Allusions and Metaphors in *Rites of Passage* by William Golding

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ABSTRACT

     This paper is mainly concerned with the identification of the allusions and metaphors in "Rites of Passage", the first volume of "To the Ends of the Earth" trilogy by the English novelist William Golding, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1983 for his parables of the human condition. Golding's use of symbolism plays an important role in the understanding of his novels and being aware of the metaphorical nature of his thematic framework encourages the reader to refine upon the abstract implications which lie behind the concrete realities of his plots. Thus, one of the objectives of this study is the revelation of the metaphors in "Rites of Passage" along with the analysis of main thematic structure. Allusions, on the other hand, stands as another point of discussion and examination essential to the discovery of the path that will help us get into the mind of the writer. Nevertheless, the ultimate aim of this study is not only to portray the use of allusions and metaphors in "Rites of Passage" but also provide a sample analysis demonstrating the function of these narrative devices in the construction and perception of a literary work of art.

     Key Words: *criticism, allusion, metaphor, rites, epistolary, microcosm*

William Golding'in "Rites of Passage" Romanındaki Gönderme ve Eğretilemelere Genel Bir Bakış

ÖZET

     Bu makale, insan doğasıyla ilgili çalışmalarından dolayı 1983 yılında Nobel Ödülü kazanmış olan İngiliz yazar William Golding'in "To the Ends of the Earth" üçlemesinin ilki olan "Rites of Passage" romanındaki göndermeler ve eğretilemelerin incelemesini içermektedir.Golding'in eserlerinde sembolizmi nasıl kullandığının anlaşılması ve çizdiği izleksel çerçevenin eğretilemeli doğasının bilincinde olmak okuyucuyu yazar tarafından yaratılan görünür gerçekliğin ardında yatan unsurları keşfetmeye iter. Bu yüzden, bu çalışmanın amaçlarından biri, ana izleksel yapının incelemesinin yanısıra, "Rites of Passage" romanındaki eğretilemelerin ortaya konmasıdır. Öte yandan, göndermeler yazarın zihnine giden yolun keşfinde okuyucuya eşlik eden diğer bir tartışma ve inceleme konusu olarak ele alınmaktadır.Tüm bunların ötesinde çalışmanın nihai amacı sadece "Rites of Passage" da yer alan gönderme ve eğretilemelerin analizi değil ayrıca bu analatısal araçların edebi bir eserin oluşturulması ve algılanmasındaki işlevini ortaya koyan bir analiz modeli sunmaktır.

     Anahtar Kelimeler: *eleştiri, gönderme, eğretileme,*

     The critic casts a critical eye upon books until he can come up with aspects that would be of some use for the understanding and revelation of the points lying beneath narrative veils. Criticism is primarily bound with the range of knowledge and perception of the critic himself. In order to reach those deep recesses where the allusions, metaphors and sophisticated narrative devices lie, the critical eye should be wide awake even more than the author of the novel, particularly if the literary work of art is a demanding one on the part of the reader,

whose appreciation will be guided by the critic. By reading between the lines the critic tries to uncover the invisible to the naked eye. In this respect, his responsibility sometimes far outweighs the responsibility of the writer, whose utilization of narrative devices is the path towards the meaning beyond the visible, waiting to be discovered.

Allusions and metaphors, or references and symbols, are the heart beats of the writer, which constitute either the core of his fictional world or the means that promise to take you to the core and thereby provide a better understanding, an insight beyond the surface reality. A literary work of art, mainly through the use of allusions and metaphors, can sometimes tell us more than the intended meaning.

The more able and equipped an author is, the harder it gets for the critic to go through his work as is the case in William Golding's *Rites of Passage* (1980), which brought him Britain's highest literary award, *The Booker McConnell Prize* in 1981, only a year after its publication. It is the first volume of the famous Sea Trilogy, *To the Ends of the Earth* (1991), a collection of three previously and individually published novels; *Rites of Passage* (1980), *Close Quarters* (1987), and *Fire Down Below* (1989). The overall symbolic nature of *Rites of Passage*, its sophisticated narrative devices and countless allusions, make the first volume, just like its sequels, a daring venture.

Golding is believed to be a pessimist throughout his whole career as a novelist. Thus, much of the critical consideration devoted to his works tends to focus on the darker side of the scale. However, this is not surprising at all, especially when we remember his accepting the theology of original sin and fallen man in *Fable*, a 1962 lecture at the University of California in Los Angeles (1966:88). Although Golding has never rested on a single approach throughout much of his writing, the primacy of evil has always overshadowed his other thematic intentions and made itself seen as his main thesis, which has inevitably been the major focus of critical assessment. As he declares right at the beginning of his *Nobel Lecture*, this attitude towards his fiction seems to be a matter of concern for Golding: "Twenty-five years ago I accepted the label 'pessimist' thoughtlessly without realising that it was going to be tied to my tail ..."(1983:1). Golding holds that evil is inherent in the human mind itself and the result is that man is a fallen creature. In his essay, *On The Crest of The Wave*, he declares that "I am by nature an optimist but a defective logic – or a logic which I sometimes hope desperately is defective – makes a pessimist of me"(1966:126). This belief is in fact the basic motif behind his recurring theme, which has developed as a result of the events he witnessed during World War II. However, the building blocks of the circumstances that he creates to set the scene to demonstrate his major philosophy are embedded in the allusions and metaphors, the identification of which are essential for the correct interpretation of *Rites of Passage* as well as his other works of fiction.

The voyage to the ends of the earth begins with *Rites of Passage*, the first volume of the sea trilogy. We are aboard a converted British warship, *Britannia*,

110

whose passangers are on their way from the south of England to the Antipodes, or Australia as it is called today. The time is the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the Napoleonic era of the 1815s. Golding himself has specified the date of his voyage at round about 1812 or 1813 (Baker, 1982:162). *Rites of Passage* is an epistolary novel, whose author is its hero. Edmund FitzHenry Talbot, both the first person narrator and the protagonist of the novel, reports the events on board the ship, *Britannia*, through the journal he keeps for his godfather, an unnamed but politically influential nobleman who the reader never encounters throughout all the three books of the trilogy; yet, he stands as the person who has secured the administrative post for Talbot in New South Wales, a British colony in the South Pacific.

Golding has constructed *Rites of Passage* as a journal, and within Talbot's journal the reader is presented with Colley's journal-like letter written to his sister. This technique enables Golding to use two first person narratives, and the reader is introduced to the same events in the novel through two different points of view. When the reader settles down with Talbot to read Colley's letter, it is as if the novel starts again, but this time from a totally different mode of perception. In this respect, the novel resembles James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1986), which begins once with 'Telemachus' and again with 'Calypso', and ends once with Bloom falling asleep in 'Ithaca' and again with Molly's reverie in 'Penelope'. However, we have to wait almost till the end of the novel to learn what there is in Colley's letter, which is one of the most characteristic devices of Golding's fiction: the plausible delay of significant information. Up to that point, we are bound with Talbot's complacent view of events. After reading Colley's letter, we realize that there have been missing parts in the events narrated by Talbot, and we fill in the gaps; in other words, we discover the missing parts of the story, so the real ordered plot is built in the minds of the readers. Colley's account of the voyage and the strange rites into which he is initiated appear in a very different light, especially, the realities behind the central mystery of the book – the event in the fo'castle, which results in Colley's dying of shame – is understood only after reading Colley's letter to his sister towards the end of the novel.

The rigidity of the British class system has always been a great concern for Golding, who calls it "the classic disease of society in this country" (Baker, 1982:136). The ship's surface is, in fact, a model of this hierarchically structured society, a microcosm, manifestly Britain in miniature. The passengers are divided into those with cabins, referred to as ladies and gentleman who live in the stern of the ship, and the common people, referred to as the emigrants, who are placed at the front end of the ship with the sailors. The boundary dividing these two groups of people is marked with a white line across the deck, which is strictly forbidden to cross. The quarterdeck, on the other hand, belongs to the captain and the officers. It is not a coincidence that Golding gave his ship the name *Britannia*, which is a representation of the class-ridden structure of British society in a different setting. *Britannia* stands as a separate world with its own rules, laws and

reality. Mr Colley likens the vessel to a little universe: "It is as if I think of her as a separate world, a universe in little in which we must pass our lives and receive our reward or punishment" (Golding, 1980:191). A feeling which is shared by Talbot as well when he says for the ship that "it is a microcosm of human life divorced from reality where time has its own dimension" (Golding, 1980:129). Talbot's view of their vessel as a world of its own leads him to a preoccupation with theatrical metaphors throughout the novel. He views the ship as a theatre saying "I tried to cut a scene or two for our floating theatre" (Golding, 1980:145). The scenes in his journal and his reactions are often reflected with reference to some theatrical terms. For example, he describes Zenobia as "an habituée of the theatre if not a performer there" (Golding, 1980:58); for the people who witnessed Colley's disgrace he notes "the audience was well enough satisfied" (Golding, 1980:116-18); he labels the meal in Captain Anderson's cabin a "farce" (Golding, 1980:166) caused by drunken Brocklebank, and he describes the scene at the end of Colley's funeral -as his body is sent deep down in the ocean- having "recourse to Shakespeare!" (Golding, 1980:262-63). In fact, he thinks that the whole journal, unintentionally, "turned to the record of a drama – Colley's drama" (Golding, 1980:264). Golding himself admitted the intensive use of theatrical metaphors in the novel (Baker, 1982:161): "It had to be theatrical because (Colley) has to make an exhibition of himself and therefore the ship had to be turned into a theatre in which he could do it." Don Crompton maintains that the plot of the novel is composed of a three-act division when the events are arranged in their order of occurance, that is, the chronological sequence (1985:132): Act one is the presentation of the general situation aboard the ship and the appearance of conflict mainly between Talbot and Colley as the representatives of State and Church and between Colley and the rest of the pagan ship led by Captain Anderson, who has a hatred for men of the cloth. Act two is the part where the fatal consequences of this rivalry appear, and act three is the final stage in which everything that has taken place is revealed. A theatrical manifestation or the microcosmic presentation of the real world, whatever we call it, Golding has created the perfect setting to introduce his main theme, 'fall', along with the pervasive social discrimination and the self discovery on the part of his narrator.

The news of Colley's death marks the narrative climax of the novel. At this point, *Rites of Passage* shows a strong resemblance to Elizabeth Longford's *Life of Wellington* (1969), specifically with an incident recorded in Scawen Blunt's diaries taking place in 1797: With the insistence of William Hickey, Mr Scawen, a young man named Blunt, was allowed to take part in the expedition to Manila as chaplain. They set sail in August. However, after only three days at sea, the clergy got drunk and rushed out of his cabin stark naked. After his great shame, he shut himself up in his cabin and refused to eat or speak, just like Colley's case in *Rites of Passage*: "Colonel Wesley's broad-minded and kindly attempts to reconcile Mr Blunt to himself were not successful. In ten days he forced himself to die of contrition" (Longford, 1969:51). This is exactly what happens to Colley after his disgrace. Summers and Talbot's effort to stop Colley's

suicide gets unsuccessful and the parson dies of his great shame. Golding remarks that, this was "so horrific that I had to invent human circumstances to make us understand how a man could die of shame" (Baker, 1982:155).

In his critical study of *Rites of Passage*, Don Crompton establishes a resemblance between the French anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep's description of rites of passage, which he analyzes in three main stages; separation, transition and incorporation (1985:153). The first phase, separation, is the departure of both Talbot and Colley from their immediate environment: Talbot leaves his parents and brothers and Colley his sister behind as well as their other social connections. The first step in the transition phase is their struggle to get used to the life aboard the ship in physical terms, and the next step is to identify their status in the new social pyramid. The final and the most important stage of this process is incorporation, which is mainly concerned with the acceptance into a new society. Talbot, by using and abusing his priviliges, completes his incorporation successfully, whereas Colley becomes unsuccessful due to his failure to recognize and perform the rites of the new society. The scene that best demonstrates the difference between the degree of their achievement is Talbot's having dinner at the captain's table while Colley dies, isolated and rejected in his cabin. In the course of the novel, Colley undergoes two different acts of incorporation: The first one is the crossing-the-line ceremony, in which he becomes an object of scorn and which results in his being baptised not in holy water but in human ordure. The next one appears as Colley's attempt at incorporation with the people of the ship, which turns into the fatal act of fellatio. Colley travels from life to death in his own personal rite of passage. Talbot, on the other hand, with the impact of the parson's death, realizes his defects, comes to know himself and experiences a self-evolution for which, at first, he seemed to lack the potential.

Rites of Passage utilizes both historical and literary sources as a point of departure including its narrative style, the epistolary mode, which was one of the most commonly used types of the eighteenth century fiction. Over a thousand epistolary novels are estimated to have been written in the Augustan Age (Rogers, 1978:68). One of these novels, Smollett's *Humphry Clinker* (1771), is similar to *Rites of Passage* not only in terms of epistolary technique but also in its narration through letters from different points of view. On the other hand, as noted before, the main thematic structure of the novel is built around an incident narrated in Scawen Blunt's *My Diaries: Being a Personal Narrative of Events* 1884-1914 (1919-1920) and Elizabeth Longford's *Life of Wellington* (1969).

In addition to the historical source, which the novel is based on, Colley's death in *Rites of Passage* resembles other strange deaths in literature and in life which Golding accepts having been attracted by: "When you read nineteenth century life and literature, it seems quite remarkable how many people suddenly died: Arthur Hallam for instance lay down on a couch and just died. I don't understand it, but it is something that deeply interested me, and it seems to have occured more often in the nineteenth century than at any other time" (Haffenden, 1985:100).

Bernard F. Dick, in his critical study of *Rites of Passage*, gives further examples of these unexplainable deaths (1987:133-34): Lucy in Walter Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819), Fiers in Anton Checkov's *The Cherry Orchard* (1904), Elsa in Robert Wagner's *Lohengrin* (Opera/1850), Elizabeth in *Tannhuser* (Opera/1845), Isolde in *Tristan and Isolde* (Opera/1865), and Clarissa in Richardson's novel of the same name. Among these, the most striking similarity exists between the deaths of Clarissa in Richardson's novel and that of Colley's in *Rites of Passage*.

Another period perspective is hidden in the double narrative achieved through Talbot's journal on the one hand and Colley's letter on the other. Besides the revelation provided by the use of these two different points of view, they involve the demonstration of the contrasting views of the values between Neoclassicism and Romanticism. As noted by many critics, Talbot stands for the type that represents the characteristics of the Augustan Age. In his study, Boyd describes him as "a classist young man classically educated" (1988:158). His journal is full of literary references to works, authors and mythological figures such as Martial, Theocritus, Servius, Lucullus, Pan, Circe, the Aeneid, Ploto and Aristotle. Among these Aristotle is the most frequently mentioned author, mainly in relation to Talbot's agreement with his doctrines. For instance, his theory of the orders of society is referred to by Talbot to support his view of Colley and to portray his ridiculous appearance and obsequious manners, which he thinks shows the parson's low origins: "Colley was a living proof of old Aristotle's dictum. There is after all an order which the men belong by nature though some mistaken quirk of patronage has elevated him beyond it" (Golding, 1980:67).

Talbot, whose bookshelf contains works such as *Moll Flanders*, *Gil Blas* and *Hervey's Meditations*, frequently refers to eighteenth century authors including Samuel Richardson, Tobias Smollett, Laurence Sterne, Samuel Johnson, Henry Fielding and Oliver Goldsmith. It can also be easily recognized that Golding makes use of the literary techniques existing in both the works of Richardson and Sterne. Digressions, instant beginnings and ends as well as unusual chapter headings are the general characteristics shared by Sterne's *Tristham Shandy* (1760) and Talbot's journal (Blasco, 1994:409). Talbot mentions the works of these authors particularly when he encounters difficulties in writing his journal. When he realizes that it is impossible to give a full account of the events in his journal, he remembers Richardson's work: "I begin to understand the limitations of such a journal as I have time to keep. I no longer credit mistress Pamela's piestic accounts of every shift in her calculated resistance to the advances of her master! (Golding, 1980:28)" Later in the novel, he also refers to Sterne as he feels in pains due to his temporary failure in writing longer chapters: "My entries are becoming short as some of Mr Sterne's chapters" (Golding, 1980:72).

As opposed to the Neoclassical view of Talbot, Colley appears to be shaped by the values of Romanticism. Unlike Talbot, he depicts the events in his journal without reference to class or manners. His letter is more like the record of

an emotional outlook seeing the whole voyage as a spiritual one and describing nature with a sense of feeling which Talbot's journal lacks except when it disturbs him. This marked contrast reminds us of the divergence that was experienced in England in the second half of the eighteenth century. It was a time when official culture, the institutions, favoured Enlightenment and rationalism while many people were caught by the attraction of the irrational and the cult of sensibility proved by the success of Gothic fiction, Graveyard Poetry and Richardson's novels (Blasco, 1994:410). In Colley's letter, as well as allusions to the classics and a quotation from the bible, there are specific citations of Sophocles, Hercules, Leviathan, and the legend of Talos. On the other hand, in his library there is Richard Baxter's *Saints' Everlasting Rest* (1650), a title which sounds like describing Colley's death in opposite terms, restless and unsaintly.

Another significant point of reference in the novel appears when Colley exclaims, "Joy! Joy! Joy!" (Golding, 1980:117), a quotation from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Dejection: An Ode* (1802), echoed with the satisfaction of fulfilling his forbidden sexual desire followed by feelings of despair and shame which, in fact, marks the major difference between Colley and Coleridge's 'joy' as the latter is free from the defects of the former.

Rime of the Ancient Mariner (1789) is another work of Coleridge's poetry, first referred to by Zenobia: "Alone, alone / All, all alone, / Alone on a wide, wide sea" (Golding, 1980:59). Just like the Ancient Mariner, Colley, excluded from the whole society of the ship, feels lonely: "I was alone! Yes, in that vast ship with her numberless souls I was alone ..." (Golding, 1980:233-34). Despite the similarities between the sufferings of Colley and the Mariner, the difference is that Colley's isolation results in his spiritual death followed by the actual while the Mariner's gives way to his spiritual rebirth.

Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* (1924) is the romantic novel which seems to be the source of Golding's character Billy Rogers, a handsome foretopman, who takes part in the final scene of Colley's disgrace. Nevertheless, Golding did not accept any such similarities. In an interview with Herbert Mitgang, he declared that "Nothing in common to Budd at all nothing. No possible similarity ever occured to me. Anyway, this chap in my novel doesn't get hanged" (1980:1). In a later interview with James Baker, he added, "I thought this Billy has absolutely nothing in common with the other Billy. He is diametrically opposite of innocence in every conceivable way" (1982:162). Yet, when Baker asked him if he had that contrast in mind, Golding admits he did. In fact, Billy Rogers is an ironic and deliberate inversion of Melville's Billy Budd, who stands for innocence against the corruption displayed by Golding's figure. On the other hand, like *Rites of Passage*, Billy Budd takes an historical event as its point of departure, the Somers mutiny case, which occured in the American Navy in 1842. It is also notable that the date and setting of Herman Melville's story, which took place in the British Navy in 1797, the period of Napoleonic wars, bear a strong resemblance to *Rites of Passage*.

Another nineteenth century novel that is believed to have been alluded in

115

Rites of Passage is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902). Crompton, in his study of the novel, has figured out that Talbot's decision to change Colley's letter with one of his own recalls that of Marlow's, who also hides the truth from Kurtz's fiance (1985:134). Although Golding has never accepted the influence of Conrad on his fiction, Boyd has identified another paralelism of *Rites of Passage* with Conrad's *Shadow Line* (1917) in terms of the passage from youth to maturity (1988:160), a voyage of the human nature or the rites out of their literal sense, experienced by both of the protagonists of *Rites of Passage*, Talbot and Colley, whose physical passage turns out to be a ritualistic transition, a journey from ignorance to experience in which "Talbot is growing up. He doesn't realize it because he thinks he has grown up already, but he is not. And poor old Colley fails to make the grade," as Golding states in his interview with James Baker (1982:161).

Along with the many works influential on *Rites of Passage*, drama plays a crucial role, especially in the narration of the incidents of the story by Talbot, who obsessively sticks to theatrical terms, "It is a play, is it a farce or a tragedy? Does not a tragedy depend on the dignity of the protagonist? Must he not be great to fall greatly? A farce, then, for the man appears now a sort of Punchinello (Golding, 1980:104)." While describing Colley's fall, Talbot chooses to label it as farce instead of tragedy with regard to the man's low origins in the social pyramid. Also, there exist specific references to drama, mainly to Shakespeare's tragedies compared with Racine's plays by Talbot, who favours Shakespeare due to his integration of the tragic with the comic. On the other hand, the structure of the novel is similar to Racine's plays as the most significant actions of the story come about offstage: The badger bag ceremony and Colley's visit to sailors are the key incidents Talbot misses during the course of the story.

The main influence on the structure of the novel, however, is neither Racine nor Shakespeare but Greek drama. Golding has never denied the presence of Greek in his fiction (Baker, 1982:165). As he did in its predecessors, Golding employs some of the technical devices of Greek drama in *Rites of Passage*. In this respect, a comparison of *Rites of Passage* with Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (430 BC), similar to the one utilized for the analysis of *The Spire* (1964) by Bernard F. Dick, would surely help to identify the characteristics of a Greek play in Golding's novel and to demonstrate the shared features (1967:85-87). First of all, in *Oedipus the King*, there exists a basic polarity between the conscious motivation and subconscious desire: Oedipus' great effort to find the murderer of Laius leads him to the reality of his subconscious attempts to uncover his origins. A similar polarity in *Rites of Passage* is between Colley's conscious struggle for identity as a man of cloth, which brings out his subconscious homosexuality. Another feature of Greek drama that could well be detected in *Rites of Passage* is the change in the personality of the king-figure: like Oedipus, who sees himself a father-king bound by a cosmic sympathy to his children-subjects, but eventually turns into a tyrant, Colley views himself as a Christ figure with regard to the sufferings he is forced to encounter, but in the end evolves into a man conquered

116

by his desires. Another similarity is the revelation of the tragic knowledge: in the final stage, Oedipus reaches his aim and finds the murderer of Laius but the outcome of all is an ironic and unanticipated self-knowledge. In Colley's case, the tragic knowledge is his realization of his true nature, which leads him to self-destruction.

Rites of Passage, which borrows its title from Arnold Van Gennep's classic study of initiation rituals and ceremonies, should be viewed as a black comedy according to Golding, who suggested that much of the book is "just funny" (Baker,1982:164): the careless coupling of Talbot and Zenobia; Talbot's noisy convulsions and involuntary groans interpreted as over-zealous prayers; the manners and speech of drunken Brocklebank; the seasoned soldier Oldmeadow fainting at the sight of a corpse and a series of conversational misunderstandings are only some examples that constitute the humour in the novel. Obviously, the first volume of the sea trilogy owes a part of its public success to the skillful combination of comedy and tragedy. "If someone would present me with a great social comedy, I think I would go very near to selling myself," (Haffenden, 1980:11) says Golding expressing his admiration and vision of social comedy in an interview with John Haffenden. According to Crompton, it is Golding's this view of social comedy that leads him to overestimate the role of humour in his work (1985:128-29). The elements which make the comedy black is at the heart of the novel, and behind all those farcical moments there lies an inclination to demonstrate the defects embedded in human nature.

In *Rites of Passage*, Colley's tragedy has come to an end just in the south of the equator, leaving the reader curious about the prospective dramas that might take place before the ship, *Britannia*, finally reaches its destination in Australia. Golding encouraged such speculations, saying in one interview, "just because my ship has got from the coast of England a little beyond the equator, don't think its voyage is finished. You could get another couple of volumes about that voyage, if you wanted. I still find myself thinking of things I wish I'd made Talbot say but the voyage is still young" (Webb, 1980:12). And Golding kept his promise. *Rites of Passage* is the first installment in what was to become a trilogy.

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