Chapter Four

William Golding’s Novels: A Critical Review

I believed that the condition of man was to be a morally diseased creation and that the best job I could do at the time, was to trace the connection between the diseased nature and the international mess he gets himself into. (Golding 1965: 87).

In this chapter I attempt to present a survey of the influences and the various critical viewpoints on Golding. I also attempt to trace the varied assumptions about his novels where they can be seen as reflecting varied influences.

As already mentioned the Second World War was a turning point in Golding’s life. It had immensely shattered his beliefs about ‘the perfectability of social man’. Realising the atrocities committed in that period, he then reevaluated his attitude towards the optimistic theory regarding the reality of the nature of mankind. He developed a deep sense of repulsion at the violence not of war but of what man can do to one another “not talking of one killing another with a gun, or dropping a bomb on him” but “of the vileness beyond all words that went on, year after year, in the totalitarian states.” (Golding 1965: 86). Such a change in thought and attitude led to the allusions that claim that man is: “if not physically hardened at least morally and inevitably coarsened.” (Golding 1982: 163). Golding (1965) argues there is some kind of force that compels man to turn away from good. He even insists that if the war has ended and evil is destroyed, he knows: “why the thing rose in Germany,” he still believes that ‘it could happen in any country’; which means there is no antidote for evil in Golding’s novels, so to speak. Golding has received relatively good attention from many scholars and critics. I will discuss here the most note-worthy work on Golding that is relevant from the critical point of view. I will confine myself to the critical interpretation devoted to the early novels i.e. Lord of the Flies (1954), The Inheritors (1955), Pincher Martin (1956), Free Fall
(1959), and *The Spire* (1964). I will show what the critics, contemporary to Golding, generally think of his early fiction.

In his work on Golding’s first five novels, Baker (1965) points out that the literary fame Golding had achieved in *Lord of the Flies* and *The Inheritors* was because they were extremely intriguing books and enjoyed a strenuous style unlike their contemporary counterparts, and are “burdened with a philosophical significance quite alien to the modern temper.” Baker traces the notion of evil underlying Golding’s novels to two significant facts - his wartime experience, which made him observe the atrocities of the irrational man; and the Greek tragedies, especially the Euripede's *Bacchae*. The Greek tragedy is the material from which he could present his philosophy about the human condition. In his analysis of *Lord of the Flies*, he declares that what led the boys to violence was that they tried “to impose a rational order or pattern upon the vital chaos of their own nature, and so they commit the error and 'sin' of Pentheus” and the aftermath “are bloodshed, guilt, utter defeat of reason.” (ibid: 9). Disillusioned with the atrocities of war, he abandoned the problems of modern world and adapted the art of allegory. He then produced his fiction: “to show that the perennially repeated fall of man is caused by defects inherent in his own nature.” (ibid: 62).

Hodson (1969) provides an illuminating, critical discussion of Golding’s first six novels, including the Greek ascendancy upon his technique as a novelist. Hodson remarks: “The implications of this theme underlie and illustrate a basic preoccupation of Golding’s.” (ibid: 8). Hodson also observes that, during the war, Golding has witnessed what man can do to man, and so it has darkened Golding’s beliefs about humanism. Thus, Golding has taken up the question of good and evil as in *Lord of the Flies* “which deals with the harshness and bitterness of existence while yet revealing the potential nobility of the human spirit.” (ibid: 12). In all these early novels, there is the quest for the malignant agent in human nature. He
maintains: “It is impossible, during the reading of a Golding novel, to separate the aesthetic
pleasure in the writing from the moral impact of the author’s point of view.” (ibid: 108-109).

Burgess (1971) views Golding’s novels as representation of ‘Evil’ and hardly with
‘Good’. Golding maintains, Burgess believes, the main thesis of all his novels: “the primacy
of evil and the near-impossibility of good.” (ibid: 65). Without any strictly religious bias,
Golding was obsessed with the two absolutes of good and evil. In *Lord of the Flies*, the boys,
choosing chaos rather than order, turn into young savages - painted, naked and murderers. In
*The Inheritors*, evil is part of *homo sapiens*. In *Pincher Martin*, Martin, refusing to die,
chooses the hell, ‘the eternity of total emptiness.’ In *Free Fall*, Sammy chooses the worse
instead of good and hence wills himself to evil. In *The Spire*, Jocelin follows his so-called
God-driven vision to build the spire. This event involves more evil acts. In other words,
Jocelin gets into the sin of lust; the monetary source for the construction of the spire is a
corrupt one. That is “Golding’s revelation is not just of the primacy of evil; it is of ultimate
forces that no man can ever hope to understand.” (ibid: 66).

Oldsey and Weintraub (1965) discern that Golding’s fiction is rimmed with his
serious, revolutionary ideas. Their argument here is that Golding “is a reactionary in the
most basic sense of the word. Reacting strongly to certain disagreeable aspects of life and
literature as he sees them, he writes with a revolutionary heat that is contained rather than
exploded within his compressed style.” (ibid: 34) Disenchanted, he distanced himself from
the current, modern trend in the literary scene. And as a novelist, he took up the more
serious, exploratory and ‘significant literature’. In their account, they describe *Lord of the
Flies* as “the primeval savagery and greed which civilisation only masks in modern man.”
(ibid: 17). The touch of novelty in his works, they believe, is of religious background in
which “(h)e would restore principles in an unprincipled world; he would restore belief to a
world of willful unbelievers.” (ibid: 34)
Green (1985) believes that Golding has set himself to the task of searching the ‘cosmological truth’ the reality that lies in the relationship of man to his cosmos and subsequently to God. In other words, Golding’s fictional works are of religious impulse in which ‘the whole moral framework (. . .) is conceived in terms of traditional Christian symbolism.’ (ibid: 80). There is ‘spiritual blindness’ which grows more and more due to man’s full engagement in the physical world. With absolute, spiritual certitude, Simon discovers that the beast is nothing but a rotten corpse of a dead parachutist. Green also adds that “Evil is ineradicable: the Earthly Paradise is a delusion. Man’s heart is dark, and no innocence lives beneath the sun; or if it does, it must, inevitably, suffer and die as Piggy and Simon died, their wisdom and virtue destroyed by the beast’s devotees.” (ibid: 84). His books reveal ‘universal moral implications’. Detached from the spiritual world, man falls.

Livingston (1967), in his William Golding’s The Spire, holds a similar view as that of Green (1963), and Oldsey and Weintraub (1965), and relates Golding’s themes as ‘essentially theological (. . .) to illuminate man’s natural spiritual condition.’ (ibid: 6). In his commentary, Livingston parallels Jocelin, the main character of The Spire with Soleness of Ibsen’s The Master Builder where both “are uncertain about whether they are driven by the angels of light or the powers of darkness.”

The Novels of William Golding, authored by Boyd (1988) is a full-length study which focuses upon Golding’s novels up to The Paper Men. Boyd claims that Golding’s works deal with moral and profoundly spiritual issues of human nature. In his interpretation of Free Fall, he links the psychological torment of Sammy to two contrasting world-views, a conflict “which runs through virtually all of Golding’s novels, between a rational or scientific view of the world and a more intuitive and generally religious attitude. . .” (ibid: 71-72). These mighty forces grew out of the spiritual darkness in Samm’s world which he is forced to explore “at the centre of him.” (ibid: 76).
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Tiger (1974), on her *William Golding: The Dark Fields of Discovery*, presents a thorough analysis of the mythic dimension in Golding’s early novels. She holds the view that Golding presents a deeper, spiritual understanding of man’s cosmos. Upon Golding’s belief that man lacks “vision”, Tiger focuses her study on the author’s effort to construct a bridge between the physical world and the spiritual world, to use the critic’s term, the ideographic structure. His novels contain the question of man’s nature “looking not at men simply in relation to a particular society but at man in relation to his cosmic situation: his evil in *Lord of the Flies*, his origins in *The Inheritors*, his destiny in *Pincher Martin*, his guilt in *Free Fall*, his vision in *The Spire*” (ibid: 17). She observes that such defects in contemporary man are represented as darkness, ‘the darkness of man’s heart;’ (LoF: 202) whereas the spiritual dimension is ignored in man’s cosmos.

Dick, in his book *William Golding* (1967), offers a detailed discussion of Golding’s early works - *Lord of the Flies*, *The Inheritors*, *Pincher Martin*, *Free Fall*, and *The Spire*. He subscribes the idea of moral conflict, in Golding’s work especially *Lord of the Flies*, to the Greek tragedy. That is, the crisis of man’s struggle, the threat or dilemma that his characters encounter inside or outside their nature can be examined from the angle of ‘the Dionysian-Apollonian dichotomy’; in other words, good and evil conflict. In Golding’s novels, there is the polarity of ‘Two Worlds, Two Wisdoms’ – for example, in *Lord of the Flies*, there is the rational and there is the irrational; in *The Inheritors*, the powerful and the powerless. Above all, the bestial side of man cannot quell the ‘dark, demonic urges’ (ibid: 47) and, ‘the real devil, the real ogre, lies in the heart of man qua man. It is impossible to separate the shadow from the one who casts it including Golding’s Greek impact upon his method as a novelist.’ (ibid: 48).

Another work is Hynes’s *William Golding* (1968). Hynes argues with those who claim that Golding deserves to be read from a religious angle (Oldsey and Weintraub
1965:168), and provides another perspective to his fiction. He considers them as “moral models” as he concerns himself with “clear and strong moral assumptions,” and hence “give form and direction to his fiction.” Out of ‘moral preoccupation’, Hynes sees *Pincher Martin*, like its previous companions, as “a novel with moral ‘program,’ which deals schematically with the problem of evil and its consequences.” (Hynes 1968:24).

Dickson’s *The Modern Allegories of William Golding* (1990) is an investigation into the structure of Golding’s art as far as ‘moral allegory’ is concerned. He attempts to explore the potentials of his techniques underlying his novels in order to establish his motifs. In his allegorical analysis, he concludes that there is, throughout his novels, the theme of quest for the nature of good and evil.

Gindin (1988), in his book entitled *William Golding*, postulates that Golding’s treatment of human experience can be interpreted in terms of the dichotomy of the physical and spiritual worlds where physical is equated with the rational. Since this type of polarity in Golding’s perspective: “leads (. . .) to the constant ‘dissociation of thought and feeling.’” (ibid: 13). Gindin believes that Golding’s fictions are attempts to ‘bridge’ the physical and spiritual worlds. He also discerns that though the polarity of two worlds is a naturally religious phenomenon, Golding’s treatment is not confined to a definite, religious ‘doctrine or attitude.’ His novels echo his own faith about ‘the complicated nature of the human being.’ It is this faith that has its roots in literature, Egyptology, “and a whole chain of ideas about human sin and goodness implicit within the Western Christian tradition, to condense his sense of the human condition into essence.” (ibid: 14). Gindin regards *Free Fall* as crystallising his belief in the dissociation of the two worlds.

Cox (1963), in *The Free Spirit*, regards Golding’s faith as “based upon his interpretation of the moral life of the individual, rather than upon an unquestioning acceptance of dogma.” (ibid: 174). He also observes that his early novels take the discussion
of the depravity of man for he concerns himself with the significance of human life and experience. In his reflection upon *Lord of the Flies* and *The Inheritors*, Cox declares, “the total effect” of these two novels “is pessimistic, with innocence and order necessarily corrupted by the evil nature of man.” (ibid: 179).

Storr (1986) doubts Golding is “by nature an optimist”. He argues that such an attribute is not applicable as far as Golding’s fiction is concerned. He points out that Golding’s novels do not support such a claim. He states that “the madness of violence, of lust, and of fanaticism seems always just below the surface (. . .) Golding sees man as species which is irredeemably flawed, and which is only too likely to bring about its own destruction.” (ibid: 138). Consequently Golding’s attitude is pessimistic as regards human nature.

Like Tiger, who noted that the lack of man’s spiritual power is constructed by the notion of ‘darkness,’ Crompton (1985) believes that it is not evil what is meant by ‘darkness’ in Golding’s narrative fiction. Rather it is ‘darkness’ that blurs the spiritual realm, hence, leads to human pain and guilt. He emphasises that it is darkness, which Golding tries to fictionalise in his works. Moreover, he adds that it is darkness:

> Where he has explored unflinchingly those subjects that trouble and fascinate him most - the extremities of behaviour of which men are capable, their propensities for absolute good or evil, their endlessly paradoxical saintliness and sinfulness. And behind these lie the mysteries of the spiritual world that continually surround us but are largely closed to us, invisible, forgotten or ignored for much of most men's lives. (ibid: 94).

In a more recent account of Golding’s preoccupation with human nature, McCarron (1994) concerns himself with the notion of ‘projection’, which accounts for the instinctual condition of human nature. He points out that one tends to abstract himself from the evil residing within and imputes or ‘projects’ it to something external. He maintains that what the boys, in *Lord of the Flies*, have feared is nothing but their own beast and the New People, in *The Inheritors*, have attributed their inner demons to the gentler Loks. In addition, Martin, in
Pincher Martin, invents out of his aching tooth an island pegged in the middle of the Atlantic, and from his egoistical insistence not to die a heroic struggle for survival. In view of such a principle, McCarron describes: “one of Golding’s principal interests in his early fiction is examining the ways in which humanity projects its internal evil onto something external.” (ibid: 10).

Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor (1967) offer detailed critical readings on his first novels - from Lord of the Flies (1954) to The Spire (1964). This study focuses on three basic issues in Golding’s narrative: style, symbolism and the excavation for the truth of human nature. As far as human nature is concerned, Kinkead and Gregor maintain that “what has happened has proved conclusively that there is evil in all human beings, even in those who try to be rational and civilized.” (ibid: 55). As Jack finds within himself ‘the hunter,’ Ralph, who holds the rational voice, even cannot curb his inner, dark desires and finds “in himself the excitements, the ‘fright and apprehension and pride’ the others have known.” (ibid: 41).

Frank Kermode is one of the first critics who contributed a lot to the understanding of Golding’s philosophical thought. Kermode (1985) holds the view that Golding, through ‘mythopoetic power’, which sprung out of numinous interests, could mark the evil as that which “emanates from the human mind, a product of its action upon the environment.” (ibid: 58). His involved fictions preserve the continuity of a theme, the myth of the ‘Fall of Man’. Martin in Pincher Martin, like Sammy in Free Fall, is a variant of the fallen man. He has been ‘hideously greedy’, selfish and used to enjoy the best of things throughout his entire life. In the process of fighting his death, he comes to know “that the cause of apparently ‘evil’ manifestations lie entirely within himself” and “with all the gestures of heroism, he undertakes to expel the poison from within him.” (ibid: 61). Kermode deduces that, with ‘fashionable and sophisticated mythologising’:
Golding gives remarkably full expression to a profound modern need, the need for reassurance in terms of the primitive; the longing to know somehow of a possible humanity that lived equably in the whole world; the need for myths of total and satisfactory explanation. Our developed consciousness, our accumulated knowledge are marks of guilt; the fragmentary nature of our experience is the theme of our artists.” (ibid: 53).

Pritchett (1958), in his article “Pain and William Golding”, notes that Golding, with his ‘extraordinary perception of man’ portrays pain, the searing pain which is created by his own imagination and represented by his own distinct characters to show “the perennial agony of our species.” (ibid: 47). This amount of pain is the essence of his themes. Pain is closely tied to ‘the whole condition of man’, who is by no means ‘struggling with his nature.’ (ibid: 48). The intensity of pain is variant in all his novels. In Lord of the Flies, the pain is seen in the conflict between the two groups of boys. The boys who, through fear, turn to savage hunters; the other boys, out of their inner urge, try to maintain order. In The Inheritors the obscure pain is rendered in the way ‘a baffled, dying group of ape-men who see themselves’ being bestially superseded by the more civilised man. In Pincher Martin ‘the pain is in the fight against physical hurt and loss of consciousness, in the struggle to put his educated will against his terrors.’ (ibid: 48).

In his descriptive and analytic study of the first four novels – Lord of the Flies, The Inheritors, Pincher Martin and Free Fall Bufkin (1964) says that Golding, unlike his predecessors who were ‘documentary’ and even ‘didactic’ writers, along with the other post-war novelists have maintained the most feasible approach to writing novels. This approach is concerned with the consideration of one common, ageless theme – the quest for the truth of man’s nature. Bufkin (ibid: 16) observes that there are two types of quest – intangible and tangible. The tangible quest deals with individual in relation to society and so the subject in which material, physical or social issues is meant to be that of public interest. The intangible quest, on the other hand, concerns the spiritual, religious, moral or psychological dimension. Of which Golding belongs to the second type of quest – the more experimental and
metaphysical in nature that can be equated with ‘truths’, the abstract reality of being, where the tangible quest is traditional that concerns with ‘things,’ the concrete condition of the physical being.

Golding’s first four novels, Bufkin (ibid: 74) stresses, are concerned with the quest theme and the object is of intangible dimension. The most popular novel, *Lord of the Flies* is a quest that explores the evil that lives within man and the correction of which is a personal, not a social matter. *The Inheritors* widens the quest as the Neanderthals are not evil enough to withstand in front of the more destructive people. *Pincher Martin* is about the evil hero’s quest for survival, who prefers his own hell to God’s heaven. *Free Fall* recounts a man’s struggle toward ‘the monstrous consequences of man’s evil treatment of man.’ (ibid: 276).

A recent contribution to Golding criticism is an essay by Fitzgerald and Keyser (1992). They argue of a new, mythical interpretation of *Lord of the Flies*: It is the Typhonic element of human nature. They relate the theme of the novel to the Egyptian myth of Osiris and the daemon Set-Typhon. The myth ‘accounts for the emergence of discord and, hence war’ demonstrating ‘the precariousness of civilization.’ (ibid: 80). Out of envy and pride, the daemon Set-Typhon, the brother of king Osiris, decides to usurp his throne. So he tricks Osiris and drowns him. In her search of her husband, Isis finds the body and concealed it in the woods. Out for hunting, Typhon discovers the body and mutilates it. In *Lord of the Flies*, Fitzgerald and Keyser argue, Jack represents Typhon, the Typhonic drive of human nature as he exhibits ‘overweening ambition and a burning desire to be chief’ while voting for the leader of the boys. Facing this parliamentary defeat, he creates ‘his own society’ and wages war on Ralph’s. On the other hand, Fitzgerald and Keyser argue that Osiris’s nature is represented by Simon and Piggy as they embody ‘the mixture of reason and intuition,’ unlike Ralph who is attracted to ‘the seductions of hunting, fierce exhilaration and ambition.’ (ibid: 82).
In his brilliant paper “Linguistic Function and Literary Style: An Inquiry into the Language of William Golding’s The Inheritors”, Halliday (1971) offers an interpretation of the novel with a view to establishing connections between ‘the “textual” and the “theoretical” in the study of language.’ (ibid: 331). In this thematic analysis, he investigates the linguistic features that contribute to the depiction of what Golding believes to be true of the villainous human nature. He finds out that Golding used two different types of language to portray two types of people - the dominant and the dominated. The dominant are represented by ‘the new people’ (the inheritors) and the dominated are ‘the people’ the Neanderthals. The inheritors are essentially aggressive while the Neanderthals are gentle creatures. Halliday explains that Golding offers a ‘particular way of looking at experience,’ a vision of things which he ascribes to Neanderthal man; and he conveys this by syntactic prominence, by the frequency which he selects certain key syntactic options. It is this frequency which establishes the clause types in question as prominent.” (ibid: 347). He maintains that the underlying theme is the result of foregrounding of certain linguistic patterns in syntax that characterises the two different world-views of the inheritors and the Neanderthals. In the analysis, Halliday shows that ‘the people’ are powerless as the language used reflects: “ineffectual manipulation of their environment” (ibid: 350); unlike ‘the new people’ who are dynamic in manipulating the surroundings. To evoke the people’s point of view, their language is mainly intransitive clauses, mental clauses or attributive ones. The clauses of action are nothing but a description of simple movements (turn, rise, reach, hold). In addition, the large proportion of subjects is not human agents. They are either sense organ (e. g. His ears twitched), parts of body (e.g. His hands tightened on his body) or inanimate objects (e.g. The bushes twitched again) conveying the people’s incomprehension of reality, helplessness, powerlessness and hence creating ‘an atmosphere of ineffectual activity’. In contrast, transitive clauses with human subjects of the ‘new people’ predominantly exceed
‘the people’s’ transitive clauses. He then concludes that the foregrounded syntactic structures have: “a complex significance: the predominance of intransitives reflects, first, the limitations of the people’s own actions; second the people’s world view (…) thirdly a dim apprehension of the superior powers of the ‘others’ represented by the rare intrusion of a transitive clause” and this type of syntactic manipulation reveals “Golding’s concern with the nature of humanity; the intellectual and spiritual developments that contribute to the present human condition” (ibid: 351) in other words, the wicked, inner man’s nature.

From the above criticism, perhaps unsurprisingly, it is observable that the literary readings of Golding’s fiction contain somehow divergent viewpoints depending on what angle the novels are looked at. A group of critics relate Golding’s work to mythical beliefs. A second group of critics look at Golding’s fiction with a Christian eye and so assert what causes man to act in a very irrational way or ‘what makes things break up like they do’, it is the original sin. There are also those who claim that the novels contain moral lessons. Some others insist on the grim view of Golding’s attitude towards human nature. Still other critics read them from the Apollonian-Dionysian viewpoint and therefore come out with a critique of good and evil. However, it seems obvious that almost all of the critical accounts - mythical, Christian, or moral - though differ in their approach or have divergent points of view, hold one and the same view about Golding’s fiction. There is a discussion of or, let us say, a reference to the nature of man. They are, to some extent, united by a belief that there is dark; a threatening vision of how man looks like from within; the darkness in human nature is hideously overwhelming. Thus, this ascertains the foreboding worldview of his fictional works. In other words, savagery, egoism, pain, suffering and death are the recurrent issues Golding wanted to unfold in his novels. On the same scale, he tried to communicate his philosophy about man’s nature in various situations and weird struggles, so he was described as an existentialist, Freudian and a Christian preacher on one hand and moralist, pessimist,
mythologist or spiritualist on the other. Yet, whatever label the critics want to attribute to Golding, and despite the varied viewpoints of the critics, they all coincide at some point with the belief of his, that human beings are fallen and that God is absent from the centre of their consciousness, that there is darkness in man’s heart. In Chapter Seven, I shall analyse these novels linguistically so as to explore more fully what the texts (novels) say and how relevant the findings are to the author’s point of view of man.