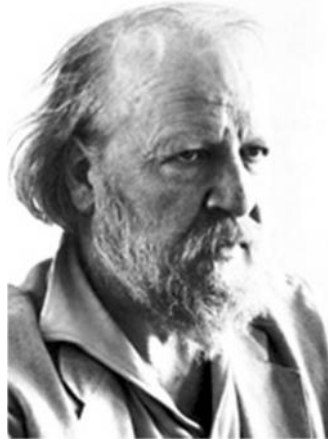


Nobel Prize in Literature 1983



William Golding

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1983 was awarded to William Golding "for his novels which, with the perspicuity of realistic narrative art and the diversity and universality of myth, illuminate the human condition in the world of today".

William Golding's first novel, *Lord of the Flies*, 1954, rapidly became a world success and has so remained. It has reached readers who can be numbered in tens of millions. In other words, the book was a bestseller, in a way that is usually granted only to adventure stories, light reading and children's books. The same goes for several of his later novel, including *Rites of Passage*, 1980.

The reason is simple. These books are very entertaining and exciting. They can be read with pleasure and profit without the need to make much effort with learning or acumen. But they have also aroused an unusually great interest in professional literary critics, scholars, writers and other interpreters who have sought and found deep strata of ambiguity and complication in Golding's work. In those who use the tools of narration and linguistic art, they have incited to thinking, discovery and creation of their own, in order to explore the world we live in and to settle down in it. In this respect, William Golding can

perhaps be compared to another Englishman, Jonathan Swift, who has also become a writer for the learned and the unlearned, or, to the American, Herman Melville, whose works are full of equivocal profundity as well as fascinating adventure. In fact the resemblance extends farther than that. Golding has a very keen sight and sharp pen when it comes to the power of evil and baseness in human beings - just like Jonathan Swift. And like Herman Melville, he often chooses his themes and the framework for his stories from the world of the sea, or from other challenging situations in which odd people are tempted to reach beyond their limits, thereby being bared to the very marrow. His stories usually have a fairly schematic drama, almost an anecdote, as skeleton. He then covers this with a richly varied and spicy flesh of colourful characters and surprising events. William Golding can be said to be a writer of myths. It is the pattern of myth that we find in his manner of writing. A very few basic experiences and basic conflicts of a deeply general nature underlie all his work as motive power. In one of his essays he describes how, as a young man, he took an optimistic view of existence. He believed that man would be able to perfect himself by improving society and eventually doing away with all social evil. His optimism was akin to that of other utopians, for instance, H.G. Wells.

The second world war changed his outlook. He discovered what one human being is really able to do to another. And it was not a question of head-hunters in New Guinea or primitive tribes in the Amazon region. They were atrocities committed with cold professional skill by well-educated and cultured people - doctors, lawyers, and those with a long tradition of high civilization behind them. They carried out their crimes against their own equals. He writes:

"I must say that anyone who moved through those years without understanding that man produces evil as a bee produces honey, must have been blind or wrong in the head."

Golding inveighs against those who think that it is the political or other systems that create evil. Evil springs from the depths of man himself - it is the wickedness in human beings that creates the evil systems, or, that changes what, from the beginning, is, or could be, good into something iniquitous and destructive.

There is a mighty religious dimension in William Golding's conception of the world, though hardly Christian in the ordinary sense. He seems to believe in a kind of Fall. Perhaps, rather, one should say that he works with the myth of a Fall. In some of his stories, chiefly the novel, *The Inheritors*, 1955, we find a dream of an original state of innocence in the history of mankind - a prehistoric race or breed of animals, poor in words but rich in pictures and wordless communication, a peaceful existence with the women or female qualities in the lead. The Fall came with the motive power of a new species. The aggressive intelligence, the power-hungry self-assertion, and the overweening individualism are the source of evil and violence - individual, as well as social violence. But these qualities and incentives are also innate in man's nature, in man as a created being. They are, therefore, inseparably, a part of his character and make themselves felt when he gives full expression to himself and forms his societies and his private destiny.

We come across this tragic drama in many different ways in William Golding's novels. In *Lord of the Flies*, a group of young boys are isolated on a desert island. Soon a kind of primitive society takes shape and is split into warring factions, one marked by decency and willingness to cooperate, the other by worship of force, lust for power and violence. In *The Pyramid*, 1967, we find similar tensions in a more everyday setting - an English country town. The social class differences exercise an insidious, but equally ruthless, violence in an existence full of lovelessness and prejudiced hypocrisy. The novel, *Pincher Martin*, 1956, depicts how the main character, the narrator, is drowning. Actually he is already dead or dying as he tells his story. In his passionate absorption in himself, he seems, for a time, to get the better of death. He does so by recounting his life to himself, a life full of ruthless egoism and cruelty to others, a miserable life, yet it was his, and on no account does he want to lose it. He, the dead man, tries to make the rock to which he is clinging into a picture of himself. It is a weird ghost story, a fable of a will to live without shame or moderation.

In the novel, *Rites of Passage*, 1980, the drama is enacted in the microcosm that the author arranges on a ship of the line at the beginning of the 19th century. The book gives a

cruel and drastic description of social barriers and aggressions on this ship, with an underlying black comedy and a masterly command of the characters' various linguistic roles. The scapegoat - one of many in Golding's works - is a priest who, naively trusting in the authority of his office, tries to assert his own dignity. He is subjected to outrages, each worse than the last, himself taking part in them, and ends up in such a desperate situation that he dies of shame.

The title of the previous novel, *Darkness Visible*, 1979, alludes to Milton's depiction of hell. It is a complicated book which, in many ways, sums up the author's view of mankind and the world, such as one can fancy it to be in his work. The novel can be regarded as a description of hell, or of purgatory, here on earth. The advocates of evil appear with almost diabolical traits in the form of two beautiful young girls who are driven by a liking for evil for its own sake. Opposed to them is yet another of Golding's scapegoats - a young man born out of a blazing inferno in London during the Blitz, and on a pilgrimage in a world without mercy towards his own destruction, again through fire. He is both human being, pitiful and weak as such, and something more, in league with powers of another kind, whether they belong to a superhuman region or to an all too human world of fancies and illusions. *Darkness Visible* is a dualistic book - one is tempted to say, an illustration in myth form of a Manichean philosophy with good and evil as two independent forces in life.

All is not evil in the world of mankind, and all is not black in William Golding's imagined world. According to him, man has two characteristics - the ability to murder is one, belief in God the other. Innocence is not entirely lost. The new race, which defeated its predecessors in *The Inheritors*, became mixed with features from the conquered. There is a striving away from evil. This striving often goes astray in self-assertion and illusionism, But it is there, nevertheless, and is allied with something that is not merely human. In the novel *The Spire*, 1964, this striving is embodied in a story about the building of a medieval cathedral. The builder is a priest who believes he has been ordered by God to build a spire that defies all reasonable calculations and measurements. His striving is both good and bad, containing the most complex reasons - humility and conviction, but also arrogance,

wilfulness and furtive sexual motives. Despite its taut and composite form, the novel is one of Golding's most diversified and significant works.

William Golding's novels and stories are, however, not only sombre moralities and dark myths about evil and about treacherous, destructive forces. As already mentioned, they are also colourful tales of adventure which can be read as such, full of narrative joy, inventiveness and excitement. In addition, there are plentiful streaks of humour-biting irony, comedy and drastic jesting. There is a vitality which breaks through what is tragic and misanthropic, frightening in fact. A vitality, a vigour, which is infectious owing to its strength and intractability and to the paradoxical freedom it possesses as against what is related. In this, too, Golding reminds us of the predecessors mentioned at the beginning. His fabled world is tragic and pathetic, yet not overwhelming and depressing. There is a life which is mightier than life's conditions.

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