

## An Analysis of the Aesthetic Value in *Darkness Visible*

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**Abstract:** *Darkness Visible*, one of William Golding's masterpieces, has been highly appreciated by people. This paper is to probe into the aesthetic value of the novel from the aspects of thought-provoking symbol, effective contrast and implicit ending in order to give the readers a fairly objective annotation to the aesthetic value.

### 1. Introduction about William Golding and *Darkness Visible*

William Golding is an outstanding writer in English literature in the latter half of the twentieth century. As a creative man, William Golding sees himself as a writer who is constantly changing and responding to his universe. He depicts in many different ways the anguish of modern humanity as it gropes for meaning and redemption in a world. William Golding is a theological novelist. His main thematic material focuses on particular theological concerns, in particular sin and guilt, innocence and its loss, individual responsibility and the possibility of atonement for mistakes made, and the need for spiritual revelation. Golding has accepted the nineteenth century novel tradition but has modified it extensively. Each novel represents a fresh attempt for him to modernize the language and the central consciousness of that tradition. Sometimes he has pushed it beyond the limits of orthodox mimetic realism and hence some of his novels have been called fables, allegories, or myths. In general, however, his central thrust is to restate the conflict between individuals and their society in contemporary terms.

In the year 1979, after a lay-off of 12 years, Golding published his first novel after *Pincher Martin*---*Darkness Visible*. With its wide range of allusions and highly complex symbolism, this novel is considered as Golding's most abstruse work. And Golding's refusal to talk about it added to its mystery. *Darkness Visible* is composed of three parts. The central character of Part One is a child of unknown parentage discovered walking naked down on East London Street during the Blitz. The bombardment has disfigured him; the left side of his face is so badly burned that he looks two-toned. Nameless, the boy is called Matthew Septimus, Matthew the Seventh; his surname, which is variously misspelled, is Windrove. Matty begins his journey into a where he is half human and half spirit. His sole consolation is the Bible, portions of which he commits to memory. After a sojourn in Australia, he returns to the mythical Greenfield in England where he had briefly attended school until his implication in a fellow student's death caused him to be expelled.

Matty's book, which covers the period from 1940 to 1967, ends just as he served the Stanhope twins, Sophy and Toni, in a Greenfield bookstore. Sophy, the eponymous character of Part Two, is Matty's converse. Highly intelligent but without any intellectual discipline, a buyer of books who shows no evidence of ever having read them, Sophy pursues a meaningless existence that reflects her belief in a meaningless universe. Ultimately, she evolves into a nihilist and then, with the aid of her hoodlum lover into a terrorist. She hatches to kidnap the son of an oil sheik from the school where Matty works as a hangman backfire. Matty is burned to death in the process—his fate impinging on hers, and hers on his. Since, as the title of the third part states, “one is one.

### 2. The Aesthetic Value in *Darkness Visible*

As one of the famous writers in the literary world, William Golding is famous for his application of aesthetic techniques between lines. By using applying some useful artistic techniques, Golding not only makes his novels truly reflect the real life, but also touch people's aesthetic sentiments and

enlighten people's thinking deeply. *Darkness Visible* is interpreted as religious allegories. In this chapter, we will discuss the artistic techniques respectively.

## 2.1 Thought-provoking Symbols

Golding is skilled at applying symbols in his novels. He once said that he knew about symbols without knowing what he knew; that he had never heard of levels of meaning but that he experienced them (Golding, 74). In none of his previous books is the evidence of this clearer than in *Darkness Visible*. The great and obvious symbol in this novel is the fire. The fire itself is not unexpected as it prefigures on more than one occasion.

In the beginning London Blitz scene, the comparison between the infernal city and a burning bush immediately draws our attention.

The limits of the this bush were clouds of tenuous smoke that were lit from below until they too seemed made of fire. The heart of the bush, where little streets had been, was of a more lambent colour. It shivered constantly but with an occasional diminution or augmentation of brightness as wall collapsed or roofs caved in (Golding, 9).

The boy Matty, who so miraculously walks from the fire in war-time London, is no ordinary boy. The first response of the fireman is incredulity, not only because small children do not normally walk out of fires that are "melting lead and distorting iron" (10), but because children had no reason to be there at all, being the first to be evacuated from the area. And the boy Matty, in spite of all the horrible burns he has suffered down one side of his body, is neither running nor apparently afraid, but walking with a "kind of ritual gait" (14). This fire brings Matty into the picture that he is wounded by the air-raid. And, indeed, on the very first page, one finds that the fire which is consuming the city is likened to a "burning bush" suggests that the fire itself might well be a refining agent as well as a destructive one. Matty who, with his moral blindness like the fire, is to bring order to destruction, but who also cleanses people's heart of evil.

Later, in Australia, when Matty symbolically plays with his matches and twigs, he unintentionally starts a big fire. In his adventures in Australia, one main lesson Matty learns is that he should build a tower of matchboxes and then adding, after seven days, twigs and a clay pot. Where the ceremonies differ is that Matty's do not promote rain, but fire, and he is called before the authorities to answer charges of creating a public nuisance by setting fire to a large patch of wasteland. The last fire takes him away. Early in the novel, Matty is viewed as a fireball, a human torch set ablaze from the incendiary air attack. Later in the novel, to sacrifice himself for the sake of the Arab schoolboy, he voluntarily seizes the bomb and again becomes a ball of fire. His story is contained within these two fires which determine his fate. However, there is a difference in the symbolic value of the two fires: whereas the fire stands for desire and vice, the second is the fire of purification. Matty's self-imposed abstinences lead him to a final purification in death.

## 2.2 Effective Contrasts

William Golding is skilled at making and applying various contrasts. In his novels, the technique of contrasts is widely and ingeniously used, which complements with each other while opposing to each other. In Golding's novel, we can see various contrasts, such as the contrast between the righteous and the evil, the contrast between beauty and ugliness, etc.

In *Darkness Visible*, the conflict and the contrast between the good and the evil are obvious. Absolute good and absolute evil are presented before our astonished eyes, and the extremities of behavior of which men are capable never stop striking our sensibility.

Matty, the protagonist of *Darkness Visible*, emerges miraculously from a man-made inferno, or as Golding puts it "the sheer agony of a burning city" (20). During his school days, his prime innocence is cruelly thwarted by the headmaster Mr. Pedigree fallen for his sexual inclinations. Matty devotes himself doggedly to the study of Christian Bible during his self-imposed exile in Australia. He keeps constant watch against sensual temptations, and becomes a prophet warning against the prospect of using atomic bombs. He returns England a "charismatic figure, exerting a strange power over the men who earlier in his life had ignored or rejected him" (21). And finally, he sacrifices his life to save the child whom Sophy has plotted to kidnap and thus fulfilled his destiny.

The “Sophy” section is to show the principle in reverse. Sophy, beautiful, clever girl, whose manner of affected innocence conceals a tortured impulse to evil. Unable to bring her passionate desire for “weirdness” under bridle, she lapses into unredeemable depravation. “She is seized with an irresistible desire to get rid of her virginity. Her propensity to violence is revealed when she hurls a stone at a dabchick and kills it. Her sadism is expressed in sexuality. She could experience orgasm only when she drove a penknife into the young man who made love to her” (22). And in her sheer desire for sadism, she plots to kidnap a child with her two lovers, which coats Matty his life. Sophy is a figure of evil whose progression from childhood to maturity is as clearly charted as Matty’s, and whose understanding of the process of darkness is as long maturing as Matty’s understanding of fire and light.

### 2.3 Implicit Endings

By the end of *Darkness Visible*, each of the major characters has earned his retribution or reward. For the twins and their accomplice, the penalty is prison; for Sim Godchild, who relies upon reason instead of intuition, the reward is insight into his limitations; for Mr. Pedigree, the gift is the understanding through love; for Matty, the result is a destiny that leads to sainthood. As for the Arab child who was saved from destruction. William Golding leaves the question of divine intervention into human history deliberately unresolved.

From the ending we can understand that *Darkness Visible* can be profitably “regarded as the climax of Golding’s attempts to create a religious novel for our times” (Broich 317). In this novel, the forces of light and darkness are once more found to be counterpoised. In one sphere there is Matty, literal, Bible-saturated and solitary, he believes himself to be Elijah, servant of God. In the other sphere sits Sophy, nihilistic, disloyal, treacherous, shares with Matty a sense of spiritual difference. Matty and Sophy embody the dualism that informs Golding’s fiction as the conflict between the artistic or religious view of life is often contrasted with the scientific or rationalist view. Matty, is obviously associated with religion, and the other, Sophy, is not religious, she realizes that something is terribly wrong with society. The novel ends with the park keeper’s thoughts that the aged pederast, whom he sees slumped on the bench, will never be cured. The final scene of the novel is indeterminate. Though the ending of the novel is ambiguous, it is clear that Golding values the religious over that scientific throughout the text. *Darkness Visible* explores the common theme of his major fiction: mankind’s essential depravity and the human need, as a consequence of innate sin or guilt, to accept the grace of Christian redemption. The moral parable of the book is clear enough: transcendent grace is revealed darkly in the world of evil.

### 3. Conclusion

William Golding is best known for his theme of the struggle between good and evil and for symbolism that interpretations on many levels. *Darkness Visible* deepens and rises a higher lever to present the complex and conflicting human nature. As to the aesthetic value, the uniqueness in the *Darkness Visible* exists in the writer’s extensive application of thought-provoking symbol, effective contrast and implicit ending. The symbol used in this novel has not only helped readers to see the essence of the society, but also add to the aesthetic effects. His application of sharp contrast not only helps create a great impact upon readers, but also urges the readers to ponder over the serious social problems. The implicit ending leaves vast space for readers’ imagination and gives artistic appeal to them. This ending helps us understand the religious belief of William Golding.

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