



An Adventure into the Human Psyche: A Psychoanalytic Reading of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*

Muna A. S. Gashout★

Abstract

Psychoanalysis, as an approach to literary criticism, is the analysis of the subconscious mind of the author / characters in a literary work. Accordingly, it is an attempt to delve into the depth of the text to discover its various meaning levels, to analyze the causes and impulses of characters' external / internal / social behavior, and, thereby, to interpret the work. The approach is mostly based on Sigmund Freud's theories of psychoanalysis which holds that the subconscious mind is the source and origin of all human behavior. This article studies the human psyche of the characters in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* from the Freudian psychoanalytic view point. The analysis reveals that the tensions and abnormal behavior of the characters, as representatives of modern man, originate from their psychological abnormality, which, in turn, represents social problems and disastrous life-conditions that modern man might find himself in.

—*University of Tripoli, Faculty of Languages, English Department

Key words: Freudian, Psychoanalysis, Id, Ego, Superego, the Pleasure principle, the human psyche, subconscious, impulses.

Introduction

William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* tells the story of a group of English schoolboys marooned on a tropical island after their plane is shot down during a war. Though the novel is fictional, its exploration of the idea of human evil is at least partly based on Golding's experience with the real-life violence and brutality of World War Two. Free from the rules and structures of civilization and society, the boys on the island, descend into savagery. As the boys splinter into factions, some behave peacefully and work together to maintain order and achieve common goals, while others rebel and seek only anarchy and violence. In his portrayal of the small world on the island, Golding paints a broader portrait of the fundamental struggle between the civilizing instinct – the instinct to obey rules, behave morally, and act lawfully – and the savage instinct – the impulse to seek brute power over others, and indulge in violence. In portraying the various ways in which the boys on the island adapt to their new surroundings and react to their new freedom, Golding explores the broad spectrum of ways in which humans respond to stress, change and tension.

In Freudian terms, the rational force of the human psyche predominates over the anarchic or irrational force of the psyche under normal circumstances, but under threatening or extremely stressful situations,

dark, irrational impulses are unleashed and behavior becomes erratic or violent (Freud,2006). The dramatic situation in which the characters of *Lord of the Flies* are placed, is an excellent vehicle for exploring the opposing forces of the rational and the irrational and the societal and personal conflicts these opposing forces generate. This could be done by approaching Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies* through Sigmund Freud's theories of psychoanalysis.

Freud and the human psyche

Freud developed his psychoanalytic theory around three principles: the **ego**, the **id**, and the **superego** (Freud, 2006). The **id** is the primitive, unconscious part of the personality, the storehouse of the fundamental drives, the basic drives of hunger, thirst, pleasure, and aggression. The id is removed from reality, that is, from the outer world of society and environment, it is the mind of the infant, demanding instant gratification, incapable of tolerating the delayed gratification that makes the ego socially acceptable. According to Freud, the *Id* operates irrationally; it works to gratify its own impulses. These impulses seek to provide pleasure without regard to the cost; it cannot tolerate frustration and is free of inhibitions. It shows no regard for reality and can seek satisfaction through action or through imagining that it has gotten what it wants; the fantasy of gratification is as good as the actual gratification. At first, Freud thought that the id had only one principle, *the pleasure principle*, also known as *the libido*. However, he found he could not account for aggression, violence, and self-destructiveness

without postulating a second principle, *the aggressive drive*, also known as the *death wish* (Freud 1998).

The **ego** is conscious and represents the part of the mind that interacts with the environment and with other people in social situations. As the conscious waking self, the ego is the reasonable, sane, and mature aspect of the mind capable of mastering impulses and dealing effectively with the stresses of daily life. The ego's role, as the conscious mind, is to mediate between the Id's demand for pleasure and the social pressures brought to bear by the Superego. Freud calls this mediation process " *the reality principle* .

The **superego** is the final part of the human psyche, representing parentally instilled moral attitudes; it is the repository of the values of the individual, including moral attitudes implanted by society. The superego basically corresponds to the conscience and develops when a child internalizes the prohibitions of parents and other adults against certain kinds of actions. Like the id, however, the superego is largely unconscious. Sometimes the superego is thought to represent an idealized image (ego-ideal) towards which the ego strives and it develops as a child internalizes the views of others as to the kind of person he or she should strive to become. The superego, is actually society's representative in the individual and is often in conflict with the id, representative of survival. The id just wants to do what feels good, while the superego is the part of the mind that seeks to control the impulsive behaviour of the id. It acts as an internal censor.

For Sigmund Freud, human nature is hidden in the mind and is produced by "the irremediable antagonism between the demands of instinct and the restrictions of civilization" (Strachey in Freud, 1961). Human nature in the state of nature is thus one thing, while human nature in civilization has been reshaped and produces a different form of alienation in the Freudian conception. As the individual develops during the life cycle, the ego, or the sense of self, changes from encompassing everything to detaching itself from the external world and thus including only the inner world of the self. Freud writes: "In this way one makes the first step towards the introduction of the reality principle which is to dominate future development. This differentiation, of course, serves the practical purpose of enabling one to defend oneself against sensations of unpleasure which one actually feels or with which one is threatened" (Freud 1998).

One of the important conceptions noted by Freud is that *the pleasure principle*, "... consists in finding the satisfaction of happiness" (Freud 1998) ; for Freud, satisfying the *pleasure principle* also means fitting into civilization: "Integration in, or adaptation to a human community appears as a scarcely avoidable condition which must be fulfilled before this aim of happiness can be achieved" (Freud 1998). It might be preferable otherwise, but Freud sees the development of human nature as a consequence of the urge toward happiness on the one hand and toward an altruistic principle of finding union with others in the community.

The dynamics of this three-way relationship is also shaped by one's development at different developmental stages. During each development stage, individuals are confronted with environmental pressures and events that compel them to modify the relationship among the id, the ego and the superego. When individuals are able to make the necessary modifications and adapt successfully to these situations, they will be able to achieve personal growth. On the other hand, when individuals are overwhelmed by environmental pressures, they can be traumatized by these experiences. As a result, some individuals, during their childhood, may not be able to develop their ego, thus resulting in their response of fixation in which their development is momentarily arrested. This occurrence may also exert a negative impact on their subsequent development and even their adulthood (Comer, 1995).

" More than just a static set of personality attributes, Freud's construct of a personality is characterized by a dynamic interaction among the three forces of the personality, which are constantly engaged in conflict with one another. A functional personality is achieved when a stable equilibrium is achieved among the three forces. Conversely, when any of the three forces dominates the three-way relationship, the outcome is a dysfunctional personality". (Comer, 1995).

In order to understand how the personality of each of the characters of *Lord of the Flies* is shaped by the developmental stages within Freud's psychoanalytical model, it is important to describe each of the characters' behavior within the context of the novel. In *Lord of the*

Flies, William Golding conveys the idea that in order to maintain structure in a civilization, a balance is needed between the Id, the ego and the Superego; without this balance, society loses its stability. The various characters in the novel portray this idea.

Characters and the human psyche

Since the id possesses the primitive, greedy and inconsiderate traits in a human being, Jack, the antagonist of the novel, exemplifies this personality the best. Jack illustrates the primitive component of the Id; the animalistic, the non-rational impulse in human beings to satisfy their physical, material desires; unchecked this inevitably leads to violence and cruelty. Jack, the large, rude leader of the choir, incorporating "libidinal and other primal desires" (Abrams 249), volunteers himself and his choir mates as hunters - a decidedly primal job. When Jack hunts for a pig at the beginning of chapter two: "The dog-like, uncomfortably on all fours, yet unheeding his discomfort, he stole forward five yards and stopped". (Golding, 2012, p. 45) Jack hunched on all four and dog-like, shows the Id's impulsive and atavistic nature. His bloodlust guides him to succumb to his current desire for meat and drives him to hunt on all four like an animal. Not only does Jack surrender to his bloodlust and lacks restraint by behaving like an animal, but he also makes hasty comments without considering their long term effects.

When Jack starts taking his hunters off fire duty to hunt, this symbolizes that he has started to lose touch with reality. His Id can be seen again when he first puts on face paint. "He capered toward Bill and

the mask was a thing on its own behind which Jack hid, liberated from shame and self-consciousness." (Golding, p.58). This shows that with the mask, one will not have to suffer consequences for his actions, meaning that he has lost his perception of reality. Subconsciously Jack uses this and ignores society's rules. In chapter four Jack kills his first pig... "His mind was crowded with memories; memories of the knowledge that had come to them when they closed in on the struggling pig, knowledge that they had outwitted a living thing, imposed their will..." (Golding p.82). When he longs to lead the group he asks the boys, "Who'll join my tribe and have fun?" (Golding p. 90). It is evident that he only seeks immediate pleasure instead of carefully pondering the consequences. He fails to realize that Ralph would be a better leader, and instead only craves to fulfill his lust for power and fun without ever considering the greater good of the group or show concern for survival needs... All this is evidence of Jack's shift to the Id and its self gratifying aims.

Ralph, the central character, serves as the moral and social compass of the book. He is caring and seeks to mimic the world in which all the boys originated. In Freudian terms, he exemplifies the Ego, he is the conscious mind that mediates between the Id's demands for pleasure and the social pressures brought to bear by the Superego. Ralph tries to control Jack's urge for immediate pleasure of hunting by getting him to focus on maintaining the signal fire. He also tries to mitigate the social pressures of the Superego – exemplified by Piggy – who often lectures too much and alienates the boys from himself and Ralph. Here, Golding

seems to be saying that without the reinforcement of social norms the Id will control the human psyche.

Piggy, exemplifies the Superego, that part of the mind that seeks to control the impulsive behaviour of the Id. Piggy, who finds little good with the conduct of the boys, is "the internalization of standards of morality and propriety" (Abrahams, 1999). David Spitz compares Piggy to "Socrates, the voice of reason" (Spitz, 1981). One example of his sense of reason is shown when the boys' first fire gets out of control. Piggy tells the others, "The first thing we ought to have made was shelters on the beach... How can you expect to be rescued if you don't put first things first and act proper." (Golding, 44). He helps to establish order by introducing the conch; he also scorns the boys for "acting like a crowd of kids" (Golding 42). Piggy always reminds Ralph and the others of their responsibilities, yet he understands that Jack hates him, because he stands between him and his achievement of pleasure. Furthermore, just as the Superego must employ the Ego to control the Id, Piggy cannot control Jack on his own; he must rely on Ralph to do so.

The balance of the two boys is Ralph, who both laughs "delightedly" (Golding p.12) at the prospects of the wild island, and thinks quickly to establish a signal fire. Ralph is the Ego, which "tries as best it can to negotiate the conflicts between the insatiable demands of the id [and] the impossibly stringent requirements of the Superego" (Abrahams 1982). He is well suited to the job, as he is chief : this allows him to

both control and listen to the wills of the Id and Superego. All goes well with the tribe of boys - the “psyche” of Ralph, Piggy and Jack is reasonably balanced - until Jack makes a fateful decision: he lets the fire go out when he abandons it to hunt; a ship passes by the island but, without a signal fire to alert it, does not rescue them. As the Id, he has made a key move: he has bypassed the balancing effects of the Ego and made a decision on his own, putting him closer to the primal, wild world he wishes to create. Jack’s actions distance him from Ralph; this creates an imbalance in the psyche of the boys: Ralph is forced to become increasingly rational. Jack feels ignored, as he is unable to explain the “compulsion to track down and kill that [is] swallowing him up”, (Golding 55). Finally, Jack snaps, telling Ralph to “shut up”, and “to stop giving orders that don’t make sense”, (Golding p.57). Indeed, Ralph’s increasingly rational orders (for example, keeping the fire lit) seem contrived and unnecessary to Jack who would rather have fun hunting and killing pigs.

All the characters in *Lord of the Flies* are symbolic in nature. Simon, for example, represents emotional capacity in human beings which is moved to serve others, he is all goodness and innocence. He seems to be a unique case, while in most of the other boys their Superego deteriorates, Simon’s seems to grow. The Id contains the primal urges, such as urges for food, and considering that they hadn’t had meat in probably months, it was very generous of Simon to give up his meat to Piggy (Golding P158.). Generosity is the opposite of the characteristic selfishness of the Id. Simon seems to be kinder and worries about

people while for the most part everyone else is looking out for themselves. He seems to be the only one treating the littluns (the younger children) kindly or even recognizing them for that matter. In the forest they were following him and yelling and squabbling, Simon was patient with them and helped them to get fruit, without a word of complaint, this demonstrates that his Superego has been unmarred; it might have even become more dominant over the Id.

The “darkness of man’s heart” (Golding 223) is a prominent theme throughout *Lord of the Flies* and in modern society today. At first, it seems as if the id, represented by Jack is balanced by Ralph’s control and Piggy’s rational thought who manage to keep his primal urges in check. But the boys are on a wild island, where no laws prevail. This allows Jack to gain power and break away from the boys, and roam unchallenged. The other boys grow savage and unthinking, free to explore the primal desires of the id, and free to lose all of what society defines as humanity.

Conclusion

Lord of the Flies is ..".an attempt to trace the defects of society back to defects in human nature. The moral is that the shape of a society must depend on the ethical nature of the individual..." - William Golding. The problem is that no matter what the level of ethics in the individual, there is always the dormant aggression in humanity that can present itself in the absence of a strong lawful, moral authority. In an extreme case of isolation from the laws and rules of society, such as in *Lord of the Flies*,

conformity, persuasion and aggression can cause an individual to abandon their ethics and revert back to baser instincts. Intense anxiety producing situations like these, can manufacture certain psychological disorders and/or exaggerate already existing psychological characteristics.

The characters in *Lord of the Flies* mimic the crucial elements in our own civilized culture; security, leadership, morality and scientific discovery. Each of the elements offers a check and balance to the other, but if anyone is lost, the entire system decays into anarchy. This is exactly what happens to the group of boys on the island. The island as a place, order as the true issue in society, while logic and manners rule in the beginning, the boys soon realize that logic does not feed stomachs. Structure and civil order are replaced by savagery and ruthlessness, the voice of reason is replaced by primal fears and needs. While *Lord of the Flies* may seem to be a narrative telling of young boys being marooned on an island, it is more of a caution to society. Golding cleverly shows us that individuals can be swayed by order and eventually corrupted by power when left to their own devices, and will eventually behave with instinctive cruelty and violence, and that as individuals, we must recognize that there is a darkness that potentially resides in each of us, but we must learn to control it for the greater good of society or we will be lost, and we will all degenerate into bloodthirsty warriors.

References

- Abrams, M.H. A Glossary of Literary Terms. 7th ed. Toronto: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999, (pp 249-250)
- Comer, Rachel review in Lord of the Flies by Mary Haley, Tony Buzan (2011)
- Cox, C.B. "A review of 'Lord of the Flies.' " Critical Quarterly 2.2 (Summer 1960): 112-17. Contemporary Literary Criticism. Ed. Roger Matuz. Vol. 58. Detroit: Gale, 1990. 170-72
- Forester, E. M. "Introduction." Lord of the Flies: Casebook Edition. Ed. James R. Baker & Arthur P. Ziegler, Jr. New York: Penguin Group, 1988.
- Golding, William. Lord of the Flies: Casebook Edition. New York : Penguin Group, 1988.
- Johnston, Arnold . Of Earth and Darkness: The Novels of William Golding. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980.
- Kermode, Frank. "The Meaning of It All." Lord of the Flies: Casebook Edition. Ed. James R. Baker & Arthur P. Ziegler, Jr. New York: Penguin Group, 1988.
- Rosenfield, Claire. "Men of Smaller Growth: A Psychological Analysis of William Golding's 'Lord of the Flies.' " Literature and Psychology 11.4 (Fall 1961): 93-101. Contemporary Literary Criticism. Ed. Roger Matuz. Vol. 58. Detroit: Gale, 1990. 172-75
- Shanks, Cindy. "Character Analysis: Jack in Lord of the Flies, by William Golding." Helium.com. Helium Inc, 2013. Web. 4 June 2013. Rosenfield, Claire (1990). "Men of a Smaller Growth: A Psychological Analysis of William Golding's Lord

of the Flies". Contemporary Literary Criticism **58** (Detroit, MI: Gale Research). pp. 93–101.

Spangler, Donald R. "Simon." Lord of the Flies: Casebook Edition. Ed. James R. Baker & Arthur P. Ziegler, Jr. New York: Penguin Group, 1988.

Sigmund Freud. Encyclopedia of World Biography. 2nd ed. Gale Research, 1998. Biography Research Center. Web. 26 June 2006.

Sigmund Freud. World of Health. Gale Group, 2000. Biography Research Center. Web. 26 June 2006 Golding, William. Lord of the Flies. London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1969.

Spitz, David. Power And Authority: An Interpretation of Golding's 'Lord of the Flies. The Antioch Review 30.1 (Spring 1970): 21-33. Contemporary Literary Criticism. Ed. Sharon R. Gunton. Vol. 17. Detroit: Gale, 1981. 172-73.