

William Golding's *The Inheritors*: A study of Innocence and Evil

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Abstract

The Inheritors by William Golding is a poetic account of the origin of evil in man which has been considered to be an imaginative take on the idea of evil and its origins among the Homo-sapiens. Like *Lord of the Flies* is considered to be a dramatization of evil in man and how this evil pierces the mask of civilization, *The Inheritors* focuses on the origin of evil. A novel written from the point of view of Neanderthal man, Golding depicts the natural man in his Adamite innocence, the loss of this innocence and the tensions and anxieties associated with loss. This pre-historic novel relates the encounter between the last surviving family of Neanderthal species and the first "true men."

Keywords: william golding, *the inheritors*, innocence, evil

Introduction

Wells calls Homosapiens of his Outline of History and the eventual extermination of the former by the latter. The new men, the hunters and ritualists inherit the earth. These inheritors, who were actually our ancestors, take the cave men to be devils, and flee in terror. Golding calls himself "propagandist for Neanderthal man. Digging for relics of ancient people was one of his favorite pastimes in his younger days. It was suggestive of civilization's arbitrary encroachment upon the primeval regions which he equates with "prehistoric murder". The experience evidently left its mark on his imagination for the 'prehistoric murder' forms the theme of *The Inheritors*, the sub-sapiens folk representing the "phantom family" and Homosapiens who exterminate them fittingly taking the place of the bulldozer.

The Last Struggle

In *The Inheritors* Golding explores man's struggle for survival: the struggle with his fellow-men, with his physical environment, and with himself. For the Neanderthal people, the natural, physical world of tree, mountain, river and rock is the prime reality. We see Lok and his mate Fa, hunting for food. They find a doe killed by a cat, and take the carcass for food, but only Fa has said, "A cat has sucked all her blood. There is no blame". Far from being the cannibals that Wells calls them, these creatures have reverence for life that forbids killing or eating bloods, and dislike the taste of meat. Their deity, Oa, is an earth goddess who gives and preserves life and who is worshipped in a natural form - a root shaped like a woman and female-looking ice formation.

The Neanderthals, after escaping a great forest fire, reach their summer quarters, near a waterfall. They are the last of the species, a band of eight animals (?) people (?) is, already at the hour of reckoning, or in other words, of extreme peril. They are at a loss to know what to do when forces alien to their known world intrude. The story takes off with their bafflement at the disappearance of the log that they had always used to cross the marsh. Finding that it was not at its old position, the people conclude that the log could have "crawled off on business of its own." All at once we suspect trouble ahead for this band, for their innocence, for their inability to use "likeness," relate and connect events and see nature in alien term.

Golding, who is endowed with a great imaginative power, describes these people with the brushes of a great master and creates an environment of great solidity and reality. We are not told what they are and how they are different. He nowhere identifies them as monkeys or Neanderthals till the last chapter. He does not tell that his heroes walked on four legs and were the monkey or apes. These people have an instinctive and anthropomorphic grasp of things. They are a "fight little group", bound as a knot with a "thousand strings". These strings were not "the ornament of life but its substance. If they broke, a man would die". They have blood-knowledge of each other and communicate largely through pictures which join them as "one mind or no mind". They live by perception. For them, a thing existed only if they could perceive it. Their undeveloped minds do not understand Lok's report that Ha had fallen into water, for they have no picture of man falling into water. This surely sets the limits to their evolution as also to their handling of the dangers.

It was their linguistic [in] competence, their lack of knowledge of guile and deception, which ultimately joined to make them incapable of understanding fear, which was lurking all around them, since the day they had reached their summer quarters. When the new men throw arrows at him, Lok takes them as gifts. They do not kill animals for the specific purpose of eating them. If at all they have to kill one, they ensure that "there is no blame." They eat the doe only because Mal is dying of hunger, but even here they eat it only after "A cat has sucked all her blood".

The Unequal Encounter

The Inheritors is the story of a clash, which is unequal, since one of the parties is entirely unaware of why it is being attacked.

Golding brings into focus the reality of this clash. It is a clash not between two species, but between two ways of life, but attitudes two sensibilities. The clash between the two species boils down to a choice between error of perception and error of conception. The Neanderthals have erred in failing to perceive the danger when and from where it comes; the Cro-Magnon new men err in conceiving of danger when it does not really exist.

This difference in attitude is reflected in their life also. As Samuel Hynes comments, "whereas the people share a collective identity that is not yet fully differentiated, the

new men appear different from one another.” The Neanderthals are nowhere described in physical terms but the new men get full two paragraphs from Golding; “Their hair was black and grew in the most unexpected ways. The bone-face in the front of the log had a pine-tree of hair that stood straight up so that his head, already too long, was drawn out as though something were pulling upward without mercy. The other bone-face had hair in huge bush that stood out on all side like the ivy on dead tree”

Their culture and eating habits also underline another big difference. While the new men express a violent nature, the Neanderthals fully reveal a harmonious organic world view. The observations of J.J. Bachofen regarding the non-violent, loving way of life of matriarchal tribes are relevant here; “Whereas the paternal principle is inherently restrictive, the maternal principle is universal; the paternal principle implies limitation to definite groups, but the maternal principle, like the life of nature, knows no barriers... Every woman’s womb, like the mortal image of the earth mother Demeter, will give brothers and sisters to the children of every other woman; the homeland will know only brothers and sisters until the day when the development of paternal system dissolves the undifferentiated unity of the man and introduces a principle of articulation..... The matriarchal peoples.... assigned special capability to the physical injury of one’s fellow men or even of animals....an air of tender humanity....permeates the culture of matriarchal world”.

This matriarchal world view of the Neanderthal men is explicated in their belief in Oa, who, for them knows “so indescribably much,” and is “the doorkeeper to whom all secrets were open”, and is the source of all creation. In their innocence, they felt all kinds of guilt in eating meat it was because they believed that Oa had brought it out of her belly. Likewise, if they could not relate with the new men, it was because Oa “did not bring them out of her belly”, though they admired them also for they found the new men “like Oa”.

Undoubtedly, the new men were better equipped to survive in the new situation, and this equipment entailed the use of skill and malice, of thought, word and negation. They “are a people of the fall; nothing stands against them”. They use animal skins for covering; have bows and arrows, canoes, drinking vessels and crude alcohol. They know sexual jealousy. They also know murder, kidnapping, power game, fear and future; in short, they are fully equipped in evil, the biggest evidence of which is the scene where they sacrifice Liku.

Their camp I, shifted from the island to the people’s side of the river, so as to enable them to hunt for deer, was made by the side of hollow tree where Lok and Fa hide from the others. From this tree, the two people witness an incomprehensible day of ritual and night debauchery. They also witness the killing of Liku. Lok, when he gets up from sleep, urges Fa to rescue Liku, but Fa who had seen the whole episode, looks him in silence. She puts out hand and he takes it. She opens his mouth to speak, “but no sound came”. William Golding’s silence like those of William Wordsworth’s are complete in their expressiveness. It is here perhaps that we have seen the first murder being committed.

Fa killing shortly afterwards leaves Lok totally stupefied, totally shattered and totally unable to make sense of the events that are taking place. He digs a hole in the ground, assumes a fetal position and sleep into death. However, this simple action is accompanied by a “convulsion of

understanding” when Lok’s true situation dawns on the readers. It is only here that Golding makes us view Lok as an animal, as a thing, as an “it”. So far, we had not really known that these Neanderthals ancestors, were some kind of animals walking on four legs. Taking a bone-one of Liku’s-he grows “into the earth, drawing the soft flesh of its body into a contact so close that the movements of pulse and breathing were inhibited”. This death, Kinkead-Weekes and Gergor rightly comment, is “one of the most tragic moments in contemporary fiction.”

Golding has “made Neanderthal man more primitive and homo sapiens more advanced”, if we go by the anthropology text book versions, as referred to by Samuel Hynes. It is the evil in the homo sapiens which makes them label the simians as “as violent, aggressive creatures and planning their destruction”. These intelligent people are respectable for having violated “ceremonies of innocence”. Their “rise” as a better- equipped civilization entails their “fall” as a moral race. Man, when he “evolved” on the strength of rational thought, discovered a better way of doing things and turned the old way into evil.

Golding visualizes evil as something which is a fixation, which kills freedom to be and let others to be. By reducing Lok to “It”, Golding has charged both the parties. He indicts the new men for their over blown sense of superiority, for reducing the “other” into a “thing”, every not -man to non-man, non-human, in-human, ogre, evil and the people for their inability to attain a human stature. The rise of evil at the very birth-time of mankind forces Golding to take a sane view of the situation; by not diminishing Lok’s grief and Tuami’s inhumanity, he gives us a conclusion to the understanding of Lok’s finitude and Tuami’s compulsion. Tuami, new men, may have fallen into evil, but they, in showing awareness of their fellness promise a newness.

Fear and ignorance of the homo sapiens had led to the murder of innocence. But now in their leaving the island, they show their humanity, their acceptance of the other to reside there. They, looking at the line of darkness might not have been able to “see if the line of darkness had an ending”, but the reader at least is able to form a fuller picture of evil, of innocence and ignorance. Thus, *The Inheritors* succeeds in project Golding’s idea to project a point of view which others did not have.

Reference

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