

Task: Using the parts in yellow in particular, explain what ecocriticism is and how it applies to Lord of the Flies

Eco-critical Analysis of Lord of the Flies

By William Golding

Ecocriticism is the study of representations of nature in literary works and of the relationship between literature and the environment. As an academic discipline, it began in earnest in the 1990s, although its roots go back to the late 1970s. Because it is a new area of study, scholars are still engaged in defining the scope and aims of the subject. The term has been defined from several perspectives by different critics. However, the most appropriate ones relating to our discussion are that of Laurence Buell, who says that this study must be “conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis.” The other is that of David Mazel, who declares it is the analysis of literature “as though nature mattered.” With reference to William Golding’s “Lord of the Flies”, the essay shall discuss the following in relation with the eco-critical study as discussed in Imam A. Hanafy’s article: environment presented as something pure untainted and untouched, the limited nature of environmental resources and exploitation of these resources, environment as something which is eerily silent all the time but is, at the same time, immensely powerful, the ability of environment to draw out the hidden ‘beast’ inside of us, and the dichotomy of culture and environment.

The term “ecocriticism” was coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism.” Interest in the study of nature writing and with reading literature with a focus on “green” issues grew through the 1980s, and by the early 1990s ecocriticism had emerged as a recognizable discipline within literature departments of American universities.

The novel “Lord of the Flies” presents an island as a small version of the real modern world, in which man has exploited the nature and environment for the sake of his comfort, progress and also due to his beastly nature. The title of the novel is significant and carries multiple interpretations. ‘Lord’ may represent ‘power’, as we see Ralph’s and Jack’s group fighting for power. ‘Flies’ may refer to death and decay; which may mean the death and decay having an alliance with power and corruption. However, from an eco-critical perspective, it may be referred to Beelzebub (another name for evil), who is also known as *Lord of Filth and Dung*. Throughout the novel, the children keep becoming more savage, beastly, dirty and devilish. Also the ‘Flies’ signify death and decay, which may mean the death and decay of nature, environment and their purity.

Nature, according to Hanafy, has been presented as something that is pure, untainted and untouched. It is due to man’s urge for civilization and development that the nature and environment got ravished, tainted and impure. As the island in Lord of the Flies is a miniature of the real modern world, the initial environmental and physical conditions of the island were such that “the shore was pledged with palm trees” and the salty water of the sea was clear. As for the ground, it was “a bank covered with coarse grass, scattered with decaying coconuts and palm saplings”. Before the human activities on earth began, the environment of the earth was quite like that of the island in the novel and its natural beauty and purity was preserved. However, later with the developments and establishment of human colonies, the earth started to get tainted with the marks of so called human civilization which actually is the sole cause of its impurity. This can be paralleled

with the part of the novel when the boys “had built castles in the sand at the bar of the little river”, and also when they try to build huts for themselves. “Two shelters were in position” but were shaky. These activities on the island began to taint and contaminate the island as the boys tried to practice their civilization. Some critics are of the view that the arrival of the navy at the resolution of the story is symbolic, as it represents the return of the civilization which actually made the environment and nature impure. Therefore, the arrival of navy according to some critics is ironical, since they come as rescuers; however, they depict civilization, hence representing the cause of destruction of environment and nature.

Imam A. Hanafy, in his article, writes that environment is something that remains still and eerily silent; yet it is immensely powerful and can have a long lasting effects. Since the advent of man, he has been experimenting with nature and his surroundings. As soon as his means of food, shelter and covering were met, man started exploiting nature for the sake of surplus, leisure and in order to satisfy his beastly and curious nature. However, the nature and environment silently observed the man exploiting them, and proved powerful in the climax as man today is at a constant threat of global warming, climatic changes, thinning of ozone and other natural disasters. A representation of this power of environment is evident within *Lord of the Flies*, when the boys initially make all the rules like civilized English people, and try to set up the facilities they enjoyed back home in their country. For this, they exploit the island in return of which the environment silently practices its strength on them and overpowers them, making them forget all their civil nature and submit to the environment and nature. The environment also possess power of punishing by remaining silent and attacking the minds of the inhabitants. Simon, in *Lord of the Flies*, gets scared of the cave mystery and pig’s head due to eerier, silent eloquence of the island and runs madly to the other boys. There, he gets killed by the boys as they mistake him for a beast in the dark, killing him brutally with their wooden spears.

Furthermore, Hanafy discusses the ability of environment to draw out the hidden beast inside of the man, that how being one with the environment causes one to lose his humanity and causes him to give in to his animalistic instincts. The phenomenon of man-eating leopards and tigers has a long history in different parts of world (Atkinson 1881; Corbett 1947). But this kind of beastly behaviour cannot be justified for man, as he is born with wits and characteristics higher in degree than that of the beasts. However, as Dipesh Chakrabarty says: “There is the widely accepted point that humans have been putting pressure on other species for quite some time now; I do not need to belabor it. Indeed, the war among animals such as rhinoceroses, elephants, monkeys, and big cats may be seen everyday in many Indian cities and villages”. It may also be seen in the novel, *Lord of the Flies*, that initially Jack and his hunters are hesitant in killing a pig. But later, when he kills one finally, he makes it a practice to kill the pigs and eat them as a treat. Initially, when the boys find Simon sitting near the bank, they throw stones at him, however took care that it didn’t hit him. But when Ralph comes to Jack’s group later for Piggy’s specs, they throw stones at Ralph brutally in order to show him their might.

In chapter nine-the boys think they heard the beast (really Simon) they sing a chant “kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!”. Also, when Simon is killed by misunderstanding, Jack’s group becomes a little upset at the killing of a human being. But afterwards, when Piggy and Ralph come to them for retrieving Piggy’s spectacles, one of the boy from Jack’s group throws a huge stone on Piggy, killing him at the spot. At this, no expressions of guilt could be seen on their faces; rather an air of pride, arrogance, shamelessness, brutality and barbarity was evident on their faces. And when Ralph is left alone after Simon and Piggy’s death, Jacks and his boys had become so barbarous that the beast inside them completely overtook them and they run after Ralph to kill him. All these incidents reflect how the nature and the environment brought out

the beast inside the boys, which makes them not only kill the pigs but also the human beings without any guilt.

According to Imam A. Hanafy, Golding has presented the island; the microcosmic representation of nature, as something pure; untainted. By doing so, he has set it up as a foil to the impure civilization that society thrusts upon humans. However, at the same time, Golding seems to endorse the fact that letting go of civilization completely causes one to become inhuman. Golding does not seem to place much faith in human nature to begin with, as he comments in the early chapters of Lord of the Flies, that civilization or culture helps humans curb their savage or beastly impulses by providing a suitable outlet for these emotions. In the wilderness, without any authority to check them, the boys easily fall prey to the natural urges inside them, eventually causing them to lose their humanity completely. For instance, Jack's initial desire to hunt is channeled into the need for food, highlighting how civilization provides an acceptable outlet for such urges. As long as Jack is within the rules of a civilization, he is no threat to the people around him. It is when he outrightly rejects the authority of Ralph and rejects the validity of society that he becomes a true danger for the others. Golding seems to suggest that while savagery is an inherent characteristic of human beings, civilization helps to mitigate its effects to some extent, creating a sort of balance between the natural beastly side of humans and the socially acceptable 'civilized' version of themselves. By leaving that culture behind, the boys let go of their humanity, and "reenter nature on its own terms". Naked and cultureless, their perceptions become irrational, intermixing with the perceptions of the creatures around them, so that, as a part of the natural world they are stranded in, they become inseparable from it. This is evident from Ralph's first encounter with this new world, he immediately takes off his clothes and leaps into the water. The act of undressing signifies Ralph's shedding of his former identity – the shedding of his culture; his civilized self – and adopt a new identity; one that is more at 'home' in this natural world.

Imam A. Hanafy goes on to suggest that when there is no law and order; when there is no authoritative figure to keep one in check, those curbed urges find an outlet. This can clearly be seen in the attitude of the boys, as their hunts become kills; their need for food turns into pure bloodlust and they begin to thirst for blood. This deterioration begins with the hunts of pigs turning into frenzied ritualistic massacres, and ends with the murder of Piggy. The boys feel no remorse for killing their friend; instead there is only the feeling of extreme satisfaction and contentedness at having made another kill. Golding does not seem to hold much faith in the preservation of one's humanity while being one with nature. In this way, Golding reinforces the dichotomy between nature and culture.

The rediscovery of 'self'; the taking back of 'identity', the incorporation of culture into the now savage world of the boys comes in the form of the naval officer. He is a symbol of authority; of power, and most of all, of civilization and culture. His appearance causes the boys to remember what they have done; to reflect on how they have turned into savage beasts whose bloodlust is so strong that they hold no remorse for the cold-blooded murder of their friend. Tahmina Mojadeddi writes: "Realization begins with Ralph, as he remembers the deaths of the other boys and the savage ways they turned to. Soon they all begin to cry as they realize that slowly and step by step they got carried away by instinct. Instinct was the only thing that taught them how to survive on the island but they see the faults and errors in it".

The gist of the above discussion is that man is born in the natural world, yes, but from the moments he gains of consciousness of himself, he is othered from nature and nature is othered from him. He is taught to live according to society's rules and regulations and to curb his natural desires and urges. In the introduction to The Environmental Imagination, Lawrence Buell remarks that, "Nature has been doubly otherized in modern

thought”. Golding reinforces this fact through his novel by showing how, when the boys are separated from their culture and placed in the wilderness, they feel as if they are missing something. It is almost as if a part of them is missing; that part is culture. The tragedy of their life, according to Imam A. Hanafy, is the fact that humans cannot live outside of culture; they are not equipped to deal with a life without culture; without civilization; without authority.

However, on the other hand, Golding also shows the destructive effect culture has on nature. It engages the modern ecologists who see the present ecological crisis as stemming from “destructive habits of thought”. Ralph has explained this predicament when the fire becomes not fun but fatal. While the boys see the fire as a source of entertainment, Piggy and Simon see its dangerous repercussions and warn the boys against it. It is Piggy who suggests the need for smoke as a signal for help, not fire which can set the island on fire. This revolution in thought is what is needed in order for humans’ attitude towards nature to change. When humans choose to perceive something in a new way, they can do so, just as Piggy and Simon can. They begin to understand the relationship between culture and nature at a deeper level. They can see how the two are united at heart, for they are, in fact, variations on the same theme.

Under this new awareness, man is re-imagined as being not only physically dependent on nature – as shown by the boys’ need for food, which is provided by nature – but also as being culturally dependent on it. Furthermore, although it is depending on nature, culture is also a product of nature. Meaning that there is an inherent relationship between culture and nature, wherein neither can exist without the other. Golding, seemingly endorsing this notion, shows that a dual accountability to nature and culture is the best one can hope for: when one lets go of culture completely, the result is death; when one completely embraces culture, the result is also death, when viewed from an ecological viewpoint. Culture is the life-sustaining factor for human beings, according to Imam A. Hanafy, but it poses its own problems as well, because, in its alienation of nature, it poses as a serious threat to the natural environment.

Therefore, Golding delineates the double estate of man – his capacity for harmony with, and alienation from, nature. All human beings hold this faculty; this possibility of going either way, depending on their ‘power of awareness’. Golding, in this way, tries to deconstruct the dichotomy of man and nature on one hand, and culture and nature on the other hand in an effort to ‘re-imagine the self and understand it in relation to nature’.

In the light of above discussion it can be concluded that the environment and nature in itself is a strong force and has a deep effect over the mind and actions of man. In return of exploitation of nature and environment, man is made to bear devastating repercussions. Ironically, man weaves his own destruction by exploitation of his environment. The eco-critical analysis is carried out for the very purpose, and to highlight man’s treatment with his environment and nature. In the novel Lord of the Flies, Golding also endeavours to highlight some aspects of this treatment and its consequences; alarming us of destruction of our environment and tries to explain the might of the environment greater than the might of man.