

Miltonic Evil in Golding's Lord of the Flies

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Since the publication of William Golding's Lord of the Flies in 1954, critics have espoused many theories concerning the essence of the novel. "Many critics write that Lord of the Flies dramatizes the Fall of man. As Adam unparadised, the boys cradle within themselves the beast of evil, 'Beelzebub' (the Hebraic original for its English translation, lord of the flies [II Kings i.2] 'the chief of the devils' in Luke ii.15). They turn the Edenic island into a fiery hell."<sup>1</sup> This religious interpretation can, however, be seen as presumptuous, and it therefore becomes an inviting target to those who feel that "To call the novel religious is to suggest that its values are more developed, and more affirmative, than in fact they are; Golding makes no reference to Grace, or to Divinity, but only to the darkness of men's hearts, and to the God of Dung and Filth who rules there...The novel tells us a good deal about evil; but about salvation it is silent."<sup>2</sup> The one common denominator to these and certainly most other scholarly assessments is the mention of evil. Although Golding never cites Milton as one of his major literary influences (he does credit classical Greek and Anglo-Saxon), one can see the evil portrayed in Lord of the Flies and remember similar pictures in Milton's Paradise Lost. This parallel in two great works of art, and not an attempt to take sides in a twenty-four year old intellectual war, is the focus of this essay. If Milton is not the linchpin to Golding, at least we can recognize an influence that is visible and not just critical theory.

Since, as Golding himself has said, "The theme is an attempt to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human nature,"<sup>3</sup> we know that the boys are as doomed in their seeming paradise as was Satan in his. There is, of course an obvious difference. Satan engineers his own demise, a product of his arrogance and egotism, as he thus confesses:

Infernal world, and thou, profoundest hell,  
Receive thy new possessor: one who brings  
A mind not to be changed by place or time.  
The mind is its own place, and in itself  
Can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n.  
What matter where, if I be still the same,  
And what I should be, all but less than he  
Whom thunder hath made greater?<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, the boys' impending disaster hinges upon the fact that they are, after all, only human, and, "since the lost children are the inheritors of the same defects of nature which doomed their fathers, the tragedy on the island is bound to repeat the actual pattern of human history."<sup>5</sup>

Dramatically, it is an individual, Jack, who serves as progenitor of the evil in Lord of the Flies. It would be remiss, however, to equate Jack with Satan since Lord of the Flies is not a revisiting of Paradise Lost. Jack, as antagonist to Ralph, merely instigates the carnage and destruction that is to follow. Where he begins his usurping is debatable. Mark Kinkead-Weekes and Ian Gregory cite Jack's attacking Piggy and breaking the fat boy's glasses (p. 65) as "the birth of evil, since irresponsibility has become viciousness; and a will imposed on an animal has now turned in destructive violence on a fellow human being."<sup>6</sup> This observable imposing of will,

however, is evident the very first time we see Jack who, leading the choir, forces the black-robed boys to march along the beach in answer to Ralph's summons for a meeting. Never breaking formation or rhythm, they join Ralph but are still forced to stand still under a sweltering sun until one, Simon, faints. Obviously, Jack is an oppressor.

Not surprisingly, it does not take Jack long after this scene to begin his aggression, and it is for the same reason -- envy -- that he, like Satan, separates himself from the establishment, taking with him his following. We see it early in Lord of the Flies. Jack, humiliated by his failure at parliamentary procedure (his election loss to Ralph), again assumes, thanks to Ralph's unwitting generosity, control of his choir and takes the first step down toward barbarism:

"Jack's in charge of the choir. They can be -- what do you want them to be?"  
"Hunters." (p.20)

Immediately Jack orders his boys to disrobe, symbolically removing their affiliation with school, order, and eventually, civilization. In Paradise Lost we can perceive a similar division which, since the epic is not told in chronological order, appears retrospectively in Book V. God, not bothering to hold an election, announces:

✓ My only Son, and on this holy hill  
Him have anointed, whom ye now behold  
At my right hand. Your head I him appoint;  
And by myself have sworn to him shall bow  
All knees in heav'n, and shall confess him Lord. ✓  
(V, 604-8)



The angels, to show their great pleasure at God's words, sing and dance all day and begin a night of cool, restful sleep. Satan, however, is isolated and

could not bear  
 Through pride that sight, and thought himself impaired.  
 Deep malice thence conceiving and disdain,  
 Soon as midnight brought on the dusky hour  
 Friendliest to sleep and silence, he resolved  
 With all his legions to dislodge, and leave  
 Unworshipped, unbeyed, the throne supreme,  
 (V, 664-70)

Thus Satan, too, confederates all who follow into a similar evil with only one possible result -- "The split between the two societies brings on war."<sup>7</sup>

Another manifestation of evil, both Miltonic and Golding-esque, can be observed through the facial changes that occur. It is indeed Satan's face that betrays him as he soliloquizes about his evil nature. Uriel, whom Satan has fooled into giving directions to Paradise, nevertheless observes the speech and recognizes the deception:

Thus while he spake, each passion dimmed his face  
 Thrice changed with pale, ire, envy, and despair,  
 Which marred his borrowed visage, and betrayed  
 Him counterfeit, if any eye beheld.  
 For heav'nly minds from such distempers foul  
 Are ever clear. (IV, 114-9)

Similar is Adam's and Eve's appearance to God (the Son) as they are to be judged after their fall:

He came, and with him Eve, more loth, though first  
 To offend, discount'nanced both, and discomposed;  
 Love was not in their looks, either to God  
 Or to each other, but apparent guilt,  
 And same, and perturbation, and despair,  
 Anger, and obstinacy, and hate, and guile. (X, 109-11)

Golding's portrayal, that of Jack adorning himself with "dazzle paint," is far more brutal:

He looked in astonishment, no longer at himself but at an awesome stranger. He spilt the water and leapt to his feet, laughing excitedly. Beside the pool his sinewy body held up a mask that drew their eyes and appalled them. He began to dance and his laughter became a blood-thirsty snarling. He capered toward Bill, and the mask was a thing on its own, behind which Jack hid, liberated from shame and self-consciousness. (p. 58)

Whatever fear Jack momentarily instills in his hunters quickly abates, and they willingly allow themselves to be given replicas of Jack's cosmetic shield. "The lust for killing grows too strong, and Ralph's inadequate democratic machinery cannot keep it in check. Behind their painted faces, the children can feel a security, a lack of personal responsibility for the evil they perpetrate, and this desire explains the growth of Jack's prestige."<sup>8</sup> The only step remaining for him is to conquer Ralph for whom he has an envy no amount of make-up can disguise.

Envy turns to revenge, thereby providing the impetus for all subsequent evil. In Book II of Paradise Lost Beelzebub, set up by Satan, makes an influential speech to the assembly of fallen angels. He echoes Satan's most fervent desire -- to attack God through Mankind:

Where perhaps  
Some advantageous act may be achieved  
By sudden onset, either will hell fire  
To waste his whole creation, or possess  
All as our own, and drive as we were driven,  
The puny habitants; or if not drive,

Seduce them to our party, that their God  
May prove their foe, and with repenting hand  
Abolish his own works. This would surpass  
Common revenge, and interrupt his joy" (II, 362-71).

In Lord of the Flies, Jack, gradually becoming more savage and powerful, shows a similar modus operandi although his target is Ralph and not God. Still, he augments his tribe, thereby diminishing Ralph's power. Most of the boys who follow Jack do so willingly. Those who do not, particularly the twins Samneric, are captured, then coerced:

The hangman's horror clung round him. The chief said no more to him but looked down at Samneric.

"You got to join the tribe."

"You lemme go--"

"--and me."

The chief snatched one of the few spears that were left and poked Sam in the ribs.

"What d'you mean by it, eh?" said the chief fiercely. "What d'you mean by coming with spears? What d' you mean by not joining my tribe?" (p. 168)

Samneric thus taken, Simon and Piggy murdered, Ralph is alone to face the obvious fate that awaits him. He finds out when he sneaks back to Jack's fort while Samneric are on guard duty. They tell him:

"They're going to hunt you tomorrow" (p.174)

and, after further conversation,:

"Roger sharpened a stick at both ends" (p.175)

The meaning of Roger's action is not clear to Ralph, but the reader has no trouble in discerning the awful truth -- Ralph's head, like that of the slaughtered pig, is to be mounted after he is found and butchered.



Finally, however, Ralph, scurrying for his life, is rescued by the naval officer and has a chance to reflect on all that has transpired. ~~He~~ becomes sadly enlightened:

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. (p.186)

Ralph is now truly aware of the evil inherent in himself as well as the others, and, accordingly, he weeps "for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy" (p. 186-7). Milton shows a similar reflection in Paradise Lost. Adam and Eve have just fallen, and it is Adam who observes:

"since our eyes  
Opened we find indeed, and find we know  
Both good and evil, good lost and evil store,  
Bad fruit of knowledge, if this be to know,  
Which leaves us naked thus, of honor void,  
Of innocence, of faith, of purity,  
Our wonted ornaments now soiled and stained."  
(IX, 1070-6)

Their subsequent reaction to this awareness is not surprising:

They sat them down to weep; nor only tears  
Rained at their eyes, but high winds worse within  
Began to rise, high passions, anger, hate,  
Mistrust, suspicion, discord, and shook sore  
Their inward state of mind, calm region once  
And full of peace, now tossed and turbulent;  
(IX, 1121-6)

They weep, knowing that the evil they have done will have the world forever weeping; and their subsequent ejection from Paradise serves as an episodic preview of scenes like



the group of savage British boys and their fire-ravaged island, a drama mankind will recreate again and again.

Thus the evil portrayed in Golding's Lord of the Flies indeed has a Miltonic ring to it. Although the novelist makes no formal acknowledgement to Milton's influences, it is apparent in his text. One would be hard pressed to imagine Golding's Oxford days not providing him with a deep plunge into the abyss of Milton's art. It is an ocean from which, having entered, one never really leaves. Lord of the Flies and Paradise Lost indeed are two vastly different stories in two vastly different genres, but one thing is certain; the evil nature of mankind, as seen by seventeenth-century Milton, is three hundred years old, alive, well, and was recently seen causing some fine, upstanding British lads a whole lot of trouble.

You write  
 exceedingly well.  
 You could, of course, have looked less  
 for plot parallels and more for  
 essences. Does Golding see evil as  
 parasitical? secondary, a external?  
 Some Milton criticism, especially  
 on the nature of evil,  
 you might have stimulated  
 your mind along  
 more philosophic lines

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Virginia Tiger, William Golding: The Dark Fields of Discovery (London: Calder & Boyars, 1974), p. 44.

<sup>2</sup>Samuel Hynes, "Milton," Columbia Essays on Modern Writers, ed. William York Tindall (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), p.16.

<sup>3</sup>E. L. Epstein, Lord of the Flies (New York: Capricorn Books, 1954), p. 189 of his afterword to William Golding's text. All subsequent references to the novel are taken from this edition.

<sup>4</sup>Douglas Bush, ed., The Complete Poetical Works of John Milton (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 218. All subsequent references to the poem are taken from this edition. Abbreviations following the passages denote the book and line.

<sup>5</sup>James R. Baker, William Golding (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), p. 5.

<sup>6</sup>Mark Kinkead Weekes and Ian Gregor, William Golding: A Critical Study (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1967), p. 34.

<sup>7</sup>Howard S. Babb, The Novels of William Golding (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1970), p. 10.

<sup>8</sup>C. B. Cox, "Lord of the Flies," William Golding's Lord of the Flies: A Source Book, ed. William Nelson (New York: Odyssey Press, 1963), p. 87.

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