concerns of a William Golding.

In a world that tends to equate evil with unfavorable environment, Golding sees instead man's inner responsibility for choosing between good and evil; in a world that defines personality as a functional phenomenon, Golding emphasizes the substantive reality and absolute value of each human being. Finally, in a world that can affirm at one and the same time a belief in human perfectibility and in instinctive and natural depravity, Golding projects the timeless predicament of man who, despite his moral weakness, struggles to attain heroic ideals.

In a sense, Golding's method is, like his subject matter, atavistic. He returns to the story-teller's technique in anatomizing human springs of action. He avoids the pitfalls of non-communicating stream-of-consciousness techniques and the superficial flashiness of "existential" narrative. Investigating the *way* and the *why* men act, an investigation that he carries on in common with all of Western Civilization's greatest creators of imaginative literature, Golding goes back to the fable, to the apparently straightforward story that is actually multi-radiant in meaning. All the best writers tell a crashing good story; but, without resorting to impenetrable obscurities, they also admit an indefinite number and variety of subtle themes.

Perrault's fairy tale about the Frog Prince, for instance, has been enjoyed for centuries by children who knew nothing about its Freudian or Hegelian under- and overtones. *Gulliver's Travels* is still considered a child's book by many readers, while the *co-gnoscenti* interpret it as literary satire, economic analysis, political history, and theological didacticism. Like Perrault and Swift, Golding is a born story-teller, whether he is talking about the extinction of Neanderthal men (in *The Inheritors*, his latest book), about the "remembrance of things past" of a Nazi torture victim (in *Free Fall*), about a castaway naval officer (in *Pincher Martin*), or about castaway children (in *Lord of the Flies*).

But all of Golding's work is much more than just good story-

telling. For the reader can not go far without becoming aware of the parabolic direction of his writing, the presence in his story of a symbolic level. And it is Golding's understanding of man's nature and the moral problem symbolically underlying the fable to which the student responds—particularly in *Lord of the Flies*: not to the possible and even valid id-ego-superego interpretation of the characters Jack-Ralph-Piggy, nor to the democracy-versus-totalitarianism allegory, but to the fundamental battle between good and evil that goes on in the youth as well as in the adult. In a word, Golding takes the young seriously, recognizing their part in an ancient spiritual struggle.

The story of *Lord of the Flies*, to restate it, concerns a group of English schoolboys marooned on an island and their discovery (along with that of political, social, and religious organization) of the reality of evil in the world through its existence in themselves. In this best of all possible worlds—a pink-rocked, flower-laden paradise, where food is abundant and leisure for playing games is possible—all should be right and happiness assured.

To outline the essential symbolism of the story in rather simplistic terms, Ralph (the philosopher-king, who "had no devil"), with the help of Piggy ("right reason," symbolized by his spectacles) and Jack (the "hunter" and provider of meat and the "onions of Egypt") establish order (symbolized by a "conch shell") over the island. But in a short time an undefinable fear of evil—first vaguely alluded to as a "snake-thing," then, in ascendingly concrete images, as a "beastie," an "animal," a "pig" and finally as Simon/Ralph—makes its appearance.

But only Simon seems to grasp the truth ("However Simon thought of the beast, there arose before his inward sight the picture of a human at once heroic and sick"), an intuition verified in the climactic and mystic confrontation between Simon and the impaled head of a sow, killed savagely by the children. (In worshipping the head, the "Lord of the Flies," they thus satanically enthrone their own power of blackness.) While the others hide from the truth behind masks, Simon hears the words of the "Lord": "Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill! 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?"

The symbols work as all good symbols should; they crystallize the intangible, they clarify the obscure; they function both in plot development and in the parabolic movement of the story.

Each character, although larger than life—an age-old /458/ convention in any artistic medium—is distinctly individual and is

realistically drawn. Ralph, who begins as a more or less irresponsible child (who, for example, stands on his head to exorcise his high spirits), gradually sobers up with the help of experience, to the point where he bitterly questions, "What was a face? What was anything?" and agonizes in confusion, "Things are breaking up. I don't understand why. We began well; we were happy. And then—." And then the bat-like shadow of evil that flaws every creature covered Eden and made an Inferno out of it.

In the midst of some horrifying scenes, the ultimate irony, the myth of adult omniscience and indefectibility, resounds like a diabolic laugh behind the pathetic hopes of the children:

"'Grown-ups know things. They ain't afraid of the dark. They'd meet and have tea and discuss. Then things 'ud be all right—'

'They wouldn't set fire to the island. Or lose—'

'They'd build a ship—'

'They wouldn't quarrel—'

'Or talk about a beast—'

'If only they could get a message to us,' cried Ralph."

The children *do* receive a message from the adult world: a corpse from an air battle, parachuted to the mountain where the children's pathetic "fire" of hope is burning!

A generation of school children today have looked at Golding's world and recognized it as their own. With a response, at which the adults are unnecessarily surprised, the child also weeps with Ralph "for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart."

Yet there is hope in his world: there are the Ralph's who are still able to weep; there are the Piggy's who hold onto the "conch of order" and the "spectacles" of right reason.

Golding has struck the note to which the strings of the twentieth-century youth are attuned. A student in his teens or twenties has not known at first-hand the horrors of war, but he has seen international hatred and the unbridled tyranny of totalitarianism. He has seen a loss of values and of faith; he has seen the twisted faces of hatred in metropolitan ghettos and on green campuses. In sum, he has seen the frightening possibilities of his own nature.

It is no wonder that Golding's treatment of a perennial problem has called forth such a response and has become almost a minor masterpiece, while more sophisticated and ambitious works drop back into the limbo of literary obscurity.

An inevitable touch of the fashionable, it is true, is present in the new evaluations of Golding and his work. He is not yet a modern Chaucer, or a Dostoevski of the sixties. Yet he has in common with these writers the qualities of the genuine artist. And the "children" were among the first to recognize him. /459/