

The Critical Reception of William Golding in the West and China

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Abstract

William Golding, winner of 1983 Nobel Prize in literature, has been widely recognized in the U.K. and the U.S. since the publication of *Lord of Flies* in 1954, and came into the sight of China at the beginning of 1980's. By comparison, similarities and difference in Golding studies between the West and China are obvious. Criticism in the West on Golding's writing is abundant with diverse perspectives and wide coverage. In contrast, the research in China started late and is relatively limited. However, in the last decade or so, attention to Golding has grown and more approaches have been taken in the research of his writings. With reference to the previous research achievement more understanding about Golding will be reached.

Key Words: William Golding; Critical reception; Perspective; the West; China

1. Introduction

As the winner of the 1983 Nobel Prize in Literature, the British writer William Golding has been recognized by the world of literature. Between 1954 and 1995, Golding published 12 novels, as well as collection of poems, travels, and drama, 2 collections of essays, and 62 book reviews and essays in British and American journals, of which few were included in his collection of essays. Though Golding, as a dabbler, published *Poems*^① in the year of 1934 in his youth, his most well-known work was his first novel, *Lord of the Flies* published in 1954. In the next two years, he published *The Inheritors* and *Pincher Martin*. In 1959, the drama *The Brass Butterfly* and the novel *Free Fall* came into being. All the four novels published by Golding in the 1950s were highly reviews from the critics. The 1960's witnessed Golding's productivity with the delivery of two novels *The Spire* (1964) and *The Pyramid* (1967) and a collection of essays *The Hot Gates* (1965) . They were also very popular in the US. During the 1970s, Golding was frequently invited to lecture in British and American schools and universities. At the same time, he traveled a lot in European countries and some Asian countries including China. In this decade, William Golding's publication was relatively slow with only a collection of short stories *The Scorpion God* (1971) and one novel *Darkness Visible* (1979) . After ten years of recuperation, William Golding ushered in the glorious moment of life and another creative peak in the 1980s. He published *Rites of Passage* (1980) , which won him Booker–McConnell Prize. It was regarded as the best original novel published in the UK. *The Moving Targets*, a literary criticism, published in 1982, demonstrated his theoretical stand about writing and literary criticism. In 1983, the Swedish Academy awarded William Golding the Nobel Prize in literature “for his novels which, with the perspicuity of realistic narrative art and the diversity and universality of myth, illuminate the human condition in the world of today” (The Nobel Prize Outreach). William Golding continued to work hard after that and published a travel *An Egyptian Journal*, and three novels, including *The Paper Man* (1984) *Close Quarter* (1987) and *Fire Down Below* (1989) before he passed away in 1993. His family compiled his manuscripts and published his posthumous novel *The Double*

Tongue (1995) .

William Golding has attracted wide attention since the publication of *Lord of the Flies*. Literary criticism on his publications spread from the U.K. to the U.S. The research on Golding works in both the U.K. and the U.S. has continued ever since. Golding was not introduced to China until 1981 and then the Nobel Prize increased the popularity of the writer hereafter.

2. William Golding's Critical reception in the UK and the US

William Golding's Critical reception in the UK and the US can be divided into three stages, namely the 1960s-70s, the 80-90s and the last 20 years. The research of the first period is positive and fundamental, the second is more diverse in terms of perspectives and somewhat controversial, and the last period continues the focus of the first stage and brings more information about Golding himself.

Lord of the Flies has attracted the attention of readers in the U.K. and the U.S. since its publication in 1954, which initiated the first round of research on Golding till the end of 1970's. *Lord of the Flies* is even more popular in the U.S. It has long been on the list of required readings in American primary and secondary schools. After the first success, Golding produced three new novels and one collection of essay and short stories, all of which were soon introduced by newspapers and magazines to the readers and received reviews of both the British and American critics. Critics demonstrated great interest in his novels and read them from different perspectives, with several books on Golding published.

The criticism from the 1950's to the 70's on Golding is fundamental in the research on his works. The study on Golding was extensive and in-depth in this period and the most influential research monographs were published during those years. Peter's opinion that *Lord of the Flies* metaphorically revealed the situation of human existence in the form fable is widely accepted (1957). Kermode's concern about the concept of original sin in Golding's work also had a great impact (1957). More books appeared focusing on the themes, comedic expression, archetype, and other aspects of Golding's published works. *William Golding, A Critical Study* (Jame, 1965) and *William Golding* (Dick, 1967) are important foreshadowing works of early research on Golding. In addition, allegorical analysis of *Lord of the Flies* was also carried out (Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor(1967). Halliday used the narrative principle to interpret *The Inheritors* from the perspective of functional language (1977), providing another new perspective to the study about Golding's work. At the same time, an interview with Golding about his views on his own works was published (Biles, 1970), which has a certain referential significance in the study of the writer's point of view and the relationship to his work. During this period, Golding was productive and won high evaluations. The research on Golding has been comprehensively carried out from text analysis to the writer's view of writing, and provides a decisive foundation for and direction to the research.

The second phase of research lied in the 1980s and 1990s. The award of Nobel Prize in Literature in 1983 heated the research on Golding. Representative achievements involve *Of Earth and Darkness: The Novels of William Golding* (Johnson, 1980), *William Golding: the man and his books, a tribute on his 75th birthday* (Carey, 1986), and *William Golding* (revised edition) (Dick, 1987). These works extended research into all of Golding's novels published before from the themes of morality, humanity, religion, personality psychology in the works. The approaches and perspectives are diverse, ranging from the genre, style, philosophical connotation, mythological archetypes, and the connection between the writer and his works. These studies refer to sociology, political science, psychology, and other disciplinary theories, as well as realism and feminism.

These studies mainly pointed to the realistic style of Golding's work, the theme of “the evil of human nature”, the rich religious and mythological symbols in his works, as well as philosophical and practical significance.

The Nobel Prize increased the reputation of the Golding and ignited controversial response. Since *Lord of the Flies* has always been an inevitable target of all research on Golding and research on the author's other works are obviously insufficient, the suspicion is that he won the prize with only “one article in the literary world”. The American opponents led by Gray have continuously criticized Golding's new works (Gray, 1983). However, these controversies also contributed to the concern on Golding.

The third phase of research is relatively calm. After the controversy of the award and the relative slowdown of similar research in the previous stage, the research in this period moved further in the study about Golding, with complete coverage on his works and a combination of text and social history. After the death of Golding in 1993, critics represented by Tiger made a systematic analysis of all of Golding's novels. *William Golding: The Unmoved Target* (Tiger, 2006) once again emphasized the uniqueness of Golding's creative methods and the consistency of literary themes and the profoundness of his literary works. *Politics and History in William Golding: The World Turned Upside Down* analyzes Golding's novels from a historical and political perspective (Crawford, 2002). Most of all, Carey, who began to pay attention to Golding in the 1980s, published *William Golding: The Man Who Wrote Lord of the Flies* (2009) with a unique perspective, revealing many of Golding's unknown events and comments on him. Then, Judy Golding published the memoir monograph *The Children of Lovers: A Memoir of William Golding by His Daughter* (2009). The two new biographies were breakthrough in the study about Golding and his works.

In short, the research in the U.K. and the U.S. on Golding has continued since the publication of *Lord of the Flies* and covers the features, themes, and literary and social significance of Golding's novels. The perspectives are diverse, ranging from the works themselves to the writer's personal experience and opinion of writing and criticism. The continuous research of Golding in the West and the remarkable achievement improved the understanding of Golding's works and provided a valuable basis and reference to Golding study.

3. Golding's critical reception in China

Golding was not known to China until the year 1981, two years before the Nobel Prize, when *Lord of the Flies* was introduced to readers. The attention and research on Golding really started in 1983 after the news of the Nobel Prize in Literature came out. The papers on Golding's works were published one after another and it seems that the concern grows till this decade. The majority of the publications are about few of Golding's works. The perspectives and approaches are generally like those in the West but demonstrate a breakthrough with the development of critical theory in China.

As the works coverage and development of research are concerned, the study on Golding in China is quite unbalanced statistically. Most of the study achievement was papers, with only two monographs published. According to CNKI, the largest database of academic papers in China, from March 1981, when the first paper on Golding's work was published, to May 2020, 291 papers were published on the journals and magazines, not including almost 120 graduate dissertations. However, more than 130 of the journal papers focused on *Lord of the Flies* and Golding's works published in the 1980's and 90's was hardly studied. As for the publication of Golding research, there were only 17 articles in the 1980s and 23 in the 1990s, leaving 251 to be done in the last two decades, among which 166 papers were published from the year 2010 to 2020. Some books on the overview of English literature also gave some introductions to Golding, basically about his life, publications, and

summary on few of his well-known novels, such as *The History of Contemporary British Novels* (Qu and Ren, 2008), and *The Post-War British Novels* (Zhang, 2004). In short, in terms of the progress of Golding study in China, no evidence showed any interest in the writer from the 50s to 70s, and few study had been done in the 80s and 90s. However, the last 20 years witnessed a boom of research on Golding, especially in the last decade.

Golding study in China is quite limited with regard of the perspectives and coverage of research in the last century. Over 80% of the publications illustrates on *Lord of the Flies*, and most of the topics among those of the West. Few researches had been done on the other 11 novels of Golding, let alone his essays or drama. They concentrated mainly on the concept of human nature, religious implication, allegorical style, writing skills, etc. which had been discussed much abroad.

However, some papers did produce some new ideas and show their insights. Zhang (1995)“Reread and Analyzed the Symbols and Meanings of *Lord of the Flies*” . Yin (1990) also made a unique analysis of the problem of human nature in *Lord of the Flies*. Wang (2010) commented on the cultural connotation, structure and narrative characteristics of Golding’s novels and interpreted Golding ’s works from the perspective of ecological criticism. Qu (1994) analyzed the genre of Golding ’s novels and analyzed the characteristics of his novels, referring to the background of contemporary British literature. Ruan Wei (1988) studied the theme of rationality and salvation, symbol, and philosophical value in both *Lord of the Flies* and *Darkness Visible*. Zhang (2001) interpreted *Darkness Visible* from the perspective of structuralist psychoanalysis and studied the forms and functions of character language in the novels. Xiao (2011) analyzed *The Inheritors*, *Rites of Passage*, *Pincher Martin*, and *The Pyramid* from an ethical perspective. Within the last decade, China has published two monographs on Golding study. Shen (2011) analyzed the comedy mode of Golding's novels on *The Pyramid*, *Darkness Visible*, *The Paper Man* and the navigation trilogy. Feng (2013) briefly introduced Golding’s life, beliefs and thoughts and his novels except *Fire Down Below*. These works improved Golding research in China.

Overall, although China started study on Golding quite late and currently the research is limited to some extent, more concerns have been attended to it in the recent years and some original researches are undergoing. Both in the West and China, there is still room in the study of Golding with the development of critical theories. Besides, research in the author's critical opinion and its connection to his works is worth doing. As a writer of worldwide reputation, William Golding's works and theory of writing will gain more recognition and research understanding.

Note

① All of William Golding’s publications excerpt *Poems* were published by Faber & Faber in London.

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Biography

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