Lord of the Flies


Story on an Island

_**Lord of the Flies**_ by William Golding tells the story of a group of English school boys who are stranded on a coral island in the aftermath of a plane crash. As the characters emerge out of the shock of the crash amid the stunning beauty and the abundance of food on the island they begin to form some order in their ranks as they await rescue. They agree on a leader – Ralph, and they agree on rules for discussion – whoever holds the special shell (conche) has the floor. They agree on the importance of keeping a fire lit on the top of the mountain of the island so that potential rescue planes and ships might spot them. They make it a priority to build strong shelters to protect them from sun and wind and storm. They agree on the desirability of feeding not just on fruit, but also on meat because there are wild pigs on the island. Yet they find themselves unable to follow through on their agreements. The fear of a strange beast on top of the mountain keeps them unsettled and on their toes. It turns out to be a dead airman still attached to his parachute – the boys never come to know this since the corpse is swept off its perch and out to sea in a high wind. Personality conflicts emerge. Whilst Ralph and Piggy want to build shelters, Jack wants to hunt pigs. Whilst Ralph and Piggy know that keeping the mountain top fire lighting is essential for their possible rescue, the others have different priorities. The sense of community unravels. Darker forces emerge. People make enemies. Catharsis is found in hunting pigs at first, and then descends into hunting people. Two of the boys are killed. We are brought into the heart of darkness, until suddenly a clean and bright naval officer from a navy liner steps on the beach and punctures the spell of fear and hatred and transforms the world of the boys back to normality.

Biblical Echoes – Hebrew Scriptures

As in many works of literature one can create Biblical mirrors to setting, plot and character in _**Lord of the Flies**_. _**The Book of Genesis**_ begins in a luxuriant Garden of Eden – a space of abundance and innocence. Adam and Eve walk naked here without shame. The core image in Lord of the Flies is of an island garden of similar abundance and at the start of the story we find Ralph experiencing the freedom and innocence of the garden when he divests himself of his clothing and jumps joyfully into a lagoon and experiences refreshment and a sense of
empowerment. The fruit in the Garden of Eden is good and abundant and this is also the case in *Lord of the Flies*. In the latter case the plentiful fruit sustains the lives of the new inhabitants. But whilst the yearning for an “apple” is the downfall of Adam and Eve, the yearning for pig meat is the beginning of the downfall of society on the island. In *The Book of Genesis*, Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden. By the end of *Lord of the Flies* the island garden has become a valley of tears where there is much weeping and mourning. In *The Book of Genesis*, immediately following the Adam and Eve story we find the story of fratricide when Cain kills Abel (Genesis 4). One can view Jack as a Cain character because he is jealous of his “brother” Ralph. Also, in the Tower of Babel narrative (Genesis 11:1-9) the inability to understand each other and the breakdown of communication between people takes place because of pride and egoism. There are similar forces at work in *Lord of the Flies*. In *The Book of Deuteronomy* the Hebrew people finding themselves coping with the challenges of living and journeying in a desert, become agitated and afraid, and start to take it out on Moses their leader. In *Lord of the Flies*, the boys are coping with immense challenges of separation, shock, insecurity and fear. They start to take it out on their leaders too. It is also noted that the term “Lord of the Flies” has its roots in the Hebrew word for Beelzebub.

**Biblical Echoes – Christian Scriptures.**

There are three sacrificial characters displayed in *Lord of the Flies*: the sow that is killed in a frenzied ritual of blood and feelings, the boy Simon who is killed in a frenzied game of violence in search of catharsis, and the boy Piggy, insightful but awkward and blind without his glasses, bludgeoned by an enormous rock and swept out to sea. In each of these instances a mob mentality prevails over the voices of reason. Each of these episodes in the novel evoke Passion narrative elements. In the reading of the brutal violence at the end of Jesus’ life we may experience reverence and awe, but at the heart of the action is an appalling mob mentality and fear of blessedness. The Passion narrative contains a foreshadowing of a terrible finality which it carries through with each episode in the narrative unravelling our hopes and making a return to reason an impossibility.

St Paul asserts that where sin abounds, grace does the more abound (Romans 5:20) But in *Lord of the Flies* the journey is into the darkness. It is relieved to some extent by its sense of pace...the constant dynamic back and forth, the great energy in the writing. Perhaps there is some relief in the descriptions of the regularity of the tides and the fruitfulness of the plant growth, but even these prove unsettling in our exposure to the roiling of the waters and the thick dense complexity of the island’s undergrowth. Within the human community what is described are things falling apart with no redemption-insight of the mind and no redemption from the island isolation on the horizon. We live for a moment too long in a Dante like inferno – the fires of fear and envy dominating the emotions, and the drive for power and control
capturing the decisions. The Navy character who appears at the end of the novel does not convey the same warmth or fullness that we find in the father of the Prodigal Son story (Luke 5:24). It is a low key, clinical rescue as free from expressive emotion as can be. In a certain sense we find ourselves still lost, and not found. Whilst in the Gospels there are resurrection accounts, in *Lord of the Flies* it is true that we do again breathe as it were, but the damage – an irretrievable damage – has been done.

Jesus tells us that unless we become as little children we cannot enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 18:2-4) In *Lord of the Flies* there is a group of younger ones ... little uns who are not named. In real life they are grade schoolers who happen to be members of a choir. They work. They participate. They play. But in the despair of their situation they become corrupted and belong with Jack and Roger in the clutches of the forces of darkness. The ones that are on the edge of being teenagers somehow never capture the wisdom of Jesus that the Gospel of Luke narrates in the story of His finding in the temple (Luke 2:49). In the demands of a situation that calls for them to be wise beyond their years the older boys find themselves constantly out of their depth and floundering. Both age groups of boys live in an orphaned world where parents are both missing and missed.

**The Stages of Personal Development**

Reflection on *Lord of the Flies* can remind us to return to our schooling in human development theory. Charles Shelton in *Adolescent Spirituality – Pastoral Ministry for High School and College* (The Crossroads Publishing Company 1989) surveys the landscape of cognitive development in Jean Piaget, of moral development in Lawrence Kohlberg, and of faith development in James Fowler, and the relationship between these. There is an ongoing conversation regarding the completeness of any of these theories, but the field of study itself reminds us that maturity in any of these areas of brain function does not occur without there being a process. For instance, an older catechesis in Catholic culture said that a person was capable of committing a sin when they reached the use of reason at age 8. It was somewhat of a given that at that age a child had sufficient command of their freedom and their conscience to make mature adult-like decisions. The work of Piaget, Kohlberg and Fowler helps us to understand that moral reasoning involves a series of steps, and to appreciate that the moral reasoning that a child brings to bear to a situation is different from that of a thirty year old who has successfully negotiated the challenges of growing in moral maturity. To summarise Kohlberg, in Stage 1 there is the punishment-and obedience orientation, in Stage 2 the instrumental-relativist orientation (you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours), in Stage 3 the approval/acceptance orientation, in Stage 4 the law and order orientation, in Stage 5 the social contract-legalistic orientation that sees law within the context of the common good, and in
Stage 6 the universal-ethical-principle orientation. In a somewhat parallel fashion James Fowler proposes a six stage ladder towards maturity in Faith development.

Within the context of *Lord of the Flies*, the moral development issue is very much to the fore, but the issue of faith development is not made explicit in any way. Yet if faith experience is in fact part of the horizon of one’s culture at home or at school or in one’s society, then of course we know that moral development and faith development somehow go hand in hand. The voice of God and the voice of conscience are two sides of the same coin. One calls to mind the personal nature of the evangelical conversion that Blessed John Henry Newman experienced as a teenager, or the witness of the current Pope, Francis 1 who has spoken of his conviction that faith encounters of a close kind happen not infrequently in the lives of the young and the old. One of the challenges that religious adherents face in secular culture is finding a space for their voice to be heard in a meaningful way in the public square. For the person of faith, when the voice of faith is eclipsed, there is something of great significance missing. Is that voice implicit in *Lord of the Flies* in some sense, or is it entirely absent? And is that significant?

http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english_literature/proselordflies/proselordfliesplotact.shtml

http://www.gradesaver.com/lord-of-the-flies/study-guide/section13/


Charles M. Shelton  Adolescent Spirituality  Crossroad New York  1989