

## **Golding's *Pincher Martin*: Monomania Caused Moral Degradation in Modern Man**

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The twentieth century or the 'Modern Age', as it is better known, was an age of unprecedented social and economical changes. There was rapid progress in the fields of science and industry. Anxiety and interrogation were the hallmarks of the New Age. Ever since the mid-nineteenth century, ever since Darwin offered his theory of evolution in his *Origin of Species* (1859), man has struggled under the opposite pulls of science and religion, of reason and unreason, of belief and skepticism. The scientific explosion also exploded the unerring faith that man had in God and the inherent good of the human heart. It left behind fear and mistrust – fear, not only of the external dangers due to destruction caused by the two World Wars, but also of their reverberations deep inside man. An overwhelming sense of loss was rampant among all – loss of faith, of morality, of ideals and of identity. Scientific progress, which was expected to give man security for life and the much awaited peace of mind, instead, only wrought desperation. William Golding, one of the most remarkable novelists of the 20th century, studies the then society in contest with science and religion. The post war condition was so worse that his previous intention to major in science soon changed because it was science which played an important role in producing the devastating result of the World Wars. This very scenario caused him to use his pen to highlight the moral degradation of human being and undercurrent of negative impulses in them. Through his novels he always tried to portray the real picture of the 20th century men and their conditions.

Pre- world war Golding was of the view that science was capable of bettering and tidying-up the universe. He also believed that man, chosen creature of God, in spite of his Original Sin, which he had inherited from his First Parents, Adam and Eve, was basically good and was capable of being better. But serving as a lieutenant in the navy during the Second World War, Golding's collected experiences and views proved to be diametrically opposite to those which he had before the war. He saw man killing man without even a wince on his face. The reverberation of two World Wars left a shattering impact on the sensibility of young Golding. Throwing away his previously held ideas about man and his supreme qualities, Golding now set out to search for the cause behind the moral disease of which the 20th century man was suffering. With this intention, he started writing novels in the fable mode.

This paper, "Golding's *Pincher Martin* : Monomania caused Moral Degradation in Modern Man", deals with the influence of twentieth century social and political changes on the sensibility of the novelist. This also shows that Golding mourned the loss of innocence in the modern man. The novelist has depicted in this novel, *Pincher Martin* (1956), how man's monomania has destroyed and doomed him to damnation. It has bred in man such inhuman qualities as tyranny, hatred, pride, immorality and atheism. It has been the main and the biblical cause of man's fall. Golding has himself said about the protagonist of his third novel, "Pincher Martin is very much fallen – he's fallen more than most."<sup>1</sup>

*Pincher Martin* is the story of Christopher Hadley Martin, an officer in the Royal Navy during the Second World War, just like Golding himself was. He is the sole survivor of a British warship, the 'Wildebeeste', which is torpedoed in the Atlantic during the war. The first chapter shows Martin apparently drowning. He is struggling hard to rescue himself. After being buffeted around for some time by the strong Atlantic currents, it seems that Martin is able to kick off his sea-boots and is miraculously saved by his life belt. The waves throw him upon a rock and the rest of the novel, until the ending part, tells the reader of the marooned man's heroic combats with hunger, sickness and the

natural elements, and his determination to survive till he is rescued. On this very rock the protagonist manages to stay alive for six long days, challenges the forces of nature and reminisces about his past life. He is, as if, watching a video film of his foregone days.

Doing away with any logical coherence or order of any sorts, Martin picks up, one by one, the moments of the life he has lived so far. Martin remembers bits of conversations, names and faces he has been associated with and memories of various incidents. These mental flashbacks intersperse his efforts of survival on the rock, of which he was now the master and the monarch. Pincher Martin remembers his close friend, Nathaniel Walterson. Other names pop out of his weather-beaten consciousness out of nowhere. There are people whom Martin calls Mary Lovell, Pete and Helen. He realizes that he may be losing his sanity. He suffers occasional fits of hallucination. During one such bout he sees a hallucination of God and, curses and rejects it. Through the course of the novel, the main events of Martin's life till the day, he was torpedoed into the chilling Atlantic waters are highlighted by Golding. Martin remembers, besides Nathaniel, the beautiful and chaste Mary Lovell, to whom Martin is attracted sexually. He even makes a futile attempt to seduce her in his car and threatens to crash the vehicle if Mary did not give in to his wishes. But Mary rejects Martin's fleshy advances and chooses the good Nathaniel, Nat, as her husband instead. This fills Martin with extreme jealousy and hatred for his true friend, Nat. We come to know through the protagonist's memory-bouts that he had also been an amateur actor and had acted in quite a few Morality plays produced by Peter, his childhood friend and his wife Helen. We come to know through Martin's own confessions that he had had a sex affair with Helen too, and just because he wanted her to convince her husband Peter to give Martin the best parts in his plays. Thus, we can see that Christopher Martin had been a sexually corrupt man. He thinks of women as instruments of pleasure. As an indication of his overpowering and abnormal lust, we are informed that to Martin the phallus was synonymous to a sword, by which he had seared the chastity of two innocent women. Love was not known to Martin, lust was everything for him. It was a way of satisfying his insatiable monomania. We see later how Martin, unable to obtain Mary through persuasion, rapes her. In the moments before his ship is torpedoed we see Martin attempting to murder Nathaniel, who had also joined the Navy and was serving on the same ship, by swerving the ship in such a way as to throw Nat over-board.

It was Golding's opinion that whosoever exalted the self over God was completely severed from Divine grace. His negation of the heavenly power and acceptance of the powers of the persona lay as a hurdle in the path of his deliverance from the sins he had committed. It denied him transcendence and a safe passage into Heaven was a far-thought for him. It was believed in Christianity that no matter how much a man had sinned during his earthly life, but if he was willing to shun his egoism and surrender to the Will of God, he could expect pardon and could enter Heaven. Thus the Bible not only taught man how to live a moral life, but also how to prepare himself for a holy death. Man's life on earth was to be nothing but a preparation for a redeeming afterlife in Heaven. Golding, whose novels mirror his religious consciousness, propagates this idea of leading a virtuous life in hope of a blissful heaven. As a reminder to his protagonist, whose fall he monitors, Golding places such characters that may be called saintly vis-à-vis the evil ones. They show by contrast what advantages there are of leading a virtuous life. Although, more often than not, Golding shows them to die at the hands of the evil forces, even then it only helps to glorify their selfless acts more explicitly and makes us condemn their oppressors severely.

Such a saintly character in Pincher Martin, who acts as a foil to the selfishness of Martin, is his childhood friend Nathaniel Walterson, or Nat. The characters of Martin and Nat are as different from one another as are the antagonistic characters of personified Greed and Good in a morality play. This name, too, is symbolic of the function he fulfills in the novel. The meaning of his name is "gift of God". Nat is therefore God's gift to the erring Martin as a chance for his redemption and expiation. Again, Nathaniel suggests his biblical counterpart in the Gospel of St. John (John 1:47).

Nat is Golding's mouthpiece, and what he preaches to Martin actually forms the thematic crux of the novel. Nat says that a man should pass into death as a natural consequence of the process of living. Just as a man passes through the various stages of life like childhood, adulthood and old-age, he has to pass through death. In fact, birth and death are the two converging points of the circle of life. Death is, therefore, a birth into the blissful state of Heaven. But for this, man, who is a born sinner must lead a virtuous life. The quality of life led by majority of mortals is not up to the mark. They miserably fall short of the minimum pre-requisite for an after-life in Heaven. Nat says:

Take us as we are now and heaven would be sheer negation. Without form and void. You see? A sort of black lighting, destroying everything that we call life.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, Martin doesn't see and doesn't much care about Heaven. Even then, Nat keeps on warning Martin about the dangerous consequence of leading a wayward and self-centered life. No one can go on living like this forever, because all will be summoned to the presence of God on Judgement Day. Nat tells Martin that "...it is important for you personally to understand about heaven... about dying... because in only a few years you will be dead" (*PM* 71-72). To this good-natured warning of Nat, the ego-centric Martin shouts out, "I'm damned if I'll die" (*PM* 72).

Golding's aim is to resound Nat's warning to Martin for every human being, especially the egocentric and monomaniac modern man. Nat predicts Martin's after-life ordeal on the rock and the painful death experiences of all such Martin-like egoists, and warns all against "the sort of heaven we invent for ourselves after death if we aren't ready for the real one" (*PM* 183). All such men incur the wrath of God and are struck down by black lightning, just as Martin was.

When Martin was alive, he had rejected Nat's solution of a miserable life redeeming itself through a virtuous death. Even when he dies, he rejects God once more, this time seen as a hallucination, which takes the form of Nat. In the last few moments of his 'second' life, Martin faces a terrible storm. The Dwarf sculptured by Martin falls apart symbolizing that his forced egoistic existence could hold on no longer against Divine providence. Martin now stands face-to-face with the image of God, but even now he is possessed with self-love and does not want to shed it aside.

The protagonist of Golding's *Pincher Martin* is an anti-hero. He is exposed to the reader as a through and through repulsive character, a hopeless case on the Day of Judgement, a man without even a hint of redemption in him. He is monomania and egoism epitomized. And, as we come to know in the course of the novel, he loved to play the character of Greed in Peter's morality plays. Martin's determination to survive now appears to us to be his vile egoism rather than an Odysseus feat of heroism. And when we come to know, in the last chapter of the novel, that Martin had died within minutes of being shipwrecked, the whole story gathers a spooky, sinister air for a few moments. We feel, as if, we have been reading about a ghost, an evil spirit.

Martin is perhaps Golding's most grotesque study of the horrible human ego. The only character in English Literature, which may hope to surpass him in God-defying egocentricity, is perhaps Goethe's Faust, later portrayed by Marlowe as Dr. Faustus. Perched on his imaginary rock-island, Martin stands between death and judgement. His body has been dead for the past six days, but his mammoth ego refuses to accept the chaos of death as a natural ending of life. The cleavage of body and soul, matter and spirit is not enough to kill the consciousness of such an extreme egoist as Martin. Only God, in the form of black lightning, can put an end to him.

When fighting for the survival on the single rock in the Atlantic, we see how Martin is entrapped in a hell, which he has created for himself. Inside this vicious circle flashes the moments of his life. These flashes show Martin to be a cheater, a philanderer and a rapist. The flash of the spotlight shifts regularly to highlight incidents of Martin's life, which expose the vileness and treachery he has indulged in all his life. Their function is to unravel, in a gradual process, the actual character of the man through his acts. They tell us what kind of a man is struggling for his 'life' on the rock. This theatricality of the novel falls into place and seems absolutely appropriate, when we come to know during one of these flashbacks that Martin, before he joined the Royal Navy, was an actor. The roles that he played and the character that he portrayed all pointed out to his own nature. On one occasion during his theatre life, Martin is shown to be taking part in a Morality play produced by his friend Pete. He is to portray one of the Seven Deadly Sins. When he is offered a choice of the Sin he would like to portray most, he says he would not mind playing Sloth, Malice, Lechery or Envy. The producer, of course, is of the opinion that Martin could portray Pride so well that he could do it even "without a mask" (*PM* 119).

Thus Martin is found suitable for playing any of the seven worst flaws in human nature. But when it comes to the most appropriate one, Pete thinks that Martin is perfect for the role of Greed, because to him both are almost synonymous, "Chris-Greed. Greed-Chris. Know each other" (*PM* 119). Pete's mind subconsciously juxtaposes Greed and Martin when he blurts out inadvertently, "Think you can play Martin, Greed"! (*PM* 119). The description that Pete gives of the character of Greed seems to fit Martin perfectly:

This painted bastard here takes everything he can lay his hands on. Not food, Chris, that's far too simple. 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 flippers open and both hands out to grab. He's a cosmic case of the bugger who gets his penny and someone else's bun (*PM* 120).

Thus, *Pincher Martin* is the story of Christopher Hadley Martin, alias Pincher Martin, and narrates his apparent drowning followed by his after-death, purgatory-like experience on a rock and his final damnation in Hell. His survival is an attempt to preserve his personal identity. These points to Golding's thesis that love of the self and ego-centricity are the prime causes of evil in man, and help in bringing about his Fall. Martin clings to the rock of his own ego and plays God. Just as God took seven days for the act of Creation, Martin survives on his self-made heaven for almost seven days. The biblical metaphor only helps to highlight the colossal irony of the novel. Golding's own description of the character he creates goes thus:

Christopher Hadley Martin had no belief in anything but the importance of his own life, no God. Because he was created in the image of God he had a freedom of choice which he used to centre the world on himself. He did not believe in purgatory and therefore when he died it was not presented to him in overtly theological terms. The greed for life which had been the mainspring of his nature forced him to refuse the selfless act of dying. He continued to exist separately in a world composed of his own murderous nature. His drowned body is rolling in the Atlantic but the ravenous ego invents a rock for him to endure on. It is the memory of an aching tooth. Ostensibly and rationally he is a survivor from a torpedoed destroyer: but deep down he knows the truth. He is not fighting for bodily survival but for his continuing identity in face of what will smash 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.<sup>3</sup>

Through *Pincher Martin* Golding has shown how man uses his Free Will to bring about his own fall. In the few seconds between death and an after-life, Martin is given a chance to choose between damnation and salvation. And, of course, he makes the wrong choice like so many others of his species. Golding makes it quite clear that Pincher's struggle for survival is not intended to be seen as heroic, but rather as an exercise in egocentricity. He refuses to acknowledge the cosmic chaos of death simply because death is a form of submission to God, a letting-go of one's personality to merge with the Supreme Soul. His fall occurs because he refuses to learn "the technique of dying into Heaven" (*PM* 71). As Bernard F. Dick has pointed out:

For Martin, life was all that mattered; he lived on because, as Nat observed, he never learned how to die. The voracious ego could survive something as commonplace as drowning; it cannot, however, survive annihilation.<sup>4</sup>

Through *Pincher Martin* Golding shows how it is necessary for man to learn humility and purity of heart. He should use his Free Will to subdue his vain desires of the self and overcome his weaknesses. If he continues to indulge in monomania, then he will continue to live in fear of darkness. His existence will become a perpetual purgatory and a Hell, just as Martin's was. Instead of being a preparation for a blissful after-life in heaven, his life will be spent snarling at the possibility of transcendence in him.

Golding, like a true Christian, believed in the three things - Original Sin, Free Will, and The Fall. According to him man, the civilized animal, lives within the norms of civilized life under the given conditions of social and religious codes-of-conduct. But when this civilized animal is once released from the bounds of civilization and society, it takes little time for him to slip back to his original state and soon the primal instinct sprout-up within the consciousness of human mind and survival of the fittest becomes his 'modus-operandi'. In this situation he finds himself unable to resist the temptation of external world and disgraces from the paths of divinity to tread the forbidden path. This is when he negates the holy nature and commits sin. This digressing from the God or from the path of divinity brings pain, suffering and cursed life for him.

**REFERENCES**

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- [3] William Golding, "Pincher Martin", Radio Times, (March 21, 1958).8.
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**AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY**



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