

Modern Myth: An Archetypal Study on *Lord of the Flies* of William Golding

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Abstract : *Lord of the Flies* is considered to be the masterpiece of British novelist William Golding who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for his plentiful archetypes and his mythology of the darkness of human nature. Based on the mythological and archetypal theories of James G. Frazer and Carl G. Jung, this essay attempts to discover the archetypes in *Lord of the Flies* and interpret the settings, characters, images of the novel based on the western Christian culture and ancient Greek and Roman mythology.

Keywords : *Lord of the Flies*; Archetypal Settings; Archetypal Characters; Archetypal images

1. Introduction

Lord of the Flies, published in 1954, is one of the most well-known novels written by British established writer William Golding (1911-1993). The novel tells the story of a group of British schoolboys who are marooned on an inhabited island after a plane crash in the future nuclear war and how they struggle to survive in this isolated place. Without adult supervision, the boys organize themselves and establish a set of democratic rules in their little community in order to be rescued by the outside world at the beginning. But the fear of the darkness and the “beast” during their survival divided them into two parties. Ralph, the elected leader who represents ration, civilization, democracy, holding the symbol of power, a conch, is gradually taken place by Jack, a pig-hunting fanatic who stands of emotion, barbarism, autocracy. During the struggle for the transference of power between Ralph and Jack, Simon, a devout Christian who figures out the truth of the “beast”, is accidentally killed by the other boys in a frenzy of superstition, which is the climax of the story. After Simon’s sacrifice, Jack who holds the power degrades into a blood-thirsty dictator and commands the boys to kill piggy, a clumsy but knowledgeable and rational boy, for piggy’s spectacles, the only tools to start the fire. From hunting pigs to killing their fellow, British boys are no longer recognized as civilized people but as savages and brutal animals. The story embodies Golding’s view about human nature and society by depicting the children’s behavior without adults’ watch and rule.

1.1 Brief literature review

Since its publication, numerous of research on *Lord of the Flies* have been done both abroad and at home from different perspectives, such as the good or evil of human nature, the derivation of authority, the conflict between democracy and autocracy, the origin and evolution of religion, the absence of female role, the application of irony and symbolism, comparative studies between *Lord of the Flies* and other novels of the desert island, and so on. The various theoretical theory has been used to support their research, like Freudian psychological approach, Jung’s theories of collective unconsciousness and archetypal criticism, Marxist approach, feminist theory, other cultural studies, currently eco-criticism, and even biomedical studies on this work.

For the archetypal studies on *Lord of the Flies*, J. F. Fitzgerald and J. K. Kayser’s “Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*: Pride as

Original Sin” analyzed the mythical structure and major archetypes based on the Greek tragedy of the novel. Lawrence S. Friedman’s “Grief, Grief, Grief: Lord of the Flies” studies the ancient Greek mythological archetypes in the novel. At home, Hu Lei’s essay “Dionysus’s Revenge” reinterprets the ancient Greek archetypes in the story. Overall, previous studies on Lord of the Flies are abundant and diverse, but there remains space for digging into the details and themes of the story in the archetypal analysis.

1.2 Archetypal criticism

In literary criticism archetype denotes recurrent narrative designs, patterns of action, character-types, themes, and images which are identifiable in a wide variety of works of literature, as well as in myths, dreams, and even social rituals. (Abrams 24) According to Carl G. Jung, archetypes constitute the structure of the collective unconscious. They are psychic innate dispositions to experience and represent basic human behavior and situations. A great writer provides readers access to the archetypal images buried in the racial memory. (Jung 79) In western culture, three major sources of their archetypes and archetypal patterns are Greek and Roman mythology, the ancient Greek tragedy, and the Christian biblical story.

William Golding can be said to be a writer of myths. In 1983, Golding won the Nobel Prize in Literature “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” in his work Lord of the Flies. Moreover, he uses the pattern of myth in his manner of writing. Thus, Lord of the Flies is also a perfect text which embodies the archetypal theory.

2. Archetypal settings in *Lord of the Flies*

Based on Frye’s archetypal criticism, archetypal patterns are reflected in ideology like myth or legends in which archetype situation involved paradise, the hell, the purgatory, etc. In Lord of the Flies, Golding employs some typical archetypal settings in the timing, the scene, the plot, and the environment of the island.

2.1 The island: archetype of garden of eden

The most typical archetypal setting of the novel is the environment of the island. In the Old Testaments of the Christian Bible, human beings live in Garden of Eden an ideal and beautiful survival kingdom, a place of bliss, created by God. However, the harmonious peace is broken by the snake which seduces Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and then they are expelled from the garden.

Like biblical literature, the author used the image of the Garden of Eden to depict the island as a tropical paradise in the novel: the blue sea, the white waves, the lagoon where children can swim in the water, plenty of fruits for their food, and no constraints of adults. “They accepted the pleasure of morning, the bright sun, the whelming sea, and sweet air, as a time when play was good and life so full.” (Golding 218) Everything seems so wonderful, but like Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit, children are also tempted to eating pork and lived under the terror of beast and demon, which erodes children’s innocence and awakens the spiritual evil in their minds. In the end, Ralph’s crying is not only for the destruction of innocence and the darkness of human nature, but for the reappearance of the human suffering myth of “Paradise Lost”.

2.2 Day and night: archetype of heaven and hell

Another archetypal setting of the story is the light which separates day and night. In the biblical story, heaven is connected with the brightness and hell with the darkness. Hell is depicted as a fiery and painful place that means imposing on the guilt and suffering in most western myths. The common image of Hell is a dark place of fire, while the image of heaven is a place of light, warmth, innocence, kindness. “Heaven and Hell are opposite poles and can be transferred by the imagination of experience and of innocence.” (Frye 97)

In the novel, the bright daylight makes children enjoy life on the charming island, but the night on this land is pitch-dark and almost all the evil things scared the boy appear in the darkness. As Sam and Eric thought in the story, “the darkness is full of claws, full of the awful unknown and menace.” (Golding 212) The beast or the snake is seen by littleuns in the night; the crop of the pilot arrives at the night; the slaughter of Simon happens at the night. When the sun goes down and the night falls, the island in the novel turns to be a horror and evil place where full of sin. In contrary, the day gives children hope to be rescued, because only in the daytime can the smoke on the island be seen by people farther away. Therefore, the archetypal setting of heaven and hell is implied by day and night in the novel.

2.3 Revelry and sacrifice: archetype of rituals

The revelry of hunting and sacrifice of pig head are archetypal settings of the ritual. Ritual is a kind of performance to worship the mysterious force which is mentioned in nearly all the western myth. In the biblical story, “the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘If a person sins unintentionally in any of the things which the Lord has commanded not to be done, and commits any of them, if the anointed priest sins so as to bring guilt on the people, then let him offer to the Lord a bull without defect as a sin offering for the sin he has committed.’” (Leviticus 4: 1-3) In ancient Greek and Roman mythology, rituals are performed in many ways, such as the recitation of prayers in the temple, animal sacrifices, etc.

The hunting scene in *Lord of the Flies*, seemingly a dance, is actually a ritual. The revelry activity appears three times in the novel. The first time is in chapter four, the boys have hunted the pig for the first time, “Maurice pretended to be the pig and ran squealing into the center, and the hunters, circling still, pretended to beat him. As they danced, they sang.” (Golding 275) The second time is in chapter seven, Robert pretends to be the prey. The boys including Ralph overlook Robert’s screaming and shouting, beat him in a circle, and hurt him in real pain. The last time also the climax of revelry mentioned in the novel is the slaughter of Simon. All the boys participate in this revelry ritual even Ralph and Piggy.

Besides the revelry of hunting, the sacrifice of pig head (and Simon’s death in some sense) is also a ritual. To transfer the corruptions of people to a sacred animal or person, human beings could achieve rebirth by killing or eating a scapegoat. Corollary to the rite of sacrifice is the scapegoat archetype. Like people sacrifice a goat for God, and Jesus is killed as a scapegoat to save the people. In *Lord of the Flies*, Simon is a typical scapegoat archetype who sacrifice in hunting rituals.

3. Archetypal characters in *Lord of the Flies*

In addition to the archetypal settings above, Golding also uses typical archetypal characters which embody the abstract image representing western culture to reveal the evilness and cruelty in human nature. The main archetypal characters in *Lord of the Flies* are Ralph, Jack, Simon, and Piggy who act as the archetype of Apollo, Dionysus, Jesus, and Pentheus.

3.1 Ralph: archetype of apollo

The core protagonist in the story, Ralph, is the archetype of Apollo. Apollo, son of Zeus and Leto, is one of the most vital Olympian deities in ancient Greek and Roman mythology who recognized as the God of the sun and light, truth and prophecy, healing and diseases. He is good at archery, music, dance, and poetry. Based on Nietzsche’s work *The Birth of Tragedy*, Apollo is the representation of reason, rationality, advancement, and unity; on the contrary, Dionysus, who represents indulgence, chaos, passion, and ecstasy.

In the novel, Ralph shares some similarities with Apollo. First, Ralph has an attractive appearance. With fair hair, “there was a mildness about his mouth and eyes that proclaim no evil.” (Golding 211) And so does Apollo, the most handsome God in Greek and Roman mythology. “He is a beautiful figure in Greek poetry, the master musician who delights Olympus as his plays on his golden lyre.” (Tierney 25) Second, Ralph is sporty like Apollo. Ralph is portrayed as a young boy who is not strong enough as an adult but athletic and vigorous in this group of boys. “You could see now that he might make a boxer, as far as width and heaviness of shoulders went.” (Golding 211) Because of his innate advantage, he becomes the chosen leader in this micro-community. Third, Ralph is the symbol of democracy, order, and rationality of human civilization in the story. This is also the characteristic of Apollo analyzed by Nietzsche. Ralph is rational to face the situation that they are trapped on an isolated island and the most significant things for them is to be rescued. He organized the community in a good order and insist on keeping the fire on the top of the hill burning. He is on behalf of the light and hope of human society. Ralph advocates the democratic system and civilized conventions. He is the protector of reason and civilized society through the entire story. Different from Piggy, Ralph admits the existence of the beast, and he realized the evilness of human nature. But he never paints his face in the novel, which reflects that he has not been eroded by the darkness to his pure heart.

Like Roman name of Apollo, Phoebus, which means “brilliant” and “shining”, Ralph is a positive character in the story who is finally rescued by the navy officer, which embodies the author’s pursuit of brightness and hope in the future. And Ralph’s experience reflects the only way to confront the evilness is self-salvation.

3.2 Jack: archetype of dionysus

Dionysus, the God of vine, is the son of Zeus and the Theban princess Semele in ancient Greek and Roman mythology. He is

also the God of fertility, orchards, and fruit, vegetation, insanity, ritual madness, religious ecstasy, festivity, and theatre. He establishes the worship in his born place. The worship of Dionysus is centered on two ideas, of freedom and ecstatic joy and of savage brutality. Dionysus is totally on the opposite side of Apollo. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche proposes the concept of Apollonian and Dionysian. He puts these two patterns on a binary opposition, like order and passion, civilization and barbarism, democracy and autocracy, rationality and irrationality.

Back to the novel, Jack represents the archetype of Dionysus. First, both Jack and Dionysus have their followers in strange clothes. Jack appeared in the story in a black cloak with a party of boys marching in step in two lines behind him. Second, they are both cruel hunters. Jack is obsessed with hunting pigs for eating meat in the story and for Dionysus, he is also a heartless and brutal god who hunts his prey for his pleasure. "He who with a mocking laugh / Hunts his prey, / Snares and drags him to his death / With his Bacchanals." (Tierney 58) Thus, they all enjoy the ecstatic pleasure and brutality in bloody hunting. Third, both Jack and Dionysus establish the worship. During the beast-hunting game, Jack leads the boys to sing the hunting-song and dance on the beach. He also believes in the existence of the beast and decides to sacrifice the pig head to the devil, which is like the worship of a mysterious supernatural force. Fourth, they all represent the instinct of human nature, such as irrationality, disorder, evilness, and chaos. Jack is fond of enjoyments at present and always overlooks the most important things to do is to be rescued on this island. He is the destroyer of the order and reasons and desires for authority and power, which releases the bloody-thirst and evilness in human nature.

3.3 Piggy: archetype of Pentheus

Pentheus, the king of Thebes, is the son of Semele's sister, cousin of Dionysus. His mother and sisters are all the followers of Dionysus, but he refuses to worship Dionysus and finally pays to his life. All the followers of the God of vin, including his families, thought Pentheus a wild beast and tore him limb from limb.

Piggy is the archetype of Pentheus. First, like Pentheus, Piggy is a rational intellectual on the island. He understands the current situation of the boys on the island and always see what common people cannot find. He is the first boy who find the conch and knows the use of it. He never believes in the existence of the beast but science and technology. Second, Piggy is always separated from other boys for his overweight and asthma. So does Pentheus who is seen as an alien by followers of Dionysus. Third, Piggy takes action to suppress the savagery of Jack. And same as Pentheus' death for fighting against Dionysus, Piggy is killed by the displacement of Dionysus, Jack, and his followers, which signifies the failure of science in the story and reminds human beings that if order and civilization collapse, the brutal violence will grab the scientific and technological achievements consolidate its power.

3.4 Simon: archetype of Jesus

Jesus Christ is a typical biblical image as the saint, the prophet, the scapegoat the savior in the western culture. In the story, Simon shares similar archetypal characteristics with Jesus. First, Simon is a kind and generous character. He has no conflicts with other boys and always helps others on the island: helping Ralph to build the shelter, picking up the fruits for the littleuns, finding the spectacles for Piggy when Jack slaps Piggy, etc. Jesus in the Bible is also described as a merciful God who helps to cure sick people. Second, Simon is seen to be mysterious in this novel. For example, he always speaks inside of the shelter just like God gives the oracles to mankind. Third, different from Piggy, Simon is the child of nature who follows his intuition. In the novel, lots of his words become prophecy in the novel, which is similar to the prophet image of Jesus. Fourth, Simon's conversation with the pig's head is the same as the devil's temptations to Jesus in the desert. Confronting the temptations of the Lord of the Flies, Simon sticks firmly to his faith, and through the conversation, he realizes the truth that the beast would do no harm to the boys. Fifth, Simon is the only one who knows the truth of the beast, but he is murdered by the other boys, like a Christian martyr who sacrificed himself for the truth. In the biblical story, Jesus's crucifixion as the scapegoat is also for saving his people and absolve their sins.

Based on these five points above, Simon's death is inevitable in the novel, which is also a warning to human beings that the evilness in the human heart makes the savior has no chance for speaking out of the truth to help them get rid of the darkness.

4. Archetypal images in lord of the flies

The archetypal image is the typical representation that repeatedly emerged in different works with the conventional semantic association which is to reveal people's unconscious mind in literary work. In *Lord of the Flies*, there are many archetypal images to

demonstrate the theme of the novel.

The fire, which is lighted by Piggy's glasses symbolizes hope and wisdom in the story. In ancient Greek and Roman mythology, Prometheus steals fire to mankind and brings the light and force to human beings. With the use of fire, people could conquer the wild animals and invents the tools for their living, so the fire also represents the progress from ignorance to civilizations. But in the novel the role of fire changes from hope to desire. In the beginning, the smoke of fire is the only way for the children to be rescued. As the story continues the fire becomes the tools for cooking the row pork for the boys to eat. Thus, the meaning of the fire in the text could also be interpreted as the fall of rationality in human society.

The snake, which is the original fear thing of the novel embodies the deep unconsciousness of the human mind. In the Bible, the snake appears as Satan who seduces Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, breaking the harmony of the Garden of Eden. Thus, the snake also represents conflict, seduction, cheating, and betrayal. The conflict between Ralph and Jack breaks out from the appearance of a snake-like beastie, which foreshadows the evil that emerges among the boys on this island.

Lord of the flies, which is the tangible beast talking with Simon represents the devil in the story. Lord of the flies so-called "Beelzebub" originates from the New Testament of the Bible in Matthew, meaning the king of manure and dirt in Hebrew, and it is a devil only less ranked after Satan in Paradise Lost. It is personified in the novel which predicates the boys except Simon will eventually be assimilated evil and Simon will outcome death. It is a symbol of the darkness and savages deeply hidden in human nature.

Besides these three archetypal images, there still have numerous examples in the novel, like the image of water, the pig, the conch, the spectacles, the colors, and so on. Golding employs various archetypal images in western culture to reveal the mythological theme of the original sin, the deprivation, the redemption, the self-salvation of human beings.

5. Conclusion

Golding exiled a group of British children to a deserted island, which is not only to expose the depraved nature of a group of British children but the entire human race. In the twentieth century, the outbreak of two world wars brings the alienation of human values and the degradation of human nature in society, which sounds the alarm for human civilization.

In *Lords of the Flies*, Golding shows evilness and savageness in human nature, human's greed for power, and the fall of science, democracy, and civilization by using abundant archetypal themes, patterns, settings, characters, images. Modern writers created "modern mythology" like primitive people, which is a strong cry of writers on the annihilation of human nature and the embarrassing situation of modern civilization. However, in the end of the novel, Ralph, who is rescued still holds on to his faith and make a redemption from the sacrifice of Simon which convert author's hope to the society.

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