



FROM BEING TO BECOMING: A STUDY OF WILLIAM GOLDING'S "FREE FALL"

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ABSTRACT

William Golding (1911-1993), an outstanding novelist of the modern era, has undoubtedly made his mark in the annals of English Literature. A master of fictional art, he was a poet at the beginning of his literary career. Later his love for novels bloomed and he became one of the most significant novelists of the post-war English literature.

He started writing during the period of post-World War II, a period when there was much turmoil, and faithlessness and treachery had ruined the fabric of human mind. There was an atmosphere of disillusion and disenchantment. Everybody seemed to be disturbed and anxious. That is why Golding's fiction is essentially concerned with the dilemma of the modern man, and in his novels, he has rendered, in detail, an analysis of the human conflicts which emanate from man's inability to understand himself, his environment, and his spiritual world.

The artist in William Golding makes him a keen observer of the world around him. He is a writer who questions every institution of society whether political, social, or moral so as to delve deeply into the malady that afflicts mankind. His works have multi-dimensional aspects which have been explored by different critics in terms of thematic, existential, and psychological stances.

He is a writer who deals with issues essentially existential. Seen from an existentialist's point of view, man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. He is fully responsible for the choices he makes and the course of action he takes in his life. He is not readymade at the beginning. He has to make himself and choose the conditions under which he has to live. This freedom of choice creates a conflict of Being and Becoming in his mind. As he is free to choose, he is always in danger of making a wrong choice. So, there is always a perennial conflict within him and his environment - a conflict that Golding has tried to depict through the protagonist of his novel *Free Fall*.

The novel, published in the year 1959, is narrated in the first person narrative, and is full of confessional tones. It presents two situations of innocence and experience, of Being and Becoming, of freedom and loss of freedom. We hear the protagonist Sammy Mountjoy asking questions, seeking to discover how he has become what he is, trying to explain how the innocence of his childhood has been destroyed by his consciously choosing will, exploring his past in search of a pattern of Becoming governed by choice. He is a painter writing a novel, and moves forward and backward in time to discover the point at which he fell from innocence into the mire of decay. His autobiographical recollections gradually track down the point of his fall, and he comes to the conclusion that he lost the freedom of childhood by the manner in which he treated Beatrice Ifor - seduced, degraded, and then forsook her. Following the advice of the headmaster of his school to "make the appropriate sacrifice" in order to get something, he decided to sacrifice everything in order to possess her "white, unseen body". So this decision, taken as he left school, marks Sammy's loss of freedom. It was his own

'free will' that made him "a stagnant pool" of evil and infection. He was "free" to choose which led to his "fall". A wrong use of freedom cost him his loss of freedom. To quote from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, he was,
"Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall" (PL 3.99).

Thus, the novel traces his mental voyage from Being to Becoming with emphasis on 'free will'. In short, Being gives way in this novel to the exploration, explanation, and discovery of Becoming.

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William Golding (1911-1993), generally known as the dean of his generation of novelists, has undoubtedly made an indelible mark in the annals of English Literature. An outstanding novelist of the modern era, and the Nobel Laureate of 1983, he occupies a significant position in the post-second World War literary scene of England. He was a poet at the beginning of his literary career, but soon his love for fiction bloomed, and within the short span of twenty years, he became a master of fictional art who enriched the literary scene by his notable contribution to the world of fiction.

When Golding started writing, there was an atmosphere of disillusion and disenchantment, and it was this that spurred him into writing and inspired most of his novels. The horrid experiences of the war shook his faith in humanity and left a deep scar on his psyche. The war had broken out when he was still struggling to establish himself. A sense of estrangement and meaninglessness prevailed everywhere. That is why Golding's fiction is essentially concerned with the dilemma of the modern man, and in his novels, he has rendered, in detail, an analysis of the human conflicts which emanate from man's inability to understand himself, his environment, and his spiritual roots.

He has written, in all, twelve novels, one novelette, and a few other works including some plays, essays, and a number of articles besides a book of poems which was published early in his writing career. His works have multi-dimensional aspects which have been explored by different critics in terms of thematic, existential, and psychological stances.

Even a casual glance at the critical studies of Golding's fiction makes explicit the multiplicity of his themes and his stress on the need of understanding human nature. He is a writer who deals with issues essentially existential. As we know, existentialism is a school of thought which deals

with several basic problems and conflicts concerning human life. Although it is a 20th century phenomenon, yet writers and philosophers have been dealing with several existential issues since times immemorial. To quote Dr. S. Radhakrishnan:
"Existentialism is a new name for an ancient method."¹

Trying to give a clear-cut definition of existentialism, Sartre in his book *Existentialism and Humanism*, observes:

"We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with, he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself... Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism."²

Seen from this point of view, man is fully responsible for the choices he makes and the course of action he takes in his life. This freedom of choice creates a conflict of Being and Becoming in his mind which is clearly discernible in the works of the writers of earlier times also. But the way Golding deals with this issue is unique.

He creates characters and situations in his novels which show his deep sense of agony about what has gone wrong with the world we live in. Through his protagonists, he describes the various kinds of conflicts that the human beings have to face in this wasteland of doubt and despair. The significance of his fiction lies in the fact that he emphasizes the reality of 'will' in human existence. According to him, man is not readymade at the beginning. He has to make himself and choose the conditions under which he has to live. As he is free to choose, he is always in danger of making a wrong choice. So, there is a perennial conflict within him,

and Golding has tried to depict this conflict through the protagonist of his novel *Free Fall*.

Free Fall, published in the year 1959, represents two situations of innocence and experience, of Being and Becoming, of freedom and loss of freedom. It is narrated in the first person by the protagonist Sammy Mountjoy. He is a painter writing a novel, and moves forward and backward in time to discover the point at which he fell from innocence into the mire of moral decay. The entire novel deals with his family, his friends, girl friends, and teachers.

As the novel is full of confessional tones, it helps the narrator, who is nobody else but the protagonist himself, to be introspective in his attempt towards self-definition. The conflict presented is between Sammy - innocent and free, and Sammy - the prisoner of what he has done. His fall is not only because of his actions, but also because time steers him towards a total loss of innocence. His autobiographical recollections gradually track down the point of his fall. He reiterates to himself,

"When did I lose my freedom? For once, I was free. I had power to choose... How did I lose my freedom?" (FF 5-6).

One thing is certain about Sammy: once he was innocent and then he lost his innocence. Obviously then, Golding in this novel is focusing on the Becoming aspect of life rather than Being. In the words of Vasant. A Shahane,

"One of the central concerns of *Free Fall*, as has been explored, is the ever-recurring dilemma between Sammy's sense of Being and awareness of Becoming. This is indeed one of the major thematic strands of *Free Fall* and Sammy's growth of the self, his mind's journey from Being to Becoming is most overpowering."³

During the course of the novel, we come to know that his fault is that of pursuing the dreams outside the range of what the world will allow. The novel takes place in Britain of contemporary times and can be best described as the portrait of the artist as a young man. The conjunction of 'free' and 'fall' in the title itself aptly dramatizes the paradoxical situation of the protagonist. 'Fall' becomes an inevitability in

view of Sammy's choice. He is 'free' without choice but as soon as he chooses, it becomes a 'fall'.

The novel presents Sammy, the artist hero, haunted by the memory of a time when he was innocent and free. He reviews the whole scenario of his life beginning from his childhood in the slums of Rotten Row, in order to trace the point of his fall. In spite of all the squalor of his life on the Rotten Row and its dirty surroundings, it remains Eden, and the days there of terrible and irresponsible innocence. His mother is all the world to him:

"Beyond her there is nothing, nothing". (FF 15)

Remembering his father, Sammy Says:

"My father was not a man... He had no head and no heart" (FF 14)

Father Wattswatt, the rector, is the one who adopts him after his mother's death. Living with Ma in a slum street in a provincial town called Rotten Row, existence for him was as innocent as it was dirty and free. The school time brought Evie who was august and unattainable. It never occurred to Sammy to challenge Evie's dominance over him because he was simply not aware of it. In the words of V.V. Subbarao,

"Ma and his girl friend, Evie, who were fantasists in their own characteristic way were his "twin towers" (FF 29). And his boyhood days were colourful, secure, and happy."⁴

Among the things that came after are Sammy's two friends, Johnny Spragg and Philip Arnold. He moved into their company at the boys' school. According to him, those were "days of terrible and irresponsible innocence" (FF 25). There was "no root of infection" (FF 78) here to spoil his paradisaical existence. Equally secure and happy are the days spent in the rectory with father Wattswatt, the rector who adopted him after his mother's death. So there is no "fall" during this period. His two school teachers Rowena Pringle and Nick Shales, who offer two polar alternatives to his choice of a system by which to live, also play an important role in his life. But here again, his weighty choice of a system is full of innocence and absolves him of the feelings of guilt and sin. Until now, he is "clear as spring water".

Then the question that arises and keeps on haunting him is that where did his fall begin. Trying to find the answer to this question, he realizes that it was only when evil desires caught him up and made him obsessed with sex and an urge to possess others, that the element of self awareness and consciousness crept in which consequently made him guilty, leading to his fall. In the words of V.V. Subbarao,

"As Sammy grows into a self-conscious adult, he becomes aware of his guilt within...Once he is aware of the guilt within, he determines upon a course of action that gives vent to it..."⁵

And this course of action is to pursue Beatrice Lfor and possess her sweet white body. He himself declares:

"Guilty am I; therefore wicked I will be...
Guilt comes before the crime and can cause it." (FF 232).

So, as he himself readily admits, he sexually exploits Beatrice, and then mercilessly jilts her although he regards her as sacred as a temple. Thus, he defiles Beatrice who is "the most mysterious and beautiful woman in the universe" (FF 84). He comes to the conclusion that he lost the freedom of childhood by the manner in which he treated Beatrice Lfor - seduced, degraded, and then forsook her.

But again, this is not the point our protagonist is looking for. The question that is conflicting his mind is to locate the moment he chose freely, the free decision made by him that led to his fall. Trying to trace his loss of freedom to sexual temptations, Sammy remembers his animated affair with Taffy, another girl-friend of his, the prettiest girl he had ever seen. He married her and they gave birth to a child. He now started avoiding and neglecting Beatrice and wanted to enjoy his life with Taffy.

But his sexual experiences have always been full of anxiety and misery. Although he has almost always fallen a prey to the torturing coils of sex, yet his sexual experiences are not exactly the point of his fall. He himself mentions the compulsions which had controlled him during these moments:

"...I could find no moment when I was free to do as I would. In all that lamentable story of seduction, I could not remember one moment when being what I was I could do other than I did" (FF 191).

It is only when he works as an artist during the World War II and becomes a P.O.W., and then is sent to one of the Nazi concentration camps, that he realizes his own real 'self' and gets the point where he fell from grace. He is put in a cell which is full of darkness. Here he meets Dr. Halde, the interrogator, who gives him the "capacity to see". It is he who gives him the "new mode of knowing" and helps him discover his "vital morality" by letting him torture himself. In the words of S.J. Boyd,

"The guilty Sammy is made to torture himself in the cell... Sammy is forced to explore the dark centre, the 'unfathomable and invisible darkness that sits at the centre of him'."⁶

Loneliness in the prison helps him retrace his past. As he pursues the origins of his flawed character, he comes to the conclusion that his first "fall" was "free". He realized the moments of his fall in his experiences of the concentration camp. Looking for these moments, he unfolds in his mind's eye the episode when he recalls the paradoxical advice given to him by the headmaster of his school:

"I'll tell you something which may be of value. I believe it to be true and powerful - therefore dangerous. If you want something enough, you can always get it provided you are willing to make the appropriate sacrifice. Something, anything. But what you get is never quite what you thought; and sooner or later the sacrifice is always regretted." (FF 235).

Sammy now understands clearly where and when he lost his freedom. This advice, "true and powerful - therefore dangerous", opened the world to him, and helped him make his choice. So, he localizes his loss of freedom in his decision to possess the "white, unseen body of Beatrice Lfor" (FF 235) at whatever cost. He was ready to "make the appropriate sacrifice" i.e. to sacrifice everything in order to gain her.

So this decision, taken as he left school, marks Sammy's loss of freedom. He comes to the conclusion that this is the point of his fall. Earlier he had declared,

"I am looking for the beginning of responsibility, the beginning of darkness, the point where I began" (FF 47).

And now, he has found the point where the darkness began.

He comes out of the cell as a resurrected man with a vision which is quite hopeful. Regaining his lost vision and realizing the sanctity of the individual, he goes to see Beatrice Lfor; but it is too late. She has suffered a mental breakdown and is living in a sanatorium, forlorn and insane. The harm done to her is irreparable, and the novel ends with Sammy's visit to the asylum.

Thus, Sammy's mental voyage helps him trace the cause of his fall which lay not in his environment, but in his own self. It was his own free will that made him "a stagnant pool" of evil and infection. He was "free" to choose which led to his "fall". So, a wrong use of freedom cost him his loss of freedom.

To sum up, we can quote from Milton's *Paradise Lost* and say that he was,
"Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall". (PL 3.99)

Thus, the novel traces his mental voyage from Being to Becoming with emphasis on 'free will'. In short, Being gives way in this novel to the exploration, explanation, and discovery of Becoming.

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Note: All textual references in this paper pertain to: William Golding, *Free Fall* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959).