

## THE PROMETHEUS MYTH IN THE NOVELS OF WILLIAM GOLDING

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### ABSTRACT

Much influenced by the horrors of the two World Wars, William Golding (1911-93) began his literary career as a novelist during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His novels depict the intricate human psychology and lack of human relationship in an age where men actually have little to live for. In explaining occurrences in the human world Golding went back to myths, just as writers and philosophers before him had used mythical stories to interpret various human situations. Hence, Golding has taken up a number of recurring mythical motifs, and detailed examination shows how these motifs are central to explaining his complex themes. One such motif is the figure of Prometheus, a champion of mankind from Greek mythology who revolted against the immortal gods to free mankind. Classical Greek writers, such as, Aeschylus portrayed him as a rebel who ultimately reconciled himself with the immortals. However, in the Renaissance and Romantic literature Prometheus became a symbol of suffering and aspiring humanity. In modern literature, once again the role of this great hero changed. Since that heroic world is lost in our non-heroic one Golding concentrates on the fallen or debased aspects of mankind interlinked with intense suffering. So, while examining Golding's Promethean figures, this paper will try to assess the author's philosophy of reshaping the myth of Prometheus.

In classical antiquity, the Prometheus myth was immortalized by the Greek dramatist Aeschylus (525-456 B. C.) in his trilogy of which only the first, *Prometheus Bound*, survives in complete form. Originally, Prometheus was a Titan, a pre-Hellenic fire god later replaced by Hephaestus. He stole fire from Zeus and presented it to mankind. As punishment for this crime along with other offences, Zeus, the supreme god had him tied on the highest peak of Caucasus. There Prometheus endured terrible sufferings as an eagle tore at his immortal liver during day time. During the night the liver got replenished only to be devoured the next day. Thus Prometheus is not just a symbol of aspiring humanity but suffering humanity as well. For poets and writers from the ancient times to the modern Prometheus has been a very attractive figure, and among other things he has been presented as the creator of mankind, a fire-bringer, a trickster and a skilled craftsman, a redeemer, a rebel against the gods, and a great humanitarian.

Aeschylus showed proper reverence to the immortal gods, and there are suggestions of a reconciliation between Prometheus and Zeus. At other times, other writers have imbued the

influence and attitude of their times in his character. So in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), the chained and tormented Prometheus is a symbol of afflicted humanity. During the time span of over two thousand years between Aeschylus and Shelley, Prometheus grew into a hero of humanistic, liberal and suffering man. In his essay, 'On Pincher Martin,' Samuel Hynes defines Prometheus as "an indestructible life worshipping identity whose very existence gives meaning to his suffering and whose suffering gives meaning to his existence" (130). Commenting on the essential sufferings of human life, Hynes points out that a central theme of Golding's novels is that the sufferings of human beings arise from their lack of understanding of their own nature and the world around them. And these men are the Prometheuses of the confused, modern world.

Indeed the world of modern men is one of intense suffering and anxiety. The disbelief and lack of faith in religious dogma reflected in English literature that started at the end of the Victorian Age and deepened with the World Wars continued even after the Second World War. The literature of the early twentieth century thus reflects a profound

sense of frustration. The later poems of Yeats, works by T.S. Eliot, Lawrence, Conrad, Green and Joyce acutely present this depression.

William Golding, one of the most religious novelists of this age, began to write in the middle of the twentieth century. His voice, however, was not that of a traditional or orthodox Christian. As a modern man, he could not afford to follow any established religion, though he made liberal use of Christian symbols, ideas and motifs in his work. In 'The World of William Golding,' Peter Green calls him "a spiritual cosmologist" (172) as he concerned himself with the philosophy of all religions of the world. He combined pagan and Christian myths. Golding is also referred to as a 'Deist' in the same essay, because he seems to believe unquestioningly in an ultimate existence, although this belief is not based on one distinct religion but on a firm faith in God.

Golding's novels reflect a deep interest in mankind. He seems, however, not so much concerned about the redeeming features of human nature, but concentrates on its depraved side. In his work, the fallen or the debased aspects of man and his intense sufferings are inter-linked, since his fallen nature goads man to commit sin and sin leads to suffering. Yet Golding does not necessarily follow the traditional formula of sin-suffering-redemption. There is no perfect redemption in Golding's world, as he describes the complex world of modern men. These men suffer without knowing the reason for their suffering, and sometimes their whole lives are spent thus. Even if they know the reason, they cannot always help it. A faithless, God-defying utilitarian—that is how modern man is, as portrayed by Golding through characters like Pincher Martin in *Pincher Martin*, Sammy Mountjoy in *Free Fall*, or Wilfred Barclay in *The Paper Men*.

Golding's men deliberately choose a safe aesthetic creed that does not demand religious practices. But this belief can scarcely sustain them. Whenever they are dragged out of their puny shells to confront things beyond their comprehension, they collapse. Those that survive often turn into half-crazy monomaniacs like Barclay or groveling creatures like Jocelyn in *The Spire*. A very few like Sammy can hope for a purgatorial existence. Nevertheless, Golding's world is a bleak one; one may spend one's entire life searching for a speck of light without ever finding it. And to enhance the

significance of this purgatorial suffering, Golding has brought in the myth of Prometheus. He has shown how man the maker, the inventor, and the builder, must also suffer for his knowledge, which is to say that he must suffer for being what he is. The mythical Prometheus had fore and hindsight, but the sufferings he went through were imposed upon him. In contrast, ordinary men of our world lack self-knowledge, and therefore, often embark on ventures that bring disaster on themselves as well as their fellow human beings.

The myth of Prometheus is thus used as a central theme in Golding's novels. In *Lord of the Flies* one comes across Piggy, the fat, asthmatic, myopic friend of the protagonist Ralph. Although outwardly a most unheroic figure, Piggy is Golding's version of Prometheus as it is with the thick lens of his spectacles that fire is lighted on the lonesome island. He is the voice of sanity and reason that Ralph slowly comes to recognize. It is always Piggy who talks about returning home, civilization, rules and regulations. In spite of being harassed and ridiculed by his friends, he always tries to help them. In the end, like Prometheus, he too embraces a terrible fate while trying to introduce reason to his 'savage' companions.

A modern Prometheus, however, cannot be flawless. Piggy too has his faults. He is hated by Ralph's rival Jack and his hunters. Unfortunately, he is unable to oppose them strongly. On the contrary, he asks for his share in the pig he did not hunt. He is wise, but his wisdom is tainted with fear, greed and irresponsibility. He adamantly refuses to acknowledge his or Ralph's share of responsibility in the death of Simon:

"It was an accident," said Piggy suddenly, "that's what it was. An accident." His voice was shrill again. "Coming in the dark—he hadn't no business crawling like that out of the dark. He was batty. He asked for it." (193)

Piggy is afraid of the hunters. And he never fully realizes that they hate him in return for his sanity, and for his logical turn of mind. In a world of darkness and confusion, where man is deliberately committed to evil, a Prometheus like Piggy cannot survive. His dependence on logic makes him emotionally sterile. And intellect and logic alone cannot solve the problems he is faced with. He wants to return to a civilization that is incapable of protecting itself. So at first he is blinded and reduced to futility when the hunters steal his

glasses, and in the end he is brutally killed by Jack and his hunters.

In his second book, *The Inheritors*, Golding does not introduce any distinct Promethean figure, but he makes deliberate references to the link between knowledge and evil, and indicates in the novel how they came upon man and led to his sufferings. Actually, he makes a fusion of the Biblical myth of Fall and Prometheus as in both knowledge and sufferings are interlinked. One of the two groups of men depicted in the novel, the Neanderthals, lived in absolute peace and harmony until the arrival of the other group. These new men with their superior knowledge and craftsmanship, however, sought to destroy the older race. In this intricately woven story Golding shows how man with greater knowledge and ability has a tendency to destroy things and not to create.

In the course of the story Golding makes us note how the two innocent Neanderthals called Lok and Fa come to taste the rotten honey procured by the new men. In the process they partake in the vision of a world seen through the eyes of the new race. In the earlier novel, *Piggy* had stolen fire from heaven; and in this one Lok and Fa eat the forbidden fruit. Naturally, as punishment they are expelled from their respective Edens. Of all the boys in *Lord of the Flies*, Piggy with his rational approach was possibly the most grown up person in the island world, always dwelling in a world beyond childhood ignorance. In *The Inheritors*, after his weird experience with the rotten honey, Lok loses his innocence. With a guilty feeling he realizes that the world that lies beyond him is not as simple as he had considered it to be. For Golding, however, this casting away from heaven is only a beginning. As Peter Green suggests, this expulsion "leads by slow degrees to the purgatorial Caucasian rocks, the eagle tearing endlessly at his vitals. So the scene is set for the third Aeschylean novel: *Pincher Martin*" (89).

Indeed the extraordinary setting of *Pincher Martin* is Aeschylean, since from the very beginning one can sense an inevitable fate maneuvering the life of the protagonist. In the beginning it seems like a typical adventure story set in the tradition of sagas about men against the sea. But soon one begins to notice the strange half-mythic, nightmare-like qualities of the struggle of the man called Christopher Martin. Ultimately, one realizes that none of the happenings associated with him had

taken place in reality. They had been visualized in Martin's sub-conscious mind and had registered there in the space of a few moments. *Pincher Martin* is actually the story of a man who died twice. Golding's American publishers had published the book under the title *The Two Deaths of Christopher Martin*. Indeed, Martin is the man who has always desperately clung to life, and therefore, refuses to die when the moment comes, and goes through tremendous metaphysical suffering.

Through a series of flashbacks Martin's character is shown to be opposite to the heroic and mythic Prometheus. Martin is an unscrupulous egotist who stops at no depravity, no betrayal of love and friendship to fulfill his own ego. One of his victims portrays his depraved character with precision thus:

He takes the best part, the best seat, the most money, the best notice, the best woman. He was born with his mouth and his flies wide open and both hands out to grab. He's a cosmic case of the bugger who gets his penny and someone else's bun. (120)

From the memory of an aching tooth Pincher fabricates his survival on a rock shaped like his own teeth (30). Like the seaweed, mussels, and shells cleaving to a rock, he lives and breathes. He sustains himself on these lowest forms of life and boasts that he can defeat nature. Samuel Hynes suggests that the qualities that keep Martin alive in the hostile atmosphere of the rock are also the qualities that make him repulsive:

By seeing *this* character developed parallel to the Promethean survivor, we are forced to acknowledge that the same qualities that have kept him alive against such odds are the qualities that make him morally repulsive. And so in the middle of the eleventh chapter we face a moral dilemma: on what grounds can we condemn those qualities by which man survives? (127)

In his agony, Pincher begins to identify himself with mythical characters such as Prometheus, Atlas and Ajax. As Prometheus made men out of clay, Pincher makes a 'dwarf' in the shape of an old woman with rocks, and hopes to be spotted by some ship. He has led a godless life in the past, and continues to do so on the rock. He even refuses to die and grunts, "I'm damned if I die!" (72) This assertion is ironic, because by refusing to die, and by declining to commit himself to a selfless act, he

chooses damnation. He visualizes himself as a mythic hero tormented alone on a rock, exposed to sun, rain, and all sorts of natural calamities. Like Odysseus, he is thrown on a rock by the sea; like Ajax he is deprived of his ship; like Atlas he is made to stand with the weight of the sky overhead; and like Prometheus he is tormented on a barren rock. He becomes a symbol of suffering humanity defying fate, crying out: "I am Atlas. I am Prometheus" (164).

But then, the figure of Pincher lacks the heroic stature of Prometheus and of the other mythical heroes he compares himself to. He does not, for example, fight the gods as Atlas did for the continued existence of his own race, the Titans. Nor being a hero like Ajax, Pincher joined the navy only when driven to do so, and his intelligence was not used in heroic causes as Odysseus' was. And whereas Prometheus was conniving for the welfare of mankind in general, Pincher is selfish for his own personal gains. Though critics like Peter Green see Pincher Martin as a Promethean figure, as one who "sums up every quality that distinguishes man from the beasts" (90), he reminds one more of Loki—the mischievous giant-god of the Nordic myths. Loki was originally a giant allowed by the gods to live with them. He was later tied down to a rock for contriving the death of another god, Balder, and for his other misdeeds. There he continues to suffer under drops of venom which keeps falling from a serpent's mouth, until Ragnarok, the final battle between the gods and the monsters. As a professional actor, Pincher may play the role of Prometheus or any other hero, but his 'Dwarf' fails to save him whereas Prometheus's man ultimately set him free from his purgatorial existence.

Nevertheless, in Pincher one can identify Campbell's version of a Modern Prometheus, portrayed in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) as the self-centred hero who "instead of submitting to all of the initiatory tests, has like Prometheus, simply darted to his goal (by violence, quick device, or luck) and plucked the boon for the world ... then the powers that he has unbalanced may react so sharply that he will be blasted from within or without—crucified, like Prometheus, on the rock of his own violated unconscious" (37). Pincher has always taken anything that caught his fancy, done everything a man would to pacify his own ego, and has been an epitome of selfishness throughout his life. And so at the end of it he has to

suffer, though he refuses to accept or understand any of it.

Modern men are puny creatures absorbed in the triviality of everyday life. Golding himself once commented on the mythical aspect of Pincher, that he was "a fallen man... Very much fallen—he's fallen more than most" (Hynes 132). The author also said that he had tried to make Pincher as unpleasant and nasty as he could, and was interested in seeing how the critics identified their own selves in him. Thus it becomes very clear that modern men would not accept a great heroic Prometheus as their spokesman, but a dwarfed one who would be very like themselves, or someone like Eliot's Phlebas the Phoenician in the *The Waste Land*, whom Pincher sees in himself:

I was young and handsome with an eagle profile and wavy hair; I was brilliantly clever and I went out to fight your enemies. I endured in water, I fought the whole sea... Now I am thin and weak... my hair is white with salt and suffering. My eyes are dull stones— (188)

At the end, however, Pincher is denied even of a purgatorial stay. As Golding himself commented in an interview:

He is not fighting for bodily survival but for his continuing identity in the face of what will smash it and sweep it away—the black lightning, the compassion of God. 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. (Kermode 60)

The mythic Prometheus was redeemed for his human qualities. Though he flouted the gods, he was compassionate toward humanity. He created and nursed something that was able to relieve him of his sufferings. On the other hand, Pincher nurses and nourishes his own arrogantly proud self. The only heaven or freedom it can provide him with is that rock. Appropriately enough, the last portion of Pincher's body that is destroyed are his claw-like hands. To escape his insignificant existence, Eliot's protagonist in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' wanted to become "a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of the silent seas." Pincher, as if to justify his borrowed name truly becomes so. After all, he has been a 'pincher' throughout his life, and with his claw-like hands he never built anything fruitful, but always tried to grab what belonged to others.

Through the figure of Pincher Martin, Golding commits himself to criticizing man's capacity to reason. Pincher thinks that with his intellect, reason, and sanity he can survive. But the author notes pointedly that in man's battle for salvation much more is needed than these qualities. Love, faith and selfless actions, for instance, seem more effective to Golding in this case. And these are precisely the qualities absent in Pincher's character. It seems that he willfully blocks his way to salvation. In their book, *The World of William Golding* (1965), Oldsey and Weintraub comment that there are no redeemers in Golding's theology. That the modern Prometheus must continue suffering without redemption appears to be the ultimate message of *Pincher Martin*.

Golding was less successful in using the Prometheus myth in the novels he wrote after *Pincher Martin*. Yet the single play Golding wrote, *The Brass Butterfly*, later published as a novella under the title 'Envoy Extraordinary,' in his collection called *The scorpion God*, presents a very fascinating Promethian figure in the character of Phanocles. Phanocles is a scientist and inventor who brings several astonishing gifts for the Emperor of Rome. He claims that through this epoch-making inventions, which consist of a pressure cooker, a steam engine, explosives, and the technique of printing, he can make man advanced in technology and change the world. The Caesar accepts the pressure cooker enthusiastically, calling it the most Promethean invention of all. The inventions of steam engine and explosives prove to be disastrous as foretold by the Emperor when he first set his eyes upon them. He also refuses to do anything with the method of printing. The farsighted Emperor explains that people were ready to accept a small change, like cooking in a pressure cooker, but they were not yet prepared for a revolution.

The mythic Prometheus gave men fire and that brought a revolutionary change in the life of pre-historic man. But as a realist Golding knows that the receiver of the gift must also be ready and willing to accept it. Phanocles, say Oldsey and Weintraub, "sees no limits to what man can do with his universe, but cannot comprehend the danger of playing Prometheus" (153). He is able to see only the good side of technological advancement, but is completely blind to the baser instincts of human nature. Phanocles is a reminder of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, whom its author herself called "the

modern Prometheus," in his attempt to unlock the secret of creation. Frankenstein thought that by bringing the dead back to life he would change human history. But what he created turned into a monster. Somewhat like him, Phanocles wants to play the part of Prometheus by bestowing his notable gifts on common men who shrink away from them. The Roman soldiers, whom he wants to present with the gift of gunpowder, prefer hand to hand combat. Even the galley slaves do not like steam engines, as they fear that for the new mechanism they will cease to have any meaning for their masters. Now at least they have a life, however miserable it might be. If engines take away their work, they will simply be eliminated. So the wonderful gifts of Promethean Phanocles are refused on the ground that they are dangerous and self-destructive.

Perhaps what Golding wants to suggest is that human beings have never been quite ready to accept all that modern technology has offered them. And the situation has not much altered since Caesar's time, although that was some two thousand years back. Far from utilizing the power put into his hands, man is using it wildly to destroy his own world. Thus Golding makes us ponder whether man can get anywhere despite the Promethean gifts bestowed upon him.

The last of Golding's Promethean figures is Ionides Peisistratides in *The Double Tongue* (1994), the incomplete novel that was published after the author's death. Ionides is possibly one of the most truthful representations of modern characters portrayed by Golding. He is shown to be an Athenian and an interpreter in the Oracle of Delphi during a time of the Roman rule in Greece. His friends call him Ion, and this is significant since according to Greek myths, Ion was a son and priest of the god Apollo. Although he appears to be a devotee of Apollo, Golding's Ion is virtually an atheist. He does not believe in the existence of divinities, but accepts their necessity. For him gods are the creation of a class of people who intend to use them to rule the mob. He himself uses the oracle chiefly for espionage.

Ion resembles Golding's earlier creation Pincher Martin. Like Martin he believes too fervently in his own identity. But he is not a greedy 'pinch-all' like the protagonist of the earlier novel. Ion is a learned person and considers himself to be a wise man. He firmly believes in and dreams of an independent

Greece. He chooses Arieka, a simple rural girl, to be a seeress in the temple of Delphi and uses her partly to conceal his own spying activities.

Golding gives to Ion the rhetoric of a modern Prometheus—one who would use gods for the profit of man:

(Arieka): “Surely the god doesn’t need to be told what is happening?”

(Ionides): “Reminded, shall we say. It’s a good theological point. What does the god need to know? After all he needs to know what the question is. Therefore he needs to know something. Therefore there is no reason why he should not need to know what is happening in Asia, or Africa, or Achaia.... Or Rome.” (63)

Ionides cannot bring himself to believe in gods or a supreme existence. He is also shown to be a homosexual. For Golding, this is a person cultivating unnatural practices. He is someone who has never faced dishonour until almost the very end. Reminiscent of Piggy and Pincher, Ionides is a flawed Prometheus in his search for something his reason and intellect cannot provide him.

The close and compassionate relationship between Ion and Arieka, and Ion’s fondness for his slave Perseus apparently make him a more likable and redeemable character than Pincher Martin. Nevertheless, like Golding’s other Promethean characters, Ion too leans too much on his own beliefs. He considers himself a steady and sturdy freedom fighter although his country Greece seems quite content under the Roman Empire. When the Romans let him go free as a harmless conspirator, he feels robbed of his identity, honour, and lifelong beliefs. That is something he cannot accept, and as a result, loses his sanity. Although the novel is an unfinished one, Golding does enough to suggest the pitiful ending of Ionides fully and superbly by relating it from the standpoint of Arieka:

He did become silly, not in the way he always had been at times, but a silliness without any wisdom in it. There was oblivion and presently his body died. I did not suffer with him as so often in these cases of extreme age, he had really died a long time before. (164)

Somewhat like Pincher, he too has to face death twice. Whereas Pincher’s subconscious mind continued to struggle even after death, Ion’s body

continued to live after his mind had succumbed to death. The nature of problem in these two men is the same. When they fully realize the loss of their identity, they have to accept death. Although Pincher appears to be the more egotistical of the two men, to a modern reader Pincher also seems more appealing and acceptable as a modern Prometheus. He grabs whatever he can lay his hands on. He cheats, he lies and does all sorts of unspeakable things a man can do. He also suffers terribly, but unlike Prometheus, and like the suffering millions of the modern world, he does not know why he suffers. Yet, he is accepted by the readers as a modern Prometheus because he is a creation of the world they themselves belong to. And like Pincher, too, they do not know the reason behind their sufferings that the modern life-style has inflicted them with.

On December 10, 1950, in his acceptance speech to the Nobel Academy, referring to the impending Cold War and constant fear, William Faulkner said, “the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the theme lying at the center of Modern literature is the suffering of the human mind, and the soul struggling with itself. This idea explains why the figure of Prometheus—the archetypal symbol of suffering humanity, has always been so attractive to writers and critics of all ages. Twentieth century men and women often pride themselves on their sense of privacy, and of the progress they have made in the field of communication. But what they have achieved amount only to screens that have shut off their thoughts and feelings. They have managed to lock themselves up in their purgatories, with only occasional social calls made at each other’s drawing rooms. They are, as writers such as Eliot, Conrad, and Greene have suggested, afraid of one another and of human relationships, and thus they identify themselves with Prometheus in their sufferings, paying the price of knowledge and aspiration.

Golding was a theologian with an aversion to the theories practiced by Darwin, Marx and Freud. In the last chapter of their book, Oldsey and

<sup>1</sup> *Nobel Lectures, Literature 1901-1967*. 27 Jan. 2006. 20 June 2006. <<http://nobelprize.org/cgi-bin/literature/laureates/1949/Faulkner-speech.html>>

Weintraub note that Golding did not consider it proper to look for a pattern in every field of life. In particular, he disliked Freud's various theories of psychological conflicts and interpretations. But myth critics like Frye and Campbell have suggested that "the myth critic sees the work holistically, as the manifestation of vitalizing, integrative forces arising from the depths of humankind's collective psyche" (Guerin et al 167). Consciously or unconsciously, Golding himself set patterns while drawing and sketching his characters. For example, his Promethean characters usually have borrowed identities. We never come to know the real name of Piggy. Christopher Martin becomes Pincher Martin when he joins the navy. Golding's last hero Ionides is mostly known by the name of Ion, the mythical son of Apollo. Fools and simpletons in his novels come closest to identify or discover meaning of the universe. Similarly, through his Promethean figures, he attempts to throw light on man's suffering from different perspectives.

A critic of the lack of morality in modern men, Golding nevertheless follows the footsteps of his subjects closely and sympathetically. Understanding the intensity of man's suffering and pain, he shows that in a world such as ours, no redeemer can be perfect. In view of all these ideas, Golding's visions have been often termed pessimistic. The figure of Prometheus, however, stands as a saviour of mankind. By bringing back this redeeming symbol from time to time, Golding perhaps wanted to indicate that even though the world is corrupt and vile, there is always a possibility of redemption. True that his Promethean characters are not always strong or faultless, or even effective enough to enlighten the dark, chaotic world, yet they symbolize the undying human spirit that refuses to surrender in the most oppressive and overwhelming situation.

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