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Review: "Lord of the Flies"

JAMES GILFILLAN

"Lord of the Flies" is a gruesome little tome which carries the reader through the attempts of a group of boys to sustain life on an island and help effect their own rescue. We are not told how the boys got there or where they are. We just know that they are on an island. The world outside, it is intimated, is enmeshed in a ruthless atomic war, but this impinges not at all upon the life of the boys.

In the struggle to survive and maintain a signal fire the boys disintegrate into two opposing factions, a civilized, orderly, humane, rescue orientated group, and a brutal, hunting, live-for-the-moment, rowdy group. As the book progresses these groupings emerge, develop, become antagonistic, then openly hostile, and eventually end in killing and torture. Civilization, in the person of one of the boys, is saved in the nick of time by the British fleet a la the 7th Cavalry.

The publishers and the author felt constrained to append an explanation of the symbology used in the book, in which the author explains his purpose and basic outlook and robs one of whatever happy delusions remain. In a few words he sums up the book and mankind and raises the question in one's mind "If it is as pat as all that, why bother to write a book about it?"

It is a toss-up to me as to which is worse, being unable to see the forest for the trees, or being unable to see the trees for the forest. Golding, falling into the latter error with great gusto and some skill, has written a disturbing, but hardly great, book. Reducing anything as complex as man to a single force, such as the id, or even allowing him the dignity of being the product of two opposing forces, such as civilization and id, is a questionable piece of intellectual gymnastics
and has not provided an adequate underpinning for perceptive literature in this case. Even measured by a single continuum good-bad or productive-destructive, man falls all along the line. Measured by many continua he becomes a pretty complex being. It is one thing for an author to follow his characters in their attempts to discover and control, or fall before, the forces which control their unique destinies. It is quite another thing to know all the answers before the fact, as Golding does and make characters puppet woodenly to such an inharmonious duet as the clash of good(?) and evil(?). He goes further and tells us we all function similarly, which is an effrontery up with which I will not put.

The author or publishers defend the major theme by calling on the gods of sociology, anthropology, psychology, and insightful authors of the past. It is Freud, however, who stands out most clearly as the generator of the theories underlining the work. References to Oedipus, and the general id, ego, super-ego interplay throughout the book convince one of the guiding Freudian principles. If we grant the id, ego, super-ego structure for Western civilized man must we concede further that it is innate in man? Golding does without a quiver. Is id, the life force, inherently destructive or does it become so as a result of social prohibitions? (I will say that the impressions I have gleaned over the years from English authors would almost make what happened on the island a predictable result of the English school system, but not quite.) Why is id man? Why id and not ego and super-ego? Is man what he is at his worst? If it is logical to say man at his worst is man, is it not equally logical that man at his best is man? How, if this basic life force is so destructive, does man survive? In such a rationale, how does the author explain man's increase and success? Where do humanizing influences come from? Some supernatural being, or do they come from the same source that the destructive forces do, man himself? To return to Freud for the moment, Golding claims that the orgiastic killing and eating of a sow, which takes place in the book, is an Oedipal wedding ritual which is a bit bewildering, for I thought it was papa we killed and symbolically ate, not mama. He may have a thing about mothers but he and Freud parted company somewhere along the line.

If we switch to a more anthropological or sociological point of view, how modern is the concept of civilization as the embodiment of that which is good, or just, or positive? The natives of various cultures around the world might indeed find it humorous to have the hunter culture depicted in a villainous, destructive light in a fight against civilizing influences. Influences of a civilization which has nearly wiped their own cultures off the map in a completely ruthless fashion. (White Cloud to Running Dear, "You must read 'Lord of the Flies,' the Indians almost win.") This book reflects beautifully European
colonial thought and reveals its author for the truly conservative person he is.

There is an odd little equation that exists in the minds of men, and Golding is no exception. This equation is found by putting the continuum, order-freedom over the continuum, order-anarchy. One then interpolates; the "order" of the order-freedom continuum, which means an unnatural authoritarian order, is equated with the "order" of the order-anarchy continuum, which means a natural order, both productive and harmonious. Order equals order, therefore freedom equals anarchy (for anarchy one may read destruction, lust, rapine, or whatever epithet satisfies the emotions best). This type of thinking is on a par with the "A piece of bread is better than heaven" syllogism and dominates the book.

To go from the abstract to the more specific, Golding indicates early in the book that the destructive characteristics of the boys are present from the start. Jack, the heavy, chunks his knife repeatedly into trees and both the younger and older boys are singularly indifferent to the feelings of the others and occasionally indulge in meaningless mean acts towards one another. The author asks us to accept these impulses as innate "natural" manifestations covered over lightly by civilization. At this point, a lesser man than he would find himself at an impasse. The older boys, having spent more time at it, would be more civilized and the younger boys less. However, the younger boys would not have the power to act in the brute fashion against the strength of the older boys and civilizing forces would have remained evident a good while. Golding circumvented this beautifully by the simple expedient by having the younger boys continue to act like little civilized leaderless kids while the older boys went native. The hypothesis that these cruel streaks in the boys are outgrowths of a natural inner structure is not particularly good psychology. A better hypothesis in light of modern research would be that this cruelty is a result of a restrictive, punitive society. Inadvertently, Jack represents this thesis equally well with his learned authoritarian approach towards his regimented followers.

(To claim that cruelty is natural and order is civilized, produces odd thoughts about recent European history. This idea makes Germans less civilized than Englishmen and reduces what happened recently in Algeria to a fiction because, as every right thinking conservative knows the French are the most civilized of all.)

There is really little more to say in this vein, for to do so is to treat the boys in the book as boys, which the author never did and the reader should not. They were not human at all but at worst cardboard images and at best symbolic things and images of things. There is "civilized man" (Ralph) who, for reasons which entirely escape me, rejects the offer of friendship by "the intellectual" (Piggy).
There is the "mystic" (Simon), the "natural, brutish man" (Jack). We are relatively sure of these symbols for the author describes them in the addenda. However, from this basic symbolism on, the reader may have a hard time staying with the author for their interplay is inconsistent and periodically escapes normal experience altogether. Why was Piggy nearsighted? Does the author mean to say that intelligence is nearsighted, or is it as he says that glasses were the way to represent the deterioration of the intellectual. Why was Simon the only one with courage? I always thought that courage went with the civilized man; playing fields of Eton and all that sort of thing. Aren't mystics supposed to be closer to nature? If so, why is Simon one of the good guys? Simon is younger than Jack and Ralph. Is mysticism more recent than civilization and brutality? Must brutality work itself into a frenzy to kill food? With spears yet? Have even symbolic kids given up pit digging as a way to trap animals? Question after question arises as the symbols go clanking and lurching along their preordained paths. The story did not move in a humanly rational world though it did move with a certain logic from event to event. In short, it was highly contrived to complete the authors prejudged plan. So contrived was it that it was difficult to work up an appropriate feeling of horror when Piggy came a cropper and smeared himself over a rock, or when Simon became the sacrificial beast. The inhabitants of the island were never allowed to develop as people but were locked in symbolic roles and as such lost their human identity and appeal.

This is a scare book and succeeded in this to the extent that I did feel disquieted when it was done. The source of my apprehension, however, is not that which the author intended. I am not nearly as afraid of an inherent evil in man as I am of what the people who believe in original sin want to do about it. If we impose more civilization and repress natural drives more stringently, we will, I'm certain, increase the intensity of whatever is hostile in man. Since time began it has always been, "Man is inherently evil and we—not he—must do something about it," and the something is usually repressive and controlling and forces man to maintain, destructively at times, his right to be himself, growing and infinitely more complex than Golding ever dreamed him to be.