

The Nightmare Beast, War and the Children in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*

Dangar, Joyanta . PSYART ; Gainesville (2013): N_A.

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FULL TEXT

Headnote

[Abstract: My article traces the origin of the nightmare "beastie" that haunts the boys stranded on the desert island in Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) to the trauma of evacuation, which was a direct consequence of the Cold War, or rather, the World War II. The content of dreams as experienced by them corresponds to what are categorized as "traumatic" dreams. The article also attempts to rethink the problematic of evil in this novel in terms of "behavioral reenactments".]

Key Words: Evacuation, Freud, "traumatic neuroses", "beastie", Domhoff, "recurrent dreams", "behavioral reenactments".

The nature of the beast in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, and its origin as well, has attracted varied critical responses. In his article "Lord of the Flies: Fable, Myth, and Fiction" Arnold Johnston, for example, opines, "The Beast is an externalization of the inner darkness in the children's (man's) nature..." (123). Claire Rosenfield in "Men of Smaller Growth: A Psychological Analysis of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*" holds that the beast originates due to the absence of "comforting mothers to dispel the terrors of the unknown" (7). "The Beast... is nothing more than a focal point for the boys' vague, archaic fears," notes Peter Green (66). My article, however, tries to relate an untold tale of the wartime children in this much told tale of Golding. By way of exploring the nature of the beast, it traces its origin to the traumatic influence of war on Golding's boys.

Lord of the Flies, far from being a mere fiction or fable, is also an authentic history of the World War II and its psychological aftermath. War is not the mere occasion of the novel, but rather the offstage protagonist in this drama of evil, determining the behavior of the boys on the marooned island. War and William Golding, in fact, are the two inextricable subjects. After working for short time in the theater as a writer and actor, Golding trained to be a teacher, a profession he left during World War II to join the Royal Navy. After the war Golding returned to writing with the publication of his first novel, *The Lord of the Flies* (1954). And, the World War II left an indelible impact on Golding the artist. On an occasion Golding himself admitted, "The war produced one notable effect on me. It scared me stiff. ... It was the turning point for me. I began to see what people were capable of doing. Where did the Second World War come from? Was it made by something inhuman and alien - or was it made by chaps with eyes and legs and hearts?" (qtd. in Lass 355)

The action of *Lord of the Flies* takes place during the Cold War on a desert island, a "boat-shaped" (LF 29) island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. In the wake of atomic war a group of school boys between the ages of six and twelve, as we infer gathering scattered references from the novel, were being transferred from an English town to a safe place supposed to be somewhere in Australia via "Gib[raltar]" and "Addis [Ababa]" (LF 20). But the aircraft was attacked by the rivals, probably over the Sunda Sea. The pilot of the aircraft released its detachable passenger tube, containing the boys, to crash-land it in the jungle of an uncharted island, while the aircraft itself flew off in flames. The imaginary island on which the tube crash-landed is thought to be Papua New Guinea, past the Sunda Islands (i. e. Indonesia). In fact, the Cold War was a political and psychological game, not a direct combat like the World

Wars. In a likely way, the fictionalized incidents of the Cold War, which form the immediate background of the novel, have close resemblance to the incidents of the World War II. Golding's boys in *Lord of the Flies* are the representatives of thousands of English school boys who had had traumatic experiences during the Second World War. In 1940 the Germans launched the daylight air raids against the ports and airfields, and in September against the inland cities. Unable to reckon with a new device, radar, which greatly increased the effectiveness of Britain's Royal Air Force, the Germans switched to night bombing, what is popularly known as the Blitz. In this period of crises some of the English towns which were the target of German attack were evacuated. Thousands of civilians, especially children, were moved from London to the countryside to protect them from bombs and war damage. Jessica Mann, herself a wartime evacuee, in her revealing work *Out of Harm's Way: The Wartime Evacuation of the Children from Britain* recounts how so many well-off parents desperately sent their children to America and the then British Dominions, especially Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa:

We know exactly how many children CORB [Children's Overseas Reception Board] evacuated since careful records were kept: 1,530 to Canada, 577 to Australia, 202 to New Zealand and 253 to South Africa - 2,562 in all. Another 838 were unofficially despatched through CORB to America. ... Complete records of the unofficial arrangements whereby children went to the United States and to the Dominions do not exist. Estimates of the numbers vary wildly, from 3,000 to 30,000. (131)

It is also worth remembering that during the World War II there was an important military base of the Allied Forces in Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea. In the Battle of the Coral Sea (1942) the Japanese Naval force attacked the port with an eye to taking control over the Coral Sea to stop the USA from using Australia as an ally, but the Allied Forces offered resistance, and defeated the Japanese. Peter Neville has marked this incident as "The turning point in the Pacific" (111). Thus Golding's fictional representation of attack on the plane, carrying the school boys from England to Australia, in the wake of the Cold War could be seen as a probable incident of the World War II. In chapter two ("Fire on the Mountain") the novelist himself makes a direct reference to the evacuation caused by war: "Ralph sat on a fallen trunk, his left side on the sun. On his right were most of the choir; on his left the larger boys who had known each other before the evacuation; before him small children squatted in the grass" (LF 31). The point I am trying to make here is that it was the trauma of wartime evacuation which engendered the nightmarish dreams of Golding's boys and their subsequent violent activities. Before we jump to a conclusion regarding the nature and origin of their dreams, let's take some samples of dream from the boys in the novel. First, in chapter two ("Fire on the Mountain") the beast, as indirectly reported by the little boy with mulberry-colored birthmark, appears in the form of a snake: "A snake-thing. Ever so big. He saw it" (LF 35). However, Ralph dismisses the snake-like beast as "a nightmare" (LF 36). In chapter four ("Huts on the Beach") Ralph informs Jack that the boys are being haunted by nightmares:

"You've noticed, haven't you?"

Jack put down his spear and squatted.

"Noticed what?"

"Well. They're frightened."

He rolled over and peered into Jack's fierce, dirty face.

"I mean the way things are. They dream. You can hear 'em. Have you been awake at night?"

Jack shook his head.

"They talk and scream. The littluns. Even some of the others. As if—"

"As if it wasn't a good island."

Astonished at the interruption, they looked up at Simon's serious face.

"As if," said Simon, "the beastie, the beastie or the snake-thing, was real. Remember?" (LF 52)

In chapter five ("Beast from Water") a meeting is convened by Ralph to discuss the issue of fear caused by the beast. Ralph, the leader elected by the boys, has been keen on building up civilization in imitation of Europe on the deserted island unless and until they are rescued by the grown-ups. But, very soon he notices that, despite their good beginning, things are falling apart:

"Things are breaking up. I don't understand why. We began well; we were happy. And then-"

He moved the conch gently, looking beyond them at nothing, remembering the beastie, the snake, the fire, the talk of fear.

"Then people started getting frightened." (LF 82)

It is "not only the littluns, but my [Jack's] hunters sometimes-talk of a thing, a dark thing, a beast, some sort of animal" (LF 83). Phil, one of the littluns, first openly talked about the beast, and his account of the experience of nightmare was thrilling:

"Last night I had a dream, a horrid dream, fighting with things. I was outside the shelter by myself, fighting with things, those twisty things in the trees."

He paused, and the other littluns laughed in horrified sympathy.

"Then I was frightened and I woke up. And I was outside the shelter by myself in the dark and the twisty things had gone away". (LF 84-85)

Piggy's argument that life is scientific is challenged by new reports of a beast from water: "He [Percival] says the beast comes out of the sea" (LF 88). In response to Simon's assertion that there may be a beast, an anonymous voice breaks in at the meeting, "Perhaps that's what the beast is - a ghost" (LF 89).

The dream samples taken into consideration show the following general features: a) the boys' dreams involve an image of some sort of strange animal; b) they are accompanied by talking; c) they result in awakening from sleep with subsequent anxiety and fright; and d) they are repeated. Apparently, the dreams of Golding's boys belong to the broad category of unpleasant dreams or nightmares. In fact, like dream and sleep, nightmare phenomenon also is a controversial issue. Beginning from the first half of the twentieth century, so many theories of unpleasant dreams or nightmares have been developed till date. The first systematic study of nightmare was made by Ernest Jones with his work *On the Nightmare* (1931). Jones, however, followed the Freudian line of psychoanalysis and considered nightmare experiences to be the legacy of "infantile fixation". But Freud was confronted with the issue of unpleasant dreams during and after the World War I. In modification of his theory dream as a form of wish-fulfillment, he treated some of the unpleasant dreams as a symptom of "traumatic neuroses" caused by either war, or such similar experiences found "after railway collisions and other alarming accidents involving fatal risks" (314). As Freud elaborated it:

The traumatic neuroses give a clear indication that a fixation to the moment of the traumatic accident lies at their root.... These patients regularly repeat the traumatic situations in their dreams; where hysteriform attacks occur that admit of an analysis, we find that the attack corresponds to a complete transplanting of the patient into the traumatic situation. (314-315)

For Sandor Ferenczi also, "anxiety dreams" (20) are one of the symptoms of traumatic neuroses. But, it would be preposterous to claim that the boys fell victim to traumatic neuroses as their crash-landing on the island had involved fatal risk. The exact traumatic situation is not repeated in their dreams.

The content of dream samples gathered from Golding's boys rather corresponds very much to what P. R. Robbins and F. Houshi categorized as "recurrent dreams":

A content analysis of the recurrent dreams that students reported revealed that only one type of dream occurred with any frequency, an anxiety dream in which the dreamer was being threatened or pursued. The threatening agents were wild animals, monsters, burglars, or nature forces such as storms, fires, or floods. The dreamer was watching, hiding, or running away. (263)

Clinical studies and surveys by Robbins et al. suggest that recurrent dreams generally begin in childhood, or in adolescence. Following in the footsteps of Robbins and Houshi, George W. Domhoff (a contemporary leading dream researcher) sees recurrent dreams as "the closest relative of traumatic dreams":

The conclusion I draw from this work on recurrent dreams is that most of them are very similar to the dreams of posttraumatic stress disorder. More exactly, they are watered-down versions of such dreams. They have their origins in some sort of stressful situation, usually in childhood or adolescence, they are repeated, and they are mostly unpleasant. They differ from the dreams of those diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder in that they

usually do not contain elements or memories from the stressful situation. Instead, they seem to be more metaphoric in content, with wild animals, monsters, scary strangers, or natural disasters chasing, attacking, or entrapping the dreamer. (n. pag.)

Thus, it seems to be more likely that the nightmare beast haunting Golding's boys is an altered or metaphoric representation of the traumatic experiences associated with evacuation during the war: witnessing destruction caused by bombing, displacement, the separation from the parents etc. The psychological aftermath of the evacuee children during the World War II as recorded by Mann deserves mention here:

By then [1941], compelling arguments against child evacuation had been published by various British psychiatrists and psychologists, who listed the serious emotional problems caused by sudden separation from home and family: these children, they observed, were depressed, insecure and angry, with a much increased tendency to physical problems from bedwetting to epileptic fits, while those who stayed with their parents, even during air raids, remained stable. (42)

Interestingly, among the marooned boys Piggy suffers from asthma, and Simon is often attacked by epileptic fits. Simon fainted twice in the tube (while the plane was crossing the Strait of Gibraltar and later Addis Ababa), once in a meeting, and finally after his encounter with the Lord of the Flies. Jack's word 'sissies' perhaps hints at the fact that some of boys had been suffering from "enuresis":

"...You littluns started all this, with the fear talk. Beasts! Where from? Of course we're frightened sometimes but we put up with being frightened. Only Ralph says you scream in the night. What does that mean but nightmares? Anyway, you don't hunt or build or help-you're a lot of cry-babies and sissies...." (LF 82)

However, for Freud, traumatic dreams are functional; in traumatic neuroses, particularly in those brought about by the horrors of war, repetition or compensation eventually brings about "recovery" (429). In a likely way, the boys here are supposed to avoid the trauma of the war by seeking compensation into the symbolization of the trauma in the form of nightmare "beastie". But, is this repetitive, symbolic compensation alone adequate for the boys here to control the original stimuli?

In this connection I would like to draw the attention of the readers to the obvious repetition dimension in the behavioral pattern of the boys, especially in their hunts and mock-hunts. Golding here presents a series of hunts, and as many as three mock-hunts by the boys. Hunting pigs has been a major source of pleasure for the boys on the marooned island. Jack and his hunters are rather obsessed with it. We may raise a pertinent question here, who taught the church bred English lads hunting? However, this not our central concern here. Let's examine the behavior of the boys in their mock-hunts. In chapter four ("Painted Faces and Long Hair") Maurice pretends to be the pig and runs squealing into the centre, and the hunters, circling still, pretend to beat him. As they dance, they sing: "'Kill the pig. Cut her throat. Bash her in'" (LF 75). In chapter seven ("Shadows and Tall Trees") the boys re-enact the hunt with Robert pretending to be the pig. Even Ralph here fails to offer resistance to the temptation of taking part in this "game":

They got his arms and legs. Ralph, carried away by a sudden thick excitement, grabbed Eric's spear and jabbed at Robert with it.

"Kill him! Kill him!" (LF 114)

Finally, in chapter nine ("A View to Death"), when Roger pretends to be the pig that the boys will try to chase and beat, Simon has been crawling out of the forest with view to revealing the truth that the beast on the mountain top is nothing but the dead parachutist. The frenzied boys mistake him for the beast from the dark forest and beat him to death. Are these recurrent activities of the boys any way related to the trauma exposure? Interestingly, the example of children's game, which Freud introduced in *Beyond the Pleasure* (1920) by way of explaining "repetition compulsion" and thereby justifying the functional nature of traumatic dreams, itself gives us some fresh insights into the game of Golding's boys. In discussing the possible motives of children's game, Freud notes, "As the child passes over from the passivity of the experience to the activity of the game, he hands on the disagreeable experience to one of his playmates and in this way revenges himself on a substitute" (BPP 17). So, it can be observed that in their hunts and mock-hunts the boys (the helpless victims of war) revenge themselves on pigs

and pretended pigs respectively. Furthermore, the hunts and mock-hunts here result in what Freud called "a yield of pleasure" (ibid.). And, the pleasure arising from this compulsion to repeat is surely "something that seems more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than pleasure principle which it over-rides" (BPP 23). At this point I would like to switch from Freud to Bessel A. van der Kolk (an internationally recognized researcher in the field of psychological trauma) for further exploration and subsequent clarification. In his article "The Compulsion to Repeat the Trauma: Re-enactment, Revictimization, and Masochism", van der Kolk observes that "[u]nbidden memories of the trauma may return as physical sensations, horrific images or nightmares, behavioral reenactments, or a combination of these" (n.pag.). Thus I find it more consistent to hypothesize that the trauma of the boys in Golding's *Lord of the Flies* is articulated in a combination of horrific images and behavioral re-enactments. Besides experiencing nightmares, the boys here repeat the trauma in the form of hunts and mock-hunts.

That the atrocities of war leave an almost indelible impression on the tender mind of children, making them prone to violence, is also supported by contemporary researchers working in this field. In discussing the obsession of the traumatized people with their trauma, Van der Kolk notes:

War veterans may enlist as mercenaries,¹²⁸ victims of incest may become prostitutes,^{47,120,125} and victims of childhood physical abuse seemingly provoke subsequent abuse in foster families⁵³ or become self-mutilators^{143a} Still others identify with the aggressor and do to others what was done to them.^{21, 39 ...} There is no evidence to support Freud's idea that repetition eventually leads to mastery and resolution. (Italics mine)

In an interview given to Mr. Ashoke Sen on his first visit to Kolkata, Golding himself identified Roger as a Hitler figure: "It is only the naval officer's stepping in which stops Roger from dominating the whole thing as Hitler dominated what was a first reaction party against Communism" (1). Piggy is murdered by Roger as the latter releases a huge chunk of stone from the top of the Castle Rock in his mischief-making spree. Should we construe then that it is a case of the victim identifying with the aggressor? "In behavioral re-enactment of the trauma, the self may play the role of either victim or victimizer" (van der Kolk ibid.). Accordingly, the boys on the island can be categorized into two groups: the victims (the littluns, Piggy, Simon and Ralph) and the victimizers (Jack and his hunters). Again, the pretended pigs play the role of both victim and victimizer. In the final mock-hunt Roger, for example, not only re-enacts but also acts decisively: "Roger ceased to be a pig and became a hunter, so that the center of the ring yawned emptily. Some of the littluns started a ring on their own; and the complementary circles went round and round as though repetition would achieve safety of itself" (LF 152). All this makes it obvious that "[r]e-enactment of victimization is a major cause of violence" in *Lord of the Flies*, to use the words of van der Kolk (ibid.).

Despite their decent beginning on the island, the English school boys gradually surrender to savagery, and ultimately become self-mutilators. In defiance of the rules laid down by Ralph, the boys neglect the fire on the mountain; prefer hunting pigs to building huts on the beach, or collecting drinking water. Like savages Jack and his hunters apply white and red clay along with black charcoal to paint their faces. While hunting, they chant the slogans: "Kill the pig. Cut her throat. Spill her blood" (LF 69). Both Simon and Piggy are killed. To crown it all, the hunters led by Jack in their hunt of Ralph set fire on the whole island, to smoke him out from his hiding place. These irrational, self-effacing activities of the boys on the island could also be seen in the light of "Thanatos" or "death-instincts", which Freud conceptualized in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and further elaborated in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), in part, as a response to World War I. It allowed Freud to explain the problem of destructiveness, that is to say man's desire for murder and destruction. It may be contended that it is the war which excited the "death-instincts" of the boys. Among the boys Simon alone is aware of the death drive that is at work in them, "What I mean is ...maybe it's only us" (LF 89). In "Why War?" Freud opines that this "destructive instinct ... is at work in every living creature and is striving to bring it to ruin and to reduce life to its original condition of inanimate matter" (213). Furthermore, "there is no question of getting rid entirely of human aggressive impulses; it is enough to try to divert them to such an extent that they need not find expression in war" (ibid.). Commenting on the message of *Lord of the Flies*, Golding as a novelist arrived at the same conclusion, and noted it

in his famous essay "Fable": "My book was to say: You think that war is over and an evil thing destroyed, you are safe because you are naturally kind and decent" (89).

To conclude, the trauma of the war, which incited the destructive instinct of the boys, accounts for the spread of violence on the desert island in *Lord of the Flies*. It is evidenced not only by the boys' nightmare "beastie" but also by their recurring resort to hunt, mock-hunt, and brutal murder. The beast that haunts Golding's boys on the island is the beast of war.

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AuthorAffiliation

Joyanta Dangar
Asst. Prof of English
M. U. C. Women's College
(A Constituent College of the University of Burdwan)
West Bengal
India - 713104
joyengsimlapal@gmail.com.

DETAILS

Publication title:	PSYART; Gainesville
Pages:	N_A
Number of pages:	1
Publication year:	2013
Publication date:	2013
Publisher:	University of Florida
Place of publication:	Gainesville
Country of publication:	United States, Gainesville
Publication subject:	Psychology
ISSN:	10885870
Source type:	Scholarly Journals
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	General Information
ProQuest document ID:	1503061015
Document URL:	https://search.proquest.com/docview/1503061015?accountid=130472
Copyright:	Copyright University of Florida 2013
Last updated:	2014-02-28
Database:	ProQuest Central

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