

William Golding's Apocalyptic Vision in *Lord of the Flies* and *Pincher Martin*

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Humanity has long been haunted by the notions of Armageddon and the coming of a Golden Age. While the English Romantic poets like Shelley saw hopes of a new millennium in poems like "Queen Mab" and "The Revolt of Islam", others like Blake developed their own unique "cosmology" in their longer poems that were nevertheless coloured with their vision of redemption and damnation. Even Hollywood movies, like The Book of Eli (2010), rehearse this theme of salvation in the face of imminent annihilation time and again. Keeping with such trends, this paper would like to trace this line of apocalyptic vision and subsequent hopes of renewal with reference to William Golding's debut novel Lord of the Flies (1954) and his Pincher Martin (1956). While in the former, a group of young school boys indulge in violence, firstly for survival, and then for its own sake, in the latter, a lonely, shipwrecked survivor of a torpedoed destroyer clings to his own hard, rock-like ego that subsequently is a hurdle for his salvation and redemption, as he is motivated by a lust for life that makes him exist in a different moral and physical dimension. In Lord of the Flies, the entire action takes place with nuclear warfare presumably as its backdrop, while Pincher Martin has long been interpreted as an allegory of the Cold War and the resultant fear of annihilation from nuclear fallout (this applies to Golding's debut novel as well). Thus, this paper would argue how Golding weaves his own vision of social, spiritual, and metaphysical dissolution, and hopes for redemption, if any, through these two novels.

Keywords

Armageddon; Cold War; Golden Age; redemption

Humanity has long been haunted by notions of the end of the world and an impending sense of doom. Romantic poets like Percy Bysshe Shelley in poems like "Queen Mab" and in the longer "The Revolt of Islam" have expressed

their hopes for a new, golden era. In the latter poem, the protagonist Laon has an ardent desire to “arise and wake the multitude”, while “The Witch of Atlas” deals with visions of an imminent resurgence of a new era. Whether it be the pictures of Armageddon in sci-fi movies that depict outer space entities like asteroids and comets announcing the doom of human civilization, or showing how a new era arises like a phoenix from the ashes of the old world order, a sense of an ending and the resultant hopes for a divine grace that would help renew most of the affairs seems to be an undercurrent in such narratives.

In the film *The Book of Eli* (2010), Eli, a nomadic character in a post-apocalyptic era, presumably after nuclear fallout, receives a call from a mysterious voice¹ that tells him to deliver the last, remaining copy of *The King James Bible* to a safe haven where it may be reprinted. Eli is the last vestige of those people who may be entrusted with the job of preserving what is left of music or literature. On the other hand, a group of men also want to get hold of the sacred text that can be skilfully used to summon obedience in an era when most religious texts have been destroyed in a nuclear war. In this post-apocalyptic era, religion alone seems to be the succor in taxing times, and the leader of these mysterious men, named Carnegie, who has rebuilt the town, feels that since people have listened to the book before, they would do so now as well. Eli wants to save what can be of religion, faith and literature, while Carnegie wants to turn the Bible into a “weapon” for obedience. This tone of apocalypse and the end of civilization may also be seen in Ray Bradbury’s dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) wherein the protagonist, Guy Montag, after having revolted against his old job of burning books, turns to a group of mysterious men led by a man named Granger, who leads all beyond the confines of the city after it is bombarded by nuclear weapons. They are the “book men” who have taken to memorizing books as the present society burns them. Granger compares humanity to a phoenix, with the sole exception that it can remember its mistakes before being destroyed. In the overall context, it is not entirely difficult to compare Granger to a Moses figure, a messiah who leads the entire group; a group which barely manages to survive the shock waves of the nuclear bombardment of the ravaged city of “sinners” which was guilty of keeping free intellect from looming large. People like Granger not only seem to hold out hope for re-building the future, but also represent humanity’s tendency to find a way in the face of severe odds.

William Golding’s debut novel *Lord of the Flies* (1954) centres on the story of British lads whose plane has unwittingly crashed into a desert island. In

the beginning, they all revel in an atmosphere where adult discipline and strict control is unknown, but then, a more pressing reality haunts them – the simple need to survive without the basic necessities of civilization. A fire is made on a hill to produce a smoke signal, and the seemingly pristine landscape is bespattered by the blood of these innocent children. A rigid hierarchy of “littluns” and “biguns” is created, and who would sound the conch to summon all and thereby assume leadership becomes the heart of the matter. The entire action takes place with warfare, presumably the danger of nuclear warfare as its backdrop.² Thus, the danger of annihilation is a possibility that Golding does not fail to depict in this microscopic entity of a remote island in the Pacific. The imminent apocalypse of human emotions, and thereby, of civilization, is brilliantly depicted by Golding in the action of these boys who kill each other for the control of the masses on the island and to assume leadership. With an aerial battle as a backdrop, the boys on the island not only come to fear a terrifying “beast” on the island, that in all actuality is the body of a dead pilot hanging on a torn parachute, but also enact strange rituals that are meant to appease this beast.

The centrality of action revolves around the cold war between the “hunter” Jack and the leader Ralph to compete for ultimate leadership, that also, inter alia, means the obliteration of human emotions within themselves and the killing of “messianic” figures like Simon the “seer” and Piggy the light-giver.³ While Piggy is often ridiculed for his asthma and his cumbersome body, his glasses are nevertheless used to start fire that also keeps the smoke signal and provides sustenance. Simon, a dreamy and meek child may be compared to a Christ figure who ultimately “discovers” the source of the beast. He climbs the mountain and discovers that the real fear of the beast is ultimately in their minds – the “beast” is actually a fighter pilot, who during the aerial battle the previous night died while descending on his parachute and thereby got entangled on a tree branch on the mountain. While he is on the way down the mountain to tell this truth to the others, he is killed by Jack’s group, now having become savage and delighting in the flesh of a wild pig. During the initial parts of the narrative, when Ralph considers relinquishing his position as the leader due to the failure to keep up the smoke signal, it is Piggy who tells him not to do so, as doing that would mean Jack’s savage control over the entire group on the island.

While Jack and his group take Castle Rock to be their abode, Ralph and Piggy are left with a handful of followers. A fight ensues between Ralph and Jack, while the sadistic Roger hurls a rock from the hilltop onto Piggy who

is instantaneously killed, while the conch shell, as well as the glasses, are broken. While the breaking of Piggy's glasses ultimately means the end of any viable means to start a fire, the breaking of the conch is a rude reminder that everyone being summoned into a viable pattern, and hence into a "group" will no longer be possible. The danger of annihilation looms large, even though the arrival of a captain of a ship opens up the possibility of these boys being "rescued" and brought back into civilization.

Golding's own unique sense of an "ending" in *Lord of the Flies* arises from his essential distrust in the nobility of human emotions, with an added inkling of humanity "red in tooth and claw". This is re-enforced in the image of the dead pig that is used as a potential source of food and also as a means to lure a goodly number of boys from their "true", appointed task of keeping the smoke signal that would help them escape from the island, which shows vagaries of weather that inevitably tax civilized minds.⁴ Even before the boys have come to understand the taxing nature of the island, there are hints about its sinister nature and a gradual erosion that seems to be happening within:

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 was a bank beneath them 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. (4)

It is well-known that Golding had a bleak vision of human progress, and in a lecture to a group of American boys, he made his stand clear:

Before the Second World War I believed in the perfectibility of social man; that a correct structure of society would produce goodwill; and that therefore you could remove all social ills by a reorganization of society. It is possible that today I believe something of the same again; but after the war I did not because I was unable to. I had discovered what one man could do to another. [...] I am thinking of the vileness beyond all words that went on, year after year, in the totalitarian states. [...] They were not done by the head hunters of New Guinea, or by some primitive tribe in the Amazon. They were done, skillfully, coldly, by educated men, doctors, lawyers, by men with a tradition of civilization behind them,...(in Spitz 22)

The agony of a post-war, atomized man is also voiced somewhat in a similar fashion by Albert Camus in his *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) wherein the author speaks about the alienating situations in an era where the “divorce” between man and his environment constitutes the feeling of absurdity that may well pave way for its impending doom.⁵

However, Golding’s vision about man’s exposed condition is even more apocalyptic in tone. In an insightful article entitled “On Aggression: William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*”, Kathleen Woodward points out that the book is a strategy of writing back R.M. Ballantyne’s *Coral Island*, wherein a group of British lads come to a desert island and colonize it and bring Christianity to the natives, thereby taking the “white man’s burden” on their shoulders. The author points out succinctly:

... Golding decided to model a fiction on *Coral Island* which underscored man’s inherent capacities for cruelty, not cooperation. ... I should also add that it departs radically from the tradition of the romance of survival established by Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Johann Rudolf Wyss’s *Swiss Family Robinson* (1812-13), which illustrate the enterprising courage of ‘civilized’ man cast away on a desert island. (199)

When the boys feel that there are no adults, they revel initially, but the games of survival and being turned into a hunting pack strips away all the possible traces of “civilization”. Woodward feels that initially the boys seek to construct an organization that closely resembles a democratic form of government, but the eventual smashing of the conch shell and the efforts on the part of the egotistical hunter Jack to break the rules, and the gradual enjoyment of the blood sport that cannot tell the friend from foe attests to its dystopian leanings. When the hunter Jack prides himself on the fact that they are all English and that Englishmen are good at everything that they do, we have traces of “colonialism, racism and even genocide” (Woodward 203). Thus, social structures may well pave way to a better civilization, but morality is the sole guiding principle. This is exactly where the boys in *Lord of the Flies* fall short. While the loose social hierarchy of the boys is indeed deemed necessary to survive on the island, the lust for power and the delicacies of nature runs rife and gives a jolt to this organization of sorts. Jack is able to lure a good number of boys to his team, while the smoke signal suffers. While Ralph inwardly contemplates relinquishing his position as leader, the equation

is set into order by Piggy telling him not to do so. During the aerial battle that ensues at night, the corpse of the dead pilot is taken by these boys to be a “beast” from the water. However, only Simon the “seer” can free a part of the group from such an enslaving vision, but the irony of the situation is that he is himself mistaken for the “beast” by the group of boys led by Jack as they are engaged in a frenzied dance around the pig’s head, now covered by flies. Indeed, the island is turned into a veritable inferno as the body of a dutiful, dead patriot is taken to be a beast from the water, and this defect of vision of Jack and his followers heightens the post-lapsarian and apocalyptic tone of the novel further.

In the book *The Novels of William Golding*, Howard S. Babb points out how Golding was more concerned about the inherent decay of human and societal values underscored by his bleak vision of civilization and the progress generally associated with the same:

As our cue to reviewing *Lord of the Flies* in its main outline, we may take Golding’s statement that the book deals in part with ‘the defects of society’. For the group of boys who find themselves on an uninhabited island – as a result of a plane crash during their evacuation from England in an atomic war – try to create a society for themselves, but experience its degradation. The society begins to come into being when Ralph blows the conch he has discovered, the children collecting on the beach. But already there is a hint of irresponsibility in the pleasure the young ones feel at the notion of ‘something purposeful being done’ – by others [...] Society’s attempts to build shelters proves as ineffective as its effort to keep a signal fire going. [...] The split between Jack and Ralph, discernible when they meet initially starts to emerge as a split between different organizing principles of society... (8-9)

If the struggle for survival becomes a nodal point of attention for these boys in *Lord of the Flies*, in Golding’s *Pincher Martin* (1956), we have the character of the same name slowly sinking into the freezing Atlantic, after his warship has been torpedoed by enemy forces. Believing himself to be the sole survivor, he slowly gathers his consciousness and comes to the conclusion that since he is all alone, he must gather enough life support systems to remain alive. In the beginning of the narrative, Martin is shown grappling not only with the intense sea waves, but also with his own fate:

But the man lay suspended behind the whole commotion, detached from his jerking body. The luminous pictures that were shuffled before him were drenched in light but he paid no attention to them. Could he have controlled the nerves of his face, or could a face have been fashioned to fit the attitude of his consciousness where it lay *suspended between life and death* that face would have worn a snarl. But the real jaw was contorted down and distant, the mouth was slopped full. (Golding 8; emphasis added)

Widely considered to be an allegory of the Cold War and the aftermath of the Second World War, *Pincher Martin* not only rehearses the condition of a post-war, atomized man trying to grapple with the fear of a second nuclear fallout, but also with a world where illusion cannot be easily separated from reality. Perching himself on a small island that merely appears on weather charts and where there is but rain water to drink and some anemones to eat, the narrative shows a convoluted journey into a single man's mind. Both *Lord of the Flies* and *Pincher Martin* depicts the fear of annihilation and an impending watery apocalypse⁶, but while the former shows the end of innocence and of the whole of human civilization, the latter depicts the viability of existing in a different moral and metaphysical realm that becomes a barrier to redemption. The freezing waters of the Atlantic then erect a corresponding "mood" in Martin to exist and not to die, but as time passes on, the sad fact that he is already dead brings with it its own unique problems of the limits of human comprehension. Existing between the realms of life and death, Martin cannot accept the fact that he is dead and did not even have time to shake off his seaboots because of his own myopia of existing in an ego-like state that values life over grace, the self over the soul, and the fear of annihilation over the joys of being saved from the terrible watery delusions of his own inner self:

I am busy surviving. I am netting down this rock with names and taming it. [...] What is given a name is given a seal, a chain. If this rock tries to adapt me to its ways I will refuse and adapt it to mine. I will impose my routine on it, my geography. I will tie down with names. If it tries to annihilate me with blotting paper, then I will speak in here where my words resound and significant sounds assure me of my own identity. (Golding *Pincher Martin*, 86-87)

At the very end, a new character called Captain Davidson retrieves the rolling

corpse of Pincher Martin from a Mr. Campbell, and it is reported that “He didn’t even have time to kick off his seaboots” (Golding 208).

In an essay called “A Matter of Belief: *Pincher Martin’s* Afterlife”, Leon Surette describes this “trick ending” on the part of the writer that had shocked and even disturbed the early readers of the novel (2). According to the writer of the essay, only the most inattentive reader of the novel could fail to see that Pincher had kicked off his seaboots in the initial part of the narrative. Though more of a “post-mortem narrative” of sorts (4), the writer continues, after what Golding explained about the novel to the critic Frank Kermode in *Radio Times*:

Christopher Hadley Martin had no belief in anything but the importance of his own life, no God. Because he was created in the image of God he had a freedom of choice which he used to centre the world on himself. He did not believe in purgatory and therefore when he died it was not presented to him in overtly theological terms. The greed for life which was the mainspring of his nature forced him to refuse the selfless act of dying. ... For Christopher, the Christ-bearer has become Pincher Martin who is little but greed. Just to be Pincher is purgatory; to be Pincher for eternity is hell. (Surette 4)

The central dichotomy in the novel is then between the fear of damnation and the possibilities of grace. Through his hallucinations, we come to know the life of Pincher Martin that was overtly sensual, even lustful. While his friend Nat, or Nathaniel was always of the view that Martin led an ego-centric existence, the latter had the credit of coveting two women and even raping one of them. He had been an amateur actor in his life and had love-affairs with the wife of his friend Peter. Thus, in the narrative that follows, Martin is all set not to die at all costs, and clings to the small rocky island of his own hardened ego. This ordeal goes on for another seven days: “Just as God took seven days for the act of Creation, Martin survives on his self-made heaven for almost seven days. The biblical metaphor only helps to highlight the colossal irony of the novel” (Singh 25).

Golding’s thesis was simple in these two novels – there is little hope for redemption for man in an era fraught with warfare and greed. Golding had a fairly optimistic vision of human civilization prior to the ravages wrought by the Second World War. Like Christopher Hadley Pincher Martin, he had also served in the navy, but after the war, he became cynical about the eventual

advancement of humankind. The apocalyptic tone in *Lord of the Flies* as well as in *Pincher Martin* is highlighted not only by the inclusion of scenes of warfare, but also by reinforcing the very idea that messianic hope for a better world and divine grace is only possible by a total surrender of human greed and a lust for power. Written during the height of the Cold War and the resultant fear of nuclear annihilation, these two novels rehearse this theme of the fear of the end of not only human civilization, but of redeeming qualities in a human being as well. This may tempt us to compare a novel like *Pincher Martin* with yet another castaway narrative – that of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001).⁷ While the former deals with, and in many ways depicts, the ego-maniacal character Christopher Hadley Martin, in the latter, we have a boy from India, a veritable Noah figure with animals in his boat, whose family decides to emigrate to Canada after political situations turn sour in the Indian subcontinent in the mid-seventies. In the course of the first part of the narrative, the ship sinks and his family perishes, and he is left with a life boat with a ferocious Bengal tiger as his sole companion (interestingly called Richard Parker after the man who captured it). While *Pincher Martin* refuses to let go of his ego and the illusion of a stable identity, Pi Patel, the adolescent boy in Martel's novel accepts his condition and musters the courage to create a stable habitat out of whatever he can find.⁸ The conditions at sea and the lust for blood in the tiger prove too much for him in the beginning. However, he successfully tames the beast by using a subtle voice and percussory tricks. A sea-survival manual comes in handy which tells a castaway, inter alia, not to lose hope.

In Golding's *Pincher Martin* and even to some extent in *Lord of the Flies*, some very opposing tendencies are at work. While there is a subtle desire on the part of the British lads to tame nature, in *Pincher Martin* the mariner slowly sinking into the Atlantic mentally refuses to take for granted that he has been battered by the elemental forces of Nature. He seeks to put a defining centre to whatever he encounters during his second death. He is a non-believer and an iconoclast who is not ready to die and lose his identity after being positioned within the vast watery abyss. Pi's situation may be the same as a castaway but his attitude towards survival encompasses both his recognition of his fall and his need to acquire the lost seat through survival strategies that hinge finally on his compassionate self:

Obviously, Pi's universe revolves around the axes of the heart, while *Pincher*'s hinges on that of the mind. Pi also reconstructs his old self by establishing the only possible relationship with the tiger he has to share

the lifeboat with – the relationship of respect. It is quite consistent with his earlier personality pattern spontaneously established on love and trust. [...] This sound ecological and existential philosophy saves his life and he survives seven months on the open sea, proving that miracles can happen and that another incredible alternative to Pincher's is also plausible: preserving oneself not at the expense but to the benefit of the other. [...] Clearly, different survival techniques of the two men correspond to the quality of existence after the fall. (Lopicic 50)

Clearly, hope for civilization and its subsequent renewal after being nearly destroyed by a watery deluge symbolized in these two castaway narratives lies more with a character like Pi than with the eco-maniacal Pincher Martin.

Though both these novels, along with *Lord of the Flies*, show the destruction of human values and the human self per se to be a recurring literary trope, hope lies more in the recognition of everyday problems of existence than in taking arms against them. This is exactly what Martin does in his greed, to such an extent that glimpses of his previous life do not offer him any redemption, and as such, people like him cannot be entrusted with the job of building a stable society with evolutionary stable strategies (Lopicic 48-50). It is this greed for power and resources that damns Ralph (and humanity at large) even when eventually rescued at the end of *Lord of the Flies*. But the very opposite tendencies within Pi gift him with a lifeboat that eventually sustains him. In a way, humanity itself is saved and rebuilt after Pi is washed down the Mexican coast and eventually saved after his ordeal of over two hundred days on the boat. With his settlement on Canadian soil, "civilization" begins anew.

Notes

1. The voice here refers to the voice of Jesus, which tells him to brave all perils to save the last surviving copy of The Bible, with the assurance that he shall be protected during the course of the journey. This notion of messianic hope implied in saving both the Book as well as human civilization is noteworthy.
2. Golding had served in the navy and had first-hand knowledge of the devastation wrought by the Second World War. Both novels show warfare and the fear of annihilation of the self, and subsequently of humanity as a whole due to the use of weapons of mass destruction. Written at the height of the Cold War, both *Pincher Martin* and *Lord of the Flies* depict how humanity may be destroyed not only by the use of the weapons of the modern era, but also due to the gradual erosion of values and the ethical fabric of society.
3. The four characters, according to Woodward, represent the four forces in early human

culture: “*Lord of the Flies* is an inquiry into the politics of cohesion and conflict which attempts to show how the social bond disintegrates and eventually explodes into war. Golding’s acute differentiation of the social roles of the four major characters invites comparison with the four-member hunting team of a primitive tribe as it is portrayed in John Marshall’s classic ethnographic film *The Hunters* and analysed by the cultural historian William Irwin Thompson” (205).

4. Both novels are survival narratives that seem to parody popular tales like *Robinson Crusoe*, with the crucial difference that it is Nature that wins, not a colonizing force exemplified in the figure of Crusoe.
5. The “irremediable exile” that Camus speaks of creates feelings of nothingness, void and a sense of an ending.
6. Most of the early world civilizations show apocalypse by water. According to the ancient Egyptian myth of creation, in the beginning, there was nothing but an inert, lifeless ocean called *zppj*, from which rose the first self-born god Atum. The Indian legend details the end of the world at the time of Manu, the first man, by a deluge and subsequent re-creation; the Old Testament details the Great Flood the subsequent covenant with Noah, or the destruction of the Pharaoh’s army by the closing of the waters of the Red Sea, while the Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh* also details the Great Flood. The list is virtually endless. While most of the floods are often acts of divine retribution, they also result in the subsequent regeneration of humankind coupled with a sense of “messianic” hope.
7. Comparing *Lord of the Flies* and *Pincher Martin* along with Yann Martel’s novel opens up new vistas of critical investigation with respect to the placing of characters in somewhat similar geographical formations but with different mental dispositions. While the novels by Golding analysed in this paper were written with the Cold War and the ravages wrought by the Second World War as the backdrop, Martel’s novel places the multicultural agenda that brewed primarily in Canada and in Australia as the context in which the characters play out their part. A peek into the various ramifications of “The Melting Pot” theory may be of help to contextualize Martel’s novel.
8. This, at least is shown in the film released in 2012. A strong fidelity to the facts presented in the novel penned by Martel can be discerned in the motion picture.

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