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WILLIAM GOLDING'S NOVEL--THE BACKWARD LOOK.

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DESCRIPTORS- *AMERICAN LITERATURE, *LITERARY ANALYSIS, *LITERARY CRITICISM, *NOVELS, ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE,

THE "SURPRISE ENDINGS" IN EACH OF WILLIAM GOLDING'S FIRST FOUR NOVELS OCCUR WHEN THE POINT OF VIEW SHIFTS FROM THE LIMITED WORLD OF THE NOVEL TO THE UNLIMITED WORLD OF REALITY. THE BOYS' RESCUE BY THE UNCOMPREHENDING OFFICER IN "LORD OF THE FLIES," REFOCUSES AND REINFORCES ALL THAT PRECEDES IT, AND THE FABLE, SUPERIMPOSED UPON REAL LIFE, BECOMES EVEN MORE FRIGHTENING UPON REFLECTION. THE SHIFT IN THE LAST CHAPTER OF "THE INHERITORS" FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF THE NEANDERTHAL MEN TO THAT OF THE CRO-MAGNON MEN BRINGS THE READER SUDDEN RECOGNITION THAT HIS IDENTIFICATION WITH THE NEANDERTHALS ALLOWED HIM TO VIEW THE CRO-MAGNONS AS OTHERS MIGHT VIEW HIM. THE REVELATION AT THE CLOSE OF "PINCHER MARTIN" THAT MARTIN'S BOOK-LONG STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL ACTUALLY OCCURS WITHIN A FEW MOMENTS FORCES A REVIEW OF THE NOVEL AND PREVENTS AN OVERSIMPLIFICATION OF INTERPRETATION. ALTHOUGH SAMMY'S TORTURE CHAMBER IN "FREE FALL" IS FINALLY REVEALED AS A BROOM CLOSET, THE UNCERTAINTY ABOUT WHETHER OR NOT SAMMY WAS THROWN INTO THE CLOSET BY ACCIDENT EMPHASIZES THE IRONY EITHER OF SAMMY'S EXTREME SELF-TORTURE OR OF HALDE'S UNDERSTANDING OF SAMMY'S MIND. WITH THE OCCURRENCE OF EACH "SURPRISE ENDING," THE READER IS FORCED TO TAKE A BACKWARD LOOK FROM A SUDDEN NEW PERSPECTIVE. CONSEQUENTLY, EACH NOVEL DOES NOT END IN THE READER'S MIND PRECISELY WHERE IT ENDS ON PAPER. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "MARYLAND ENGLISH JOURNAL," VOL. 6 (FALL 1967), 10-12, 17.) (RD)

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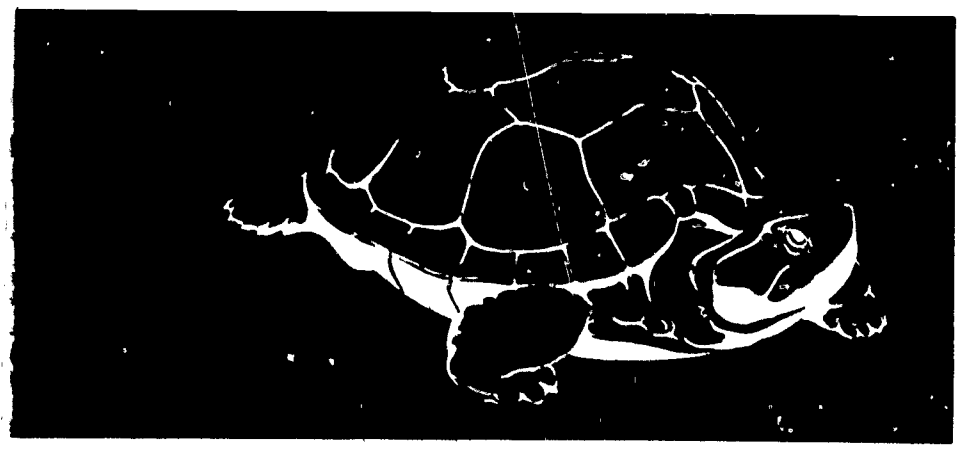

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William Golding's Novel: The Backward Look

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MUST a novel end in the reader's mind precisely when it ends on paper?

What do most readers — especially high school students — like best about "The Cop and The Anthem" or "The Gift of the Magi?" Chances are it is the surprise ending, the unexpected that we have learned to expect from O. Henry. We are delighted when he carefully builds a logical tale toward a seemingly predictable end only to cap it with an ironic twist in which, often, lies the very heart of the story.

But is it fair for a novelist suddenly to reveal new facts about his story — indeed a whole new perspective of it — and then abruptly to end the book, with the reader only beginning to realize some of its implications? When discussing William Golding's first four novels, many critics cried "fault" at such endings. In particular, James Gindin has categorized them as "gimmicks" which palliate the metaphors.[1] The boys' experience in *Lord of the Flies* becomes a childish game, he feels, because of inconsistent adult intervention; the viewpoint shift in *The Inheritors* breaks the unity and needlessly repeats the theme rather than adds perspective; the final revelation in *Pincher Martin* turns the struggle into a contrived, insignificant, self-parodying microcosm; and the institution scene in *Free Fall* magnifies the consequence of pride into near-parody, but also softens Sammy's guilt. Gindin, however, concedes that the "gimmicks" are not designed to cheat the reader; rather they are Golding's deliberate devices for showing that although the traditional Christian statements (behind the metaphors) about man and his world are still relevant, they no longer convey the whole picture. In other words, just when everything in the story looks hopeless and final, we are forced to take another look — a backward look — from a suddenly new perspective, and Gindin feels that Golding is thus dramatizing the fact that the old schemes do not contain the complete truth about contemporary experience.

But we can go beyond Gindin's explanations and ask what specific effect does this new perspective have on each of the novels? Is this really just a "gimmick" or an artistically sound device? In *Lord of the Flies*, the boys' rescue by the uncomprehending officer is a *deus ex machina* to Gindin; but its real effect is not one of escape but of forceful return to the real world of everyday experience and people. It does

[1] James Gindin, " 'Gimmick' and Metaphor in the Novels of William Golding," *Modern Fiction Studies*, VI (1960), 145-152.

not enable the fable to summarize the complex situation of man, but this ending does refocus and therefore reinforce all that precedes it. What had come to seem a natural, inevitable descent into evil savagery and self annihilation is suddenly shocking. Now superimposed on real life, the fable is even more frightening as the reader looks back on it. Ralph would be better off dead; rescued, he must live with the frustration that the knowledge for which he has paid dearly cannot bring him happiness. Through the dense officer, Golding says that this is the way man is, but knowing this does not do much good. Man must keep on this way, even though some are enlightened about his dark heart. Sanity does not save; it only heightens the hopelessness and makes happiness impossible.

In *The Inheritors,* Golding's dramatization of the conquering of Neanderthal man by the mentally superior Cro-Magnon man, the first eleven chapters are written entirely from the viewpoint of the gentle, bewildered, innocent Neanderthal. Free from evil himself, he does not comprehend what he witnesses of the "new men's" actions; and the reader, although fully understanding the savage rituals and the evils born of higher intelligence, yet feels a greater kinship with the ape-man. The final chapter (12) abruptly shifts to the viewpoint of the Cro-Magnon, the "men" who have successfully conquered the hairy "devils," with whom they ironically share many traits. For the reader there is not disrupted unity but a sudden recognition that throughout the book he has actually been seeing himself as others see him. No longer are those eleven chapters a story of simple good overcome by clearcut evil.

Pincher Martin is literally the detailed story of a shipwrecked man's struggle for survival on a barren rock and symbolically the story of his facing first himself and then God. As he relives (through flashback) the significant events in his life, the overpowering greed that is the core of his nature becomes apparent as central to his psychological struggle with God. At the very end of the book comes the revelation that the entire story has taken place during the few moments of his drowning. One of the men who finds Martin's body implies a comparison between the rotting leanto and the derelict corpse and then asks, "Would you say there was any — surviving? Or is that all?" [2] With those questions Golding legitimately extends to and challenges the rest of the world with what Martin has privately discovered in terms of his own personality. But the huge irony of the instantaneous hallucination comes dangerously close to exploding the whole story. Unless he has been incredibly alert, the reader must actually re-read the book, rather than think back through it, in order to pick up the hints (which are certainly there) of the mental confinement of the story. Even though this

[2] William Golding, *Pincher Martin* (New York: Capricorn Books, n.d.), p. 208.

surprise ending proves more unwieldy than the others, it does refocus the story and prevent its oversimplification; one might even see the whole, with all its complexities and obscurity, as a comment on man's utter self centeredness and on his insistence upon taking himself and his concepts (of time, of psychology) terribly seriously.

Free Fall, the Faustian story of Sammy Mountjoy's loss of the world of free choice, emergence into clear vision of himself, and subsequent mental pilgrimage seeking rebirth into the moral world, again reveals events not chronologically but in the order of their significance for the hero. As Sammy recalls his life, he is searching for man's responsibility in the face of non-communication between the rational and the spiritual worlds; and the torture cell in which he is briefly imprisoned is the scene of the pivotal experience of his life: in it he is forced to face his own central darkness and from it he emerges transfigured. Near the end of the book, he discovers that the girl whom he seduced and cast aside has become hopelessly insane, perhaps as a direct result of his actions. The *real* surprise ending, however, comes on the novel's last page, in the disclosure that Sammy's torture cell was really a broom closet with only a forgotten floorcloth on it. Ian Gregor and Mark Kinkead-Weeks feel that this ending shows the reader, but not the still unreconciled Sammy, that he was pitied and forgiven, and that forgiveness is the bridge between the two worlds.[3]

But that last page does much more. It is purposely not clear whether or not Sammy was thrown into a broom closet by accident. If he was, then his supreme self-torture is emphasized into irony. If he was thrown in by design, then it is an indication of Halde's complete understanding of Sammy's mind and it is the final sentence which is ironic: " 'The Herr Doctor does not know about peoples.' " The question opened up is as unanswerable as Sammy's question about whether his betrayal of Beatrice was the cause of her madness. In short, the last page adds the ironic richness that is typically Golding's.

Are these surprise endings really just tricks unworthy of the author or are they artistically sound techniques? To dismiss them as flaws simply because they require a reader to think beyond the books' physical endings is, of course, to reveal extreme mental laziness. "Surprise" alone is insufficient cause for complaint; and to the accusation "disunifying" we can answer that perhaps Golding is seeking a larger unity, one beyond the novel itself, and that we must expect a jolt when he moves from the limited world of the novel to the unlimited one of reality. Above all, we must not judge them solely as surprise endings

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[3] Ian Gregor and Mark Kinkead-Weekes, "The Strange Case of Mr. Golding and His Critics," *The Twentieth Century,* CLXVII (February, 1960), p. 125.

(William Golding's Novels, Continued from Page 13)

but in terms of what each does to or for the novel which precedes it.

It is interesting that in Golding's first four novels, two of the surprise endings operate solely on the reader *(Pincher Martin* and *The Inheritors),* whereas two revelations affect the main characters but on the last pages, so that we can only speculate about the total effects on the people *(Lord of the Flies* and *Free Fall).* However, in *Free Fall* the institution scene, near the end, is a "surprise" to which Sammy must adjust. And in *The Spire,* Golding's fifth novel, the sudden revelation comes three fourths of the way through the book, rather than at the end, and the main character's reactions to it dominate the remainder of the story. It would seem that Golding is beginning to work the "surprise" into the story earlier, as a pivot, and thus to make it more fully operative and integral by giving his characters a chance to react to and assimilate it.

The main value for students of a study such as Golding's "endings" is that hopefully it will lead to a discussion of the techniques and purpose of the novel and to the realization that one must not judge the success or excellence of a novel by the standard of what he was expecting in it or of what he would have done with it. Above all he must not be certain that he knows what was in the author's mind as well as the scope of his intention. As Professor Agassiz kept insisting that his student look at the fish, so must we insist that students read, interpret, and criticize *what is actually there.*