

**THE EVOLUTION OF THE MORAL CONSCIENCE OF  
THE “GOLDING HERO”**

**A CONTEMPORARY READING**

**ABSTRACT**

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Iasi 2012

Key Words: evil, conscience, Golding Hero, war, reception theory, moral, symbols, myth, postmodernism, violence, message, farce, artist, epiphany.

The present paper proposes an analysis of the moral dynamics of the ‘Golding Hero’ throughout nine of William Golding’s (1911-1993) novels: *Lord of the Flies*, *The Inheritors*, *Pincher Martin*, *Free Fall*, *The Spire*, *Darkness Visible*, *The Pyramid*, *The Paper Men* and *Double Tongue*. The British author, who belongs to the post-war generation articulates a generous, pacifist message of deliverance from the tyranny of evil and its effects, at an individual and global levels.

The novelist is a champion of the artistic expression, handling skillfully the eternal conflict between good and evil. He has investigated the origin of evil and its effects within man’s inner conscience, with the modern means of the innovative narrative techniques of modernism (in Joyce’s literary legacy). At a collective level, war is revealed as the most tragic outcome therein – a supreme expression of hatred and violence.

This study aims at determining the parameters of existence of the Golding Hero and its internal dynamics within the world of conflagration and of the way in which he adjusted to the new cultural, moral and ideological paradigms of the post-war world. Although a theoretical concept that evolves in an imaginary universe, the Golding Hero, the author’s *alter ego*, has a moral and religious life of his own that make him an eschatological visionary with an articulated message for his contemporaries.

We are interested in the identity traits of this hero and whether he can be considered a ‘living’ representation of all the heroes of Golding’s novels, as well as what type of message he delivers to his generation.

Secondly, of no less importance is the Hero’s assessment of the moral side of reality. We are trying to approach him in a cautious way, guessing what is under the masks he wears, thanks to the sophisticated narrative effects practiced by Golding, which by means of the narrative perspective he uses, places his reader behind a movie camera installed within the hero’s mind, his eyes being the viewfinder of the camera.

Evil springing from human nature that some of the characters are aware of, tends to turn the world into a dense darkness. Martin describes it in his imaginary crevice in *Pincher Martin* (1956), which symbolizes the pitch darkness of hell that evil will end up into, that the positive side of the Hero, represented by Matty from *Darkness Visible* (1979) wants to bring in the light which is not possible except by his own sacrifice. Sometimes the Hero opposes his redemption decisively. The Golding Hero experiences an identity and epistemological crisis. Many times he finds himself in compromising situations or extremely dangerous (like Sammy in *Free Fall* in the Nazi cell) or chaos and tolerance of sin in his personal life in order to attain his purposes that become contrary to his creed, as in dean Jocelin's case in *The Spire* (1964). Oliver's identity crisis that mars the plot of *The Pyramid* (1967) gathers momentum as it escalates the social set boundaries. The Hero backslides morally, in this modern *Bildungsroman*, as his social position evolves. In the last scenes, while visiting his native places, he asks about his late violin teacher (miss Dawlish). Then he recollects the last details in connection with her personality – a boring person, professionally incompetent and socially integrated in the local parochialism. Her mishap was due to her failure to marry outside the British system of social classes, as transpires from the novel. Oliver's reaction at the site of the graveyard, standing in front of the tomb of his ex-teacher, is stunning and unacceptable – then and there do we find out the truth about his real moral involution. He claims to hate her, despite the unanimous opinion of his parents and locals that they have had a special relationship and of the implicit role she has played in his intellectual formation.

The Hero approaches old age with a dignified attitude, of a consecrated artist, but whimsical and moody in the person of Wilf Barclay, a reputed writer who rejects professor Rick Tucker's agonizing trials to get the copyrights for his future biography in the novel *The Paper Men* (1984). The hero realizes, at the same time that, actually all the perseverance developed by Tucker and the scenario set up for finally getting the copyrights for Wilf's biography gravitates around the central symbol – paper – symbol that encapsulates all the meaninglessness of his quest and his so-called academic hopes. This thought dawns on Wilf, who has an epiphanic moment by the end of the novel, when he longs for a deliverance from the system of the world with its indifference to spiritual stimuli, but is obsessed with material gain.

The last appearance of the Hero before the world is embodied by the priestess Arieka, from the posthumous novel, *The Double Tongue* (1995). Being at a similar age with the author, she looks upon the world and life in a reverse perspective, meditating on the benefits of the spiritual life compared to the physical, mundane, lacking in philosophical quests and full of egotism, materialism and political games. After years of vacillations, Arieka pleads for the spiritual Otherness of the unknown (to the Greeks) God, with the sacrifice of her self, by which she delimits herself from the spirit of the age.

Going through the nine novels carefully, we may ask ourselves, ‘What kind of message have the postmodern readers perceived, as people who use another moral lens to watch reality?’ In the context of a contemporary world that has a different set of values and looks upon reality with a lack of concern towards the moral values to which Golding is sensitive, the Golding Hero struggles with evil because of his spirituality and even religiosity or Christ-like spirit of sacrifice.

Our foremost task is to discern what the feed-back of the readership (including critics) to this message is and whether the distance in time would be a challenge or the shift of the discourse into a cultural dimension that suffers of estrangement and ethical bias.

We agree with Iser that the message finds its shape when it reaches the mind of the reader and its reception suffers a complex process of accommodation with the level of education and competence as a reader. If the reader belongs to a readership community (e. g. focused on Golding), he develops a realistic horizon of expectations that can be easier tuned to the authorial intentions. However, the time span between the composition of these novels and their lecture is insignificant, thus the differences of paradigm are minor, fact that eases up their reception.

## **Outline and discussion**

### **I. Introduction**

What is and what is the Golding Hero up to? Here are a few ideas about this theoretical construct, as well as the type of message he addresses his (post-war) generation and then on to the next – postmodern one. During this spiritual journey, with its labyrinthine ways of access

within human conscience, the Hero fleshes out a sort of Mediaeval 'Everyman', who after identifying acute identity crises, opens up to sociological generalizations.

## **II. The language of evil**

### *1. Short history of the concept of evil from Augustine to our days*

This chapter starts from the concept of evil formulated by Augustine's theology (the original sin) and continues with different approaches of the concept in what we call 'theodicies', along the centuries by thinkers such as Leibniz, Hegel, Karl Barth, Heidegger and Paul Ricoeur until we reach writers like Golding.

The moralists, philosophers and theologians and later on, the secular rationalists, the modern neo-positivists, have developed different theories and have nuanced this controversial problem that generated a long series of polemics since ancient times until today. The theories have evolved from Augustine's concept of 'free will' (*liberum arbitrio*) to Leibniz's theodicy and then to Kant's and Hegel's criticism. Later on, the ideas of the twentieth century existentialism infiltrated human society, especially Europe. The disappointing awareness of the fact that evil became only more subtle during this period, by turning to newer methods of sneaking deeper into human conscience, determined a rather pessimistic perspective on life, such as Schopenhauer's or Nietzsche's. Meanwhile, man's fierce hatred burst out from time to time through devastating conflagrations, like the Second World War, experienced first hand by Golding.

The lack of trust in the shallow Enlightenment optimism and the superficial theory about man's place and role in the universe, posits Golding within the pessimist group. He defines himself in a conference as 'a universal pessimist and a cosmic optimist.'

### *2. Before and after the wars – reason and war*

There have always been wars, but the people's outlook have always diverged towards this devastating reality. The outcome of the Victorianism preceding Golding's work was a positivism generating a naïve optimism launched by the British naturalists and the literary realists of the

period. This chapter evaluates the European opinions regarding the war until the First World War.

The best illustration here is the famous *Illiad* that launches war as a subject of literary works from the earliest times and a central paradigm of the collective evil.

War becomes a terrible legacy of hatred over humanity that takes its toll in millions of human lives and brings sorrow to other millions, producing mutilations and unfathomable tragedies, at a personal level as well as globally. It provoked Golding “a sort of religious convulsion which is not unusual among the people with passionate and morbid habits,” he recollects in *Men, Women and Now*.

Since war remains a central motif in Golding’s novels, as it plays an important part throughout the rest of the twentieth century, the present heading elaborates on the reasons for which it became so important in the history of human ideas and ideologies. Were the contrite Mediaeval Christian or the meditative and kind wandering monk, who dreamt of the expansion of the Kingdom of God, just scapegoats of history?

The European man placed his precious ego on the altar of history, not in order to sacrifice himself for the blessing of others around, but for sacrificing others for the Ego’s benefit, glorified and uplifted by a philosopher like Max Stirner (1806-1856).n

### 3. *The Hero in search for his new identity*

The Golding Hero represents an alter-ego of the author, undoubtedly and, even if he escapes the war is internally mutilated. His transition is haunted by nightmares and troubled by moral issues, illusory guilt problems or that belong to human nature in general. He hardly finds his place within the new world full of craters of the cities, of misery that lurks at every corner and of modifying the vision regarding human nature and the evil fueled by it.

The period is characterized by a total bankruptcy of reason that gets a vote of mistrust. Its champions – Camus, Sartre or Heidegger have influenced their generation. Once Einstein’s theory was issued, European thinking relativizes as well. It seemed that the nihilistic theory

uttered by Nietzsche came to pass – man became the source of lost values via Platonism and Aristotelianism, only he knew how to play his card, to develop his ego, to eliminate the weak, contrite or lacking in vision and finally to become *Übermensch*.

### III. The Golding Hero and his war experience

#### 1. *Lord of the Flies – the germs of evil in ‘clean hearts’*

The first and most acclaimed novel Golding wrote, yet paradoxically, so difficult to print in the beginning, demolishes the well-embraced prejudice of the child’s innocence of the period. The Golding Hero is represented in the novel by four children, as their personalities are not finalized yet. Ralph who starts like a leader, is an idealist and with some sort of life philosophy that begins to take shape, but lacks initiative and that makes him fail leading the boys and later on turns him into a fugitive for his life. A second piece of the puzzle called Golding Hero, Jack, is placed at the negative pole, a synthesis of the despotic and even malefic feats of the character of the leader. His enigmatic figure recalls of Joseph Conrad’s hero, Kurtz from the novel *Heart of Darkness*. Another important figure here is Piggy, who personifies the voice of reason, of rule, discipline and tolerance based civilization. His murder later on is symbolical and symptomatic: the triumph of the forces of evil of extremism over reason. The idea can be easily expanded to the events that the author had just passed through in the war.

Jack’s gang of ‘hunters’ chased and annihilated any free thinker that could oppose his air-tight control. Jack personifies the negative side of the leader that uses his charisma for exercising control over the little ones, who are defenseless. Then, he indoctrinates them and uses them dangerously sliding towards religious and military fanaticism (turning them into hunters) with outbursts of violence that will end up in accidentally killing Simon and then, only in a more deliberate way, Piggy and finally chasing Ralph.

If Piggy is the rational part of the Hero in the novel, Simon is the spiritual side, the Christic side of those who surround Ralph. He is on the verge of finding out the mystery of the Beast, used by Jack to scare the kids, (for he is using fear to control them), for which reason he is

killed as if by mistake. He was created by the author in order to bring a spiritual balance to the novel and creating thus, the premises of an interpretation of Christ's sacrifice in this context.

## 2. *The Inheritors – the lost Paradise of the Golding Hero*

*The Inheritors*, a novel of prehistoric fiction, brings to light the irony of developing evil since the childhood of humankind, this time – thus it is a generalization of the model offered by the first novel. Some critics consider it like a normal continuation. A different approach *ab origines* of the evil inherent to the human being. Reality is seen through the eyes and rudimentary conscience of the Hero, Lok, the kind leader of a group of defenseless *Neanderthals*. They are vulnerable to all sorts of perils, but one proves to be fatal, the *Homo sapiens* competitors which become the new link in the evolutionary chain, fitter to cope with danger and more developed, at least as the weaponry is concerned. Neanderthals are chased and finally annihilated by the tribes of the 'new man', that invaded their territories and stole their children which were brought as a sacrifice to their gods. Lok represents the Hero in this novel and he is related to Ralph by destiny. Lok thinks only in images, and when he cannot find an image that illustrates reality, he does not understand and refuses the otherness. He looks at the new people, their weapons and tools, with curiosity. He is somewhat attracted by their innovations in a deadly way. Fa, his partner, tries to warn him of the new people's peril, but finally unsuccessfully. As a result of that, Lok, Fa and their whole tribe are exterminated by the new people and the 'inbuilt camera' is passed on to Tuami, a young hunter from the new people's side that harbours thoughts of taking over the leadership of the tribe.

Ironically, the author sympathizes with the Neanderthals because of their meek spirit, of a superior quality to the technological intelligence of the new people, a subtle *à propos* of the contemporary situation of the development of artificial intelligence at the expense of the moral aspects of life.



### 3. *Pincher Martin – the apostate Hero's double death*

Christopher Martin, the next phase of the Hero, in whose name echoes the authorial irony, for the meaning of his name with Greek reverberations means 'carrier of Christ', belongs to the universe of conflagration as well. He embodies the reverse of the positive profile of the Hero until now. Martin highlights the image of the apostate nihilist.

The Hero lives by extending his imaginary life in a post-mortem continuum, a footnote of his ethereal existence painfully contorted by his inauspicious memories. The author proves his special narrative gifts in this novel by developing experimentalist elements concerning the narrative perspective. His conscience filled with moral compromise suffers various metamorphoses and dystrophies of character with the passage of time and his affective memory does not forgive this. Martin becomes a vehement critic of the divinely instituted moral order on earth. In this typically postmodernist spirit, Golding achieves a construct of the imaginary of a second degree – first because the novel is generally a work of fiction as such and secondly because we finally find out that, actually, Martin was dead from the second page of the novel and all its contents becomes a convention with the reader of giving him a second chance of expiation.

He refuses his second chance, with a demonic violence and death brings him no soothe, for his rebellious spirit refuses any point of contact, any reconciliation with God.

### 4. *Free Fall – losing one's freedom of conscience*

The Hero, embodied here by Sammy Mountjoy, recollects via flash-backs in the context of the post-war period, his painful decadence from the statute of respected artist in the refined society of the art connoisseurs to that of a prisoner of war, treated as a subspecies. The Hero starts by having strong remorse vis-à-vis his sinful past and disgust towards a world that appears morally inappropriate and lacking in existential purpose (*skopos*). He represents the conscience of the intellectual who is in search of values and meanings in a universe of chaos, stirred up by the will of the malevolent forces. He is looking for his place, position, perspective, though all these are influenced by an inevitable fall in an abyss, as the title suggests, pushed through by the irresistible attraction of sin, likened with imponderability. This positioning presupposes a fight

with his own ego overwhelmed of teenage sins, as well as another one with the external forces hostile to the sensitive spirit of the artist. The Hero searches for his lost freedom of conscience, looks for the light at the end of the tunnel.

#### 5. *Darkness Visible – sacrifice through fire unto expiation*

Matty, the new hyposthesis of the Hero, is a kid of the fire, for he emerged therein. He was saved from a building on fire and comes into this world with this symbol of light, in order to purify the human being, deeply fallen into sin (represented here by the two twins, Toni and Sophy – as two living expressions of the human depravity).

This novel constitutes a sort of centre of gravity of Golding's spirituality for, this time the author chooses a 'saint' as a protagonist, not one in the monastic tradition, yet in a sort of a personal way. Matty appears as an apocalyptic character with an eschatologic destiny, he and his chums were well aware of, and he tries a reconciliation of the human nature with the divine holiness, with discouraging results, which makes him to accept his messianic destiny through an atoning sacrifice, going back into another fire, in order to save a child's life.

### **IV. Peace challenges**

#### 1. *The Spire – the visionary artist and the moral compromise*

The next phase of the Hero is that of a visionary artist that considers himself called to an exceptional work, the spire of a church he considers a prayer in stone, despite all discouraging realities, of the technical impossibility of the project. Jocelin passes through the valley of the shadows of sin, from a spiritual exaltation to the quiet acceptance of any means for continuing the building.

In reality, there are orgies, murders and even demonic rituals taking place there while Jocelin shuts his eyes and prefers to live in his imaginary world, of made up merits accumulated by the accomplishment of a call in order to build something that was a real spiritual barrier for a priest – the demonic pride. Finally, the Hero realizes on his death bed, with a contrite heart all

the sins he had committed and comes back to the humble condition of a mere mortal that relates in a natural way to his neighbours, and at last to God.

## *2. The Pyramid – crushed by the stone blocks of the social classes*

This time in a much more accessible sentence, the Hero is a young man (Oliver) that tries, as much as he can, to make a way through the thorns of the fences that separate the British class system, which have, in the words of Golding, ‘a terrible, paralyzing structure’. Its barriers do not take into account the feelings of those who try to cross them, disfiguring them, as it happened to Oliver’s provincial old piano teacher, Miss Dawlish. Running on the corridors of power towards the heights of the pyramid is done with the sacrifice of human values, understanding that Oliver gets, as it happens, too late.

## *3. Paper Men – the Hero playing his own tragic farce*

As the time passes, the Hero is more and more like his creator, gets more common ‘wrinkles’ with him. Wilf Barclay is a successful writer who lives in a perpetual spiritual duel with professor Rick Tucker, his self-entitled biographer. Wilf becomes cynical and practices gratuitous farces showing off his evil potential by exhibiting his bad conduct and succeeds to humiliate Rick repeatedly in exchange for his promise of writing his biography. In a so called eschatological farce (cf. Friedman), the Hero evolves through the absurd mist of the plot exhaling his perplexity in an absurd attempt of understanding his own cynicism and the lack of emotional life, hence the crisis of language and communication with those around him. The Hero has created (probably involuntarily) an exoskeleton that he doesn’t know how to get rid of. He has a final revelation, of an epiphanic type and finishes absurdly, shot by Rick, the former subject of his sarcasms until then. The murder was determined by a mental repression that ended up in a desperate gesture under the pressure of a malevolent energy accumulated in time.

#### 4. *The Double Tongue – two original reference points, classicism and Christianity*

In his last novel, the Golding Hero suffers of an unexpected metamorphosis – becomes a woman (Arieka) and goes back several millennia. In the mystical atmosphere of Delphi, Arieka will become the last priestess that receives Pythia's sacred oracles. The heroine, at first marginalized by her friends and family because of her lack of beauty, starts getting closer to the gods and receives messages in a trance, which she forgets later on. Arieka has the moral spine to resist Ionides' political strategies, the chief- priest of the temple, who is finally caught by the Romans and exiled. She looks back from the ivory tower of her eighty years old, as if in a diary, to these happenings, doubting more and more her so-called messages and even the existence of those who sent them, the gods.

The autobiographical bias is crystal clear here and refers not only to the coincidence linked to the age, but also to the existential questions asked by the Heroine. The skepticism of her old age helps her to resist the benefic temptations of her faith, that stayed with her all her life. She had reasons to believe and traumas that questioned her faith, but she does not seem to find the strength to play another play of argumentation at this old age, leaving her spirit at the fatal control of the equivocal attitudes, like Socrates in the past.

Her final movement surprises us, since she gives up her ego of seeing her statue exhibited in the agora as a sign of appreciation of her life-time devotion. However, the cult of her personality leaves place for a genuine modesty – she suggests that on the same pedestal instead of her statue, they write a eulogy that suggested the representation of an unknown God, whom she knew nothing about, but that she felt intuitively, covering her with his goodness and whom she could barely guess rather than know. Despite the acute skepticism, the wisdom of her age motivates her to give a last chance to faith. The name she suggests is an anticipation of what was to be presented a little later by Paul in the Athenian Agora – the unknown God, Jesus Christ.

In this way, the journey in search of a Hero with many contradictory feats of character and inner unrest, hesitations, who is attracted and somewhat repulsed by holiness, but incapable of going on the same road to the end with loyalty finishes here.

#### **Conclusions**

The message of the Golding Hero, distinguished as a clear voice of the author, a warning towards escalating violence everywhere, of the unthinkable evil resources of the original sin

which is genetically transmissible from a generation to another, becomes an appeal to self-reflection and an attempt of exorcising of this evil, inherent to the human nature that becomes deep and wide within the span of the cultural myth.

The changes of the contemporary era are just external technological innovations, which does not stop the consequences of this evil that rubs us inside and that can explode again from the terrible cellarage of the mind when helped by the technology that can obliterate the whole race.

Golding succeeds to achieve the dream of any creator of suggesting instead of pointing, using with ability the tools of ambiguity and equivocal attitudes and sacrificing sometimes clarity and transparency. The moral aspects of Golding's fiction remain central to his favourite themes and the continuous struggle of the values of good (without referencing to any kind of spirituality in particular) with the evil inherent to human nature is one of the constant elements of Golding's thinking.

This study proposes several questions that go farther than the strict ground of the literariness or of the theoretical speculation, considering that there is a much larger spectrum of applicability of those treated here than the delineation of a hero and its appearance in different contexts. It wants to suggest fundamental topics that have concerned and generated hot disputes along the millennia and contextualize them, giving them expression in the terms of postmodernism.