

The Application of Frye's Theory to *Lord of the Flies*

LIU Li^{[a],*}

^[a]School of Foreign Languages, Shandong Jiaotong University, Jinan, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Frye's theory of archetypal meaning includes the apocalyptic and the demonic imagery. The apocalyptic and demonic imagery will be applied to William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, which is stuffed with symbols. Through the demonic imagery, the theme of the novel, people naturally revert to cruelty, savagery and barbarism is clearly revealed. The apocalyptic imagery gives us some hope, though.

Key words: Frye's theory; Symbols; The demonic imagery; The apocalyptic imagery

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INTRODUCTION

Lord of the Flies is said against the background of an atomic war. A plane carrying some English boys, aged six to twelve, from the center of conflict is shot down by the enemy and the youths are left without adult companion on an unpopulated Pacific island. The environment in which they find themselves actually presents no serious challenge: the island is a paradise of flowers and fruit, fresh water flows from the mountain, and the climate is gentle. In spite of these unusual natural advantages, the children fail miserably and the adventure ends in a reversal of their (and the reader's) expectations. Within a short time the rule of reason is overthrown and the survivors regress to savagery.

This paper will apply Frye's theory of archetypal meaning, which includes the apocalyptic and the demonic imagery to William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. The symbol is richly—even infinitely—suggestive in its significance; and also that for this very reason, a symbol is the high mode of expression.

The difference between images and symbols is supposed to be clarified. According to Chris Baldick in *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*, "images suggesting further meanings and associations in ways that go beyond the fairly simple identifications of metaphor and simile are often called symbols", and

it is usually too simple to say that a literary symbol 'stands for' some idea as if it were just a convenient substitute for a fixed meaning; it is usually a substantial image in its own right, around which further significances may gather according to differing interpretations. (p.219)

To some extent, symbols in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* can be regarded as the images discussed by Frye.

1. THE DEMONIC IMAGERY

The central concern of *Lord of the Flies* is the conflict between two competing impulses that exist within all human beings: The instinct to live by rules, act peacefully, follow moral commands, and value the good of the group against the instinct to gratify one's immediate desires, and enforce one's will. This conflict might be expressed in a number of ways: civilization vs. savagery, order vs. chaos, reason vs. impulse, law vs. anarchy, or the broader heading of **good vs. evil**. Throughout the novel, Golding associates the instinct of civilization with good and the instinct of savagery with evil. It is amazingly coincident with Frye's dichotomy of the imagery—the apocalyptic and the demonic imagery. Since Frye's explanation about this is far less than systematic, this paper will not confine it to one part, instead this theory about imagery will scatter in detailed discussion of every image.

1.1 The Leader

When left to their own devices, Golding implies, people naturally revert to cruelty, savagery, and barbarism. This idea of **innate human evil** is central to *Lord of the Flies*, and finds expression in several important symbols, most notably the beast and the sow's head on the stake. Among all the characters, only Simon seems to possess anything like a natural, innate goodness. He is a typically apocalyptic character, which I will elaborate in the latter part.

In the same article, Frye talks about demonic imagery, which he considered as opposed to apocalyptic imagery, but is the presentation of the world that desire totally rejects: The world of nightmare and scapegoat, of bandage and pain and confusion; just as apocalyptic imagery in poetry is closely associated with a religious heaven, so its dialectic opposite is closely linked with an existential **hell**, like Dante's *Inferno*, or with the hell that man creates on earth, as in *1984*.

The island is described as being in the shape of a boat. The boat image and the island itself are both symbols, just as Robinson Crusoe's island is symbolized as a society. The island in *Lord of the Flies* is a microcosm for the real world, along with all the problems and realities faced in the world.

The demonic human world is a society held together by a kind of molecular tension of egos, a loyalty to the group or **the leader** which diminishes the individual, or, at best, contrasts his pleasure with his duty or honor. Such a society is an endless source of tragic dilemmas like those of Hamlet and Antigone.

In the sinister human world one individual pole is the tyrant-leader, inscrutable, ruthless, melancholy, and with an insatiable will, who commands loyalty only if he is ego-centric to represent by the *pharmakos* or sacrificed victim, who has to be killed to strengthen the others.

Since we have two leaders in the novel, Ralph and Jack, the distinction between them has to be clarified. One boy is godlike and the other satanic—thus making a symbolic level of meaning that represents the struggle between the forces of God and those of Evil. Ralph is the natural leader by virtue of his superior strength and the superior beauty. His mild proclaims him “no devil”. Jack, on the other hand, is described in antithetical terms; he is distinguished by his ugliness and his red hair, a traditional demonic attribute. He “smears his face with clay”, leads the boys to kill pigs. And he and Roger plot the killing of Piggy. At first, it is a place of natural beauty and peace, but when Simon returns later in the novel, he discovers the bloody sow's head impaled upon a stake in the middle of the clearing. The bloody offering to the beast has disrupted the paradise that existed before—a powerful symbol of innate human evil disrupting childhood innocence.

1.2 The Vegetable World and the Water World

The **vegetable world** is “a sinister forest” like the ones we meet in *Comus* or the opening of the *Inferno*, or

a heath, which from Shakespeare to Hardy has been associated with tragic destiny, or a wilderness like that of Browning's *Childe Roland* or Eliot's *Waste Land*. Or it may be a sinister enchanted garden like that of Circe and its Renaissance descendants in Tasso and Spenser.

Accordingly the island that Ralph and Piggy at first encounter are by no means Garden of Eden,

the shore was fledged with palm trees. These stood or leaned or reclined against the light and their green feathers were a hundred feet up in the air. The ground beneath them was a bank covered with coarse grass, torn everywhere by the upheavals of fallen trees, scattered with decaying coconuts and palm saplings. Behind this was the darkness of the forest proper and the open space of the scar. (Golding, 1951, p.9)

Jack, who is considered as the demonic character in the novel, before Piggy is stoned to death, “emerges from the forest and begins to fight with Ralph while Piggy stands nearby shrieking in fear, wanting only for his sight is restored by retrieving his glasses.” Further inland is the dense jungle, towards the center of which is Simon's mat of creepers. This is also where pigs are hunted and the *Lord of the Flies* is eventually found.

On the island the vegetable world is a threatening and mysterious to the boys. Since the island is unsafe to them, it is naturally for their turn to the sea.

Frye holds that the **world of water** is the water of death, often identified with spilled blood, as in the *Passion* and in Dante's symbolic figure of history, and above all the “unplumbed, salt, estranging sea. It is obvious that the island is surrounded by sea. In the sea there is always some devil or frightful animals, like what we have learned from the Bible that there is a Leviathan in the sea and from *Moby Dick*, the white whale. While in the novel, when the littluns begin to murmur that there is a beast in the island, Jack “listened to Percival's (one of the littluns) answer and then lets go of him.” After clearing his voice, Jack announced that “he says the beast comes out of the sea.” On hearing this, “the assembly considered the vast stretches of water, the high sea beyond, unknown indigo of infinite possibility, heard silently the sough and whisper from the reef.” (Golding, 1951, p.81) it is undeniable that the boys really become frightened by the “stretching” sea.

Piggy “fell forty feet and landed on him and stuff came out and turned red. Piggy “arms and legs twitched a bit, like a pig's after it has been killed. Then the sea breathed again in a long, slow sigh, the water boiled white and pink over the rock; sucking back again, the body of Piggy was gone.” This description is identified with spilled blood.

1.3 Snake and the World of Fire

Another important demonic symbol is the snake. Since the serpent seduces Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, it has considered as the demonic symbol. The boy tells of a snakelike monster prowling the woods, “I was asleep when the twisty things were fighting and when they went

away I was awake, and I saw something big and horrid moving the trees.”

They even talked about “snake” in their assembly. “A small boy wants to know what you are going to do about the snake-thing.” Although Ralph, Piggy and Simon insisted that there was no “snake thing” or any “beastie”, the others still said, “The beastie came in the dark” and “in the morning it turned into them things like ropes in the trees and hung in the branches.” (Golding, 1951, pp.31-32) This discussion elicits disastrous consequences as in the Bible, when the snake seduces Eve to eat the apple; Adam and she were condemned to undergo a lot of difficulties. The seed of evil is planted since then. Jack began to advocate hunting, the little boys got really frightened for the beastie on the island. This beastie that frightens all the boys stands for the primal instinct of savagery that exists within all human beings. The more savagery the boys act, the more real the beast seems to become.

The **world of fire** is a world of malignant demons like the willo'-the-wisps, or spirits broken from hell, and it appears in this world in the form of the *auto da fe*, as mentioned, or such burning cities as Sodom. At last, “the fire racing forward like a tide” on the island, and then the whole island is on fire. The sinful island is “scorched up like dead wood” and destroyed. It is the fire of savagery—the forest fire Jack’s gang starts as part of his quest to hunt and kill Ralph. The fire that got them rescued was not meant for rescue.

2. THE APOCALYPTIC IMAGERY

All the above-mentioned imagery is demonic. The following part will discuss the apocalyptic imagery among which Simon is the representative who is often considered as a tragic hero.

The hero of tragic irony does not necessarily have any tragic hamartia or pathetic obsession: he is only somebody who gets isolated from his society. Thus the central principle of tragic irony is that whatever exceptional happens to the hero should be casually out of line with his character the figure of a typical or random victim begins to crystallize in domestic tragedy as it deepens in ironic tone. We may call this type victim in the pharmakos or scapegoat. The pharmakos is neither innocent nor guilty. He is innocent in the sense that what happens to him is far grater than anything he has done provokes. He is guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence. The incongruous and the inevitable, which are combined in tragedy, separate into opposite poles of irony. The incongruous irony of human life, in which all attempts to transfer guilt to a victim give that victim something of the dignity of innocence. The archetype of the incongruously ironic is **Christ**, the perfectly innocent victim excluded from human society (Frye, 1971, p.42).

Simon, in the novel, who is different from the others and understands that the evil that the boys fear, the beast they fear, is substantially of their own invention, but when, in fact, he announces this, he himself is regarded as evil and killed accordingly. There always be people who will see something particularly clearly, and will not be listened to, and if they are a particularly outstanding example of their sort, will probably be killed for it. Many literary people find that Simon is incomprehensible, but he is incomprehensible to the illiterate person. The illiterate person knows about saints and sanctity, and Simon is a saint. Simon is Golding’s first saint, and a most important figure. Critics have suggested that Simon is a Christ figure. And William Golding, on the artist’s part, has said that he intended to present a Christ figure in the novel, intimating that Simon is the character he meant so to present. In the scene in which Simon “suffers the little children to come unto him,” Golding’s description unmistakably evokes the Biblical accounts of Christ amid the bread-hungry masses. The responsibility for the martyrdom of Simon, like the responsibility for that of Jesus, can be ascribed either to secular or sacred interests. At first the tribe maintains that it was not Simon they had killed, but the terrorizing “beast,” and Simon are made a scapegoat, the capital punishment of whom satisfies the established state by eliminating a supposed enemy (Golding, 1957, p.214).

CONCLUSION

Consciously or unconsciously, Golding evolves demonic imagery to depict the theme of the novel. Golding implies that people naturally revert to cruelty, savagery and barbarism. This idea of innate human evil is central to *Lord of the Flies* and finds expression in several important imageries.

The aim of the narrative is to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human. Since the inheritors of the same defects of the nature which doomed their fathers, the tragedy on the island is bound to repeat the actual pattern of human history.

The vegetable world, the world of water and the society in this novel are all the projections of the human innate evils. Although it is destroyed by the world of fire, we still have hope that Simon as a Christ figure would spiritually save us.

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