

**TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH TRILOGY BY WILLIAM GOLDING:
INTO THE DEPTHS OF HUMAN NATURE**

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals mainly with the anthropological and sociological in depth analysis of “To the Ends of the Earth”, Nobel prize Laureate English writer William Golding’s trilogy, which is a collection of three previously and individually published novels: *Rites of Passage* (1980), *Close Quarters* (1987), and *Fire Down Below* (1989). The approach is interdisciplinary in that the sea trilogy is studied in terms of the Passage Model devised by the French Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep. Through this model, the phases that the main characters undergo as a result of the ritualistic life crises which they are exposed to during their development and transformation are examined in a systematic framework. The story of this journey into the depths of human nature in a microcosmic world is analyzed and discussed in view of the sociocultural and political facts of the period. The main purpose of the study is to reveal the inner dynamics of the plot and main thematic structure of William Golding’s trilogy.

Key Words: William Golding, Arnold van Gennep, rituals, human nature, class distinction, transition, life crisis.

**William Golding’in To the Ends of the Earth Üçlemesi: İnsan Doğasının
Derinliklerinin Keşfi**

ÖZET

Bu makale temel olarak Nobel ödüllü İngiliz yazar William Golding’in *Rites of Passage* (1980), *Close Quarters* (1987), ve *Fire Down Below* (1989) adlı romanlarından oluşan “To the Ends of the Earth” üçlemesinin disiplinler arası bir yaklaşım ile antropolojik ve sosyolojik incelemesini içermektedir. Bu incelemede Fransız antropolog Arnold van Gennep tarafından geliştirilen Geçiş Modeli esas alınarak ana karakterlerin gelişimleri ve dönüşümleri esnasında maruz kaldığı yaşam krizleri sonucu geçirdikleri evreler sistematik olarak incelenmiştir. Mikro kozmik bir bağlamda sunulan ve insan doğasının derinliklerine yapılan bu yolculuğun hikayesi dönemin sosyokültürel ve politik unsurları ışığında ele alınmış ve irdelenmiştir. Çalışmanın temel amacı 20. Yüzyıl İngiliz edebiyatının önemli yazarlarından William Golding’in bu üçlemesinde oluşturduğu ana olay örgüsünün ve tematik yapının iç dinamiklerini ortaya koymaktır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: William Golding, Arnold van Gennep, törenler, yaşam krizleri, sınıf ayrımı, insan doğası, geçiş.

Anthropology and Sociology have without doubt been an important part of literature regardless of the genre. The characterization in a literary work of art can hardly avoid the social realities of its time and the basic tendencies of human nature. Even the characters attributed with some divine rights or powers, such as Achilles in Homer’s *Iliad*, go through certain stages involving significant anthropological and sociological realities of their age, both of which provide a practically unlimited source for the writer of fiction. Raskolnikov in Fiodor Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (1866) and a more striking

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example, Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915; Eng trans., 1961), who suffers the literal and symbolic transformation into a huge, repulsive fatally wounded insect, are shaped and transformed by their own nature and environment. No matter whether one is a member of a primitive tribe or a modern society, he is certain to undergo specific stages varying in degree, intensity and pattern. Thus, rituals, or 'the rites of passage' with the term coined by French Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) in 1909, are an inescapable part of almost every character whether real or imaginary.

Gennep was the first anthropologist to identify the importance of rituals associated with the transitional stages in the life of humans. The phrase 'the rites of passage' he employed to describe these stages has become a part of the language of anthropology and sociology. In his book, *Rites of Passage*, each transition or 'life crisis' is related to the ceremonies of the 'rites of passage'. He suggested three major phases within this process (Gennep, 1908: 21): separation (separation/preliminal), transition (marge/liminal) and incorporation (aggregation/post liminal). The original term 'liminal' was borrowed from the Latin word *limen* meaning a boundary or threshold. His main point is that rituals are a means of passing through the crisis of separation from the old, transition and incorporation of the next passage of life. An individual experiencing a rite of passage is initially separated from his or her earlier identity and surroundings. That's the point at which the individual stands outside the social structure. He or she lies somewhere between social categories and expectations. Finally, the reintegration in a new social status or group takes place and the process ends until one finds himself in a new ritualistic process. The functions of rituals are as intense in literature as they are in real life. An author achieves the transformation of his characters and redirects the flow of events through the use of rites of passage which in most cases transform not only society's perception of individuals but also individuals' perceptions of themselves both in life and fiction.

Though it's possible to examine the use and role of rituals in many novels, there is no need to go too far back in history to look for the perfect match. Don Crampton pointed out the remarkable similarity between Gennep's model and the story line in William Golding's last completed work, *To the Ends of the Earth* (1991) trilogy, a collection of three previously and individually published novels: *Rites of Passage* (1980), *Close Quarters* (1987), and *Fire Down Below* (1989) (Crampton, 1985: 153). Golding, the seventh British Nobel laureate, holding a unique position among his generation of post-war writers, seems to have employed the model suggested by Gennep in creating the sea trilogy.

The voyage to the ends of the Earth begins with the first volume of the sea trilogy, *Rites of Passage*, borrowing its title from Gennep's novel. It takes place aboard a converted British warship, *Britannia*, whose passengers are on

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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. *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 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. Another important character in the first novel of the trilogy is Mr. Colley, the parson, who in the course of the novel goes through certain stages which lead to his final degradation and suicide. The ship's surface is, in fact, a model of the hierarchically structured British 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 it is strictly forbidden to cross. The quarterdeck, on the other hand, belongs to the captain and the officers, the ruling community of this class-ridden society.

Rituals are not arbitrary, that is, they arise out of the belief system of a group. Their primary objective is to alter, and consequently, to transmit that belief system into the emotions, minds and bodies of their participants (McCurdy, 1994: 326). Britannia stands as a separate world with its own rules, laws and reality and the new participants whose search for identity and acceptance in the first place is initiated are Talbot and the feeble parson, Mr. Colley. Both of them go through the first phase, separation (preliminal), by the departure 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 life on the ship in physical terms, and the next step is to identify their status in the new social pyramid. Talbot, despite his initial complaints about the physical defects of the old ship and the physiological disturbance it created, seems to be determined to be integrated into the new society as soon as possible starting with the mastery of the tarry language, Tarpaulin, the language of sailors which occupies a very important part in Talbot's journal, for he frequently makes use of it to describe the events aboard the ship. The microcosmic world of Golding has also its own language most appropriate for its setting. Through his aristocratic outlook, Talbot makes judgements about the manners of his travelling companions as well as the common sailors of the fo'castle. However, the main tool he uses for his acceptance in the new environment is privilege and patronage. He stands as the only person on board able to ignore the limits

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assigned strictly by Captain Anderson and whenever there is a problem he produces his godfather's name as armour which provides him with a distinctive status aboard the ship. Mr. Colley, however, is not as lucky as Talbot in the liminal stage. Apart from the belief of sailors that a parson aboard is a natural bringer of bad luck, his every move to establish his identity receives either a harsh or an indifferent attitude. The ceremonies concerning the 'rites of passage' mark a person's progress from one role, phase of life, or social status to another. Each change stands for a transitional period involving specific rituals such as the ones previously mentioned: removal of the individual from his former status; suspension from normal social contact and readmission into society with the newly acquired status. This transitional process provides some participants with opportunity to adjust to the event while others fail in their attempts either temporarily or permanently no matter whose fault it is. The point is that the conditions in any liminal stage need not be fair for every individual as we have the chance to observe in Talbot and Colley's case. This instance can be demonstrated best by the two different reactions of the captain to the violation of his Standing Orders, the laws regulating life aboard the ship. They are the counterpart of laws in the real world. Similarly, these are the laws whose violation is less severe for the ones ranking high in the social pyramid than for those who do not hold a position that can stand up to authority. This discrimination, dominant not only in social life but also in the application of the rules, becomes more apparent when we get the opportunity to compare what Colley has to face following his violation of the same territory, ignorant of the same Standing Orders. Class distinction, a sociological reality, has an important role to play in the characters' transition from one phase to another. Therefore, the success of each individual in the liminal stage does not exclusively depend on his personal struggle but a complex network of factors interacting randomly with one another and changing from person to person. In this respect, Colley's attempt to hold religious ceremonies aboard the ship is his personal search for identity in the new environment against the resistance from the society of the ship. Gradually, this resistance transforms into an untold isolation, which brings about depression for the one pushed away by the norms of the group he wants to be a member of. Colley is stuck in the transition phase and starts to experience a psychological breakdown. Victor Turner noted that in many initiation rites involving major transitions into new social roles, ritualized physical and mental burdens serve to breakdown initiates' belief systems, leaving them open to new learning and construction of new cognitive categories (Turner, 1969: 42-43). Yet, in this sense neither Talbot, in the first phase of the voyage, nor Colley can be considered to have been successful. Talbot gained admission by abusing his already acquired social status and Colley totally failed in his struggle to carry his identity as a man of God to the "Godless vessel" (Golding, 1980: 227). The final blow for Colley comes with the crossing-the-line ceremony, in which a passenger is taken before the throne of Neptune and then thrown into a filthy

pool of water filled with sea water, dung and urine, known as ‘badger bag’. According to Glascock’s *Naval Sketch Book*, this ceremony, conducted by sailors during the crossing of the equator, involves harmless tricks that the crew play on passengers (Glascock, 1843: 42). However, this innocent game turns out to be a nightmare for Colley when he is taken out half-naked by the lieutenants and forced to kneel before the throne. Colley, the representative of the Christian rites, which the pagan seamen neither care for nor respect, is cast in the role of scapegoat in that notorious ‘rite of passage’. This incident, during which Colley is brought before the pagan god Neptune to be judged, condemned, and punished, is one of the central events in the first volume of the trilogy. Actually, in the course of the novel, Colley undergoes two different acts of incorporation: the first is the crossing-the-line ceremony, where he becomes an object of scorn and which results in his being baptized not in holy water but human ordure. The next one appears as his attempt of incorporation with the people of the ship, which turns into the fatal act of fellatio. Talbot, on the other hand, by using and abusing his privileges, completes his incorporation successfully. The scene that best demonstrates the difference between the degrees of their achievement is Talbot’s having dinner at the Captain’s table while Colley dies, isolated and rejected in his cabin. Colley travels from life to death in his own personal rite of passage while Talbot, with the impact of the parson’s death, starts to realize his defects, learns to know himself and experiences a self-evolution, for which, at first, he seemed to lack the potential. Although Talbot still stands as a neoclassical man of reason, he is ready to undergo a new ritualistic process triggered by Colley’s death. The word ‘rites’ of the title not only represents the literal passage from an old world to a new one but also refers to the ceremonies associated with crossing-the-line as well as the initiation both Colley and Talbot experience as they achieve bitter self-knowledge.

As McCurdy maintains the purpose of most initiatory ‘rites of passage’ is cognitive transformation, which in Talbot’s case stands as no more than a spark of light at the end of the first volume (McCurdy, 1994: 333). Cognitive transformation is carried out when the symbolic messages of ritual are combined with individual emotion and belief and the individual’s entire cognitive structure reorganizes itself around the newly internalized symbolic complex. Although at the end of *Rites of Passage* Talbot seems to have completed his incorporation, it is only true in terms of his acceptance among the new society. In fact, he only takes a small step in the liminal stage, which makes the reader hope that he is capable of self advancement and his impression as a flat character regarding his rigid class-based beliefs and values proves to have the capacity for evolution. Hence, the end of the road for Colley is only the initial phase of transition for Talbot, whose transformation in other respects is yet to come.

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The second volume of the trilogy, *Close Quarters* involves the second phase of Talbot's transition: social and emotional transformation. The title represents life lived at close quarters aboard the ship, isolated and confined, allowing vision no further than its horizons. Even though it is a reflection of life on land, a microcosm having its own rules and conflicts, the psychological impact of living too close to each other at sea creates a totally different mood incomparable to life on land. Now leaving the tragedy of Reverend James Colley behind, Britannia is out of the equatorial regions and on its way south. Edmund Talbot has a new journal to be filled with the events that are in store during the rest of their journey. However, the second volume, according to Talbot, "is not a continuation, but a new venture" (Golding, 1987: 3). Talbot's decision to keep the second volume for himself is another stage in his self-evolution initiated in *Rites of Passage*. The arrogant, self-centered class-conscious young man, who has been trying to amuse his godfather on every possible occasion since the start of the voyage, takes another step forward in his rite of passage from youth to maturity. His decision to leave out his godfather as the addressee from his journal is not a simple reversal in the content of his journal but a metaphorical attempt to free himself from a figure he made use of by providing himself with a distinctive status aboard the ship in the first phase of the story, which ended tragically with the death of Colley. Talbot is now a character more aware of his shortcomings, and looking back, he is able to criticize himself in terms of his overall attitude saying, "I thought I had cured myself of a certain lofty demeanour, a consciousness of my own worth which had perhaps been too carelessly displayed in the earlier days of the voyage" (Golding, 1987: 3). Talbot, in his voyage through ignorance to experience, learns to detect his failures as well as triumphs. Colley's drama and the events surrounding it started the social transformation of Talbot. One of the central events in the second volume of the trilogy is the encounter of Britannia with another British Ship, Alycone, which brings both the news as to the end of the Napoleonic Wars and Miss Chumley, with whom Talbot falls in love and marks the beginning of his emotional transformation. Talbot's falling in love with her extends the range of his transformation which comes to involve both a social and emotional transition. One of the main thematic components of *Rites of Passage* was the conflicting points of view created by the Romantic outlook of Colley on the one hand and the Augustan vision of Talbot on the other. In *Close Quarters*, we do not have a character such as Colley, who will portray the events with a more emotional and responsive attitude but instead Talbot is turned into a man of feeling, which seems quite unexpected when compared with the character in *Rites of Passage*, who seduced Zenobia, seeing her as an object of lust and whose outlook was compounded of surface appearance and social prejudice. When we remember the ambitious aristocrat, the man of reason, on his way to assist the governor of the new colony, it is hard to gather the extent of change that Talbot has undergone. Following his marriage

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proposal, the departure of Alycone with Miss Chumley aboard drifts Talbot to an emotional suffering he has never before experienced. He is almost completely overcome by his love and the sorrow arising from the unbearable sense of separation. As our man of reason is involved in a romantic scenario, the allusions in the novel are mainly to poets such as Lord Byron, Alexander Pope, John Milton and Homer, who is referred to as the father of poets by Talbot. In the second part of the voyage to the ends of the Earth, the reader is involved in life on board Britannia at close quarters and has the chance to gain new insights through the eyes of developing Talbot, whose moral and spiritual, in other words, social and emotional transformation lead to dramatic changes in his perception of the events in the self-contained world of the ship.

Rituals are bound to intensify toward a climax. Behavioral psychologists have long recognized the importance of the events that give rise to emotional change, through which those involved are far more likely to learn from and be modified by the process. Accordingly, it is not difficult to understand that the initiation of both Talbot's social and emotional transformation were achieved by emotional means; the first being Colley's tragedy and the second Miss Chumley's love. Nevertheless, Talbot, who has undergone some dramatic changes so far in the voyage, still seems to have a long way to go in his personal voyage of revelation and self-knowledge, the hints of which can be felt early in the novel by his reply to Summers, the first lieutenant, who criticizes the current political system and questions the established order on learning Talbot's ambition to take part in the government or in the cabinet after the completion of his post in the Antipodes. Summer's criticism is mainly based on the unfair election system, which allows a minority to determine the people who will govern all the country. Talbot's explanation following this accusation is an extension of his class obsession, which proves to be supported by his political point of view: "Democracy is never and cannot be representation by everyone ... A civilized community will always find ways of healthfully limiting the electorate to a body of highly born, highly educated, sophisticated professional and hereditary electors who come from a level of society which was born to govern, expects to govern, and will always do so!" (Golding, 1987: 11).

The title of the third volume, *Fire Down Below*, other than the literal sense of the phrase, which stands for the welding operation conducted to repair the broken mast, has significant metaphorical implications symbolizing the fire within each character. Talbot's political ambition and class obsession, Benét's professional greed and Prettiman's search for the ideal world are, on the other hand, the 'fire down below' of the title in metaphorical terms. After a brief interruption at the end of *Close Quarters*, Talbot keeps on recording the events on board the ship Britannia in his journal. The third volume is the last stage of Talbot's evolution from youth to maturity. His development, which is triggered

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by Colley's tragedy in *Rites of Passage* and is continued with his transformation from a man of reason into a man of feeling in *Close Quarters*, completes its course with the political awareness that Talbot reaches by the assistance and guidance of Mr. Prettiman, who has been seen as a danger to the state by Talbot since they set sail from England. Now, it is time for Talbot's first lesson in politics, and his tutor is Mr Prettiman. The political education initiated by him is the last step needed to complete Talbot's transition from youth to maturity. Mr Prettiman asks him to get a book from his shelf, Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), which includes parts about a utopian country called Eldorado, the promised land of Prettiman. This is in fact only the beginning of the regular reading sessions that will last till the end of the voyage. Mr Prettiman gets excited when Talbot reads the part about religion: "We don't pray to God, he gives us what we need, we are eternally grateful – we do not need priests, we are all priests!" (Golding, 1989: 205). This is the reflection of Mr Prettiman's religious point of view. He is not an atheist, as Talbot and Summers have long believed, but he does not have faith in organized religion. After reading these lines Talbot comments that the book is an expansion of Pindar's *The Fortunate Isles*, the book which Prettiman had been reading on Talbot's arrival. However, Mr Prettiman believes that there is a significant difference: Pindar's is a mythological land whereas Voltaire's is a real one, the utopian world he desires to reestablish somewhere in Australia. This conversation is the spark of a new revelation for Talbot. So far he has learnt to criticise himself and has been able to cure his ill-natured classist attitude at least to a certain extent. However, the beliefs which constitute the core of his defective nature are still there, untouched and bound by his upbringing. Although he has judged himself harshly in many cases, he has never before questioned the values and order of his country. This is the beginning of a new enlightenment which leads Talbot to question the taboos in a way he has never previously dared. Although Summers strongly disapproves of his rapprochement with Mr Prettiman, Talbot begins to visit him regularly and ventures into the new world he has been offered. During one of their meetings Mr Prettiman starts to talk about his dream and likens himself to the group of criminals that will be accompanying him to a 'fire down below' waiting to burst out. Right after this figurative depiction comes his invitation for Talbot to be a part of their ideal. However, such a price is too high for Talbot, who is not ready to sacrifice all he has been brought up to believe in despite his newly developed critical outlook on his country.

Fire Down Below takes Talbot not only to the end of the earth but also to the end of his passage from youth to maturity. His transformation, led by Colley's tragedy and accompanied by Miss Chumley's love, is completed by Mr Prettiman's lessons in politics. Although Talbot renounces the new world offered by Prettiman for the sake of the conventional one and the marriage to

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Miss Chumley, the extent of the enlightenment he has reached makes him a far different man from the one who set out from England to the Antipodes. Thus, despite his incapability of putting it into practice, the development in his moral perspective can still be considered as a significant achievement for a man who is trapped by his upbringing. At the heart of the trilogy stands the painful voyage of human nature with its defects, greed, failures, and triumphs all skillfully woven into tragedy, romance and politics.

Talbot undergoes all the stages in Genep's passage model starting with separation from his home in England and going through the second stage of transition with the start of the three-year-long voyage. The events in *Rites of Passage* which center around Colley mark the beginning of his social transformation, while the ones in *Close Quarters* force him to experience an emotional transformation as well as furthering the social change. Finally, *Fire Down Below* ventures into the most deeply rooted network of values and through Prettiman's tutoring initiates the political transformation. Talbot, who starts the voyage as an arrogant aristocrat, not only dresses like a common sailor but also begins to stand watch like a midshipman which symbolizes the extent of his incorporation. The disappearance of the white line across the deck, recorded by Talbot as a metaphor of their condition to the end of *Close Quarters*, was a clear indication as to the weakening of rigid class structure aboard the ship. In *Fire Down Below*, as the ship voyages on, the hierarchical system on board loses its basis almost completely, and, in this sense, not only Talbot but the whole society of the ship experiences a transformation.

To sum up, it is obvious that Talbot completes his incorporation and acquires a totally different social and emotional outlook. Yet, in view of his rejection of Prettiman's offer to abandon his political greed and ambition it would not be unfair to state that politically he is not fully incorporated, keeping in mind the recovery he achieves through his learning. Through the reading of *To the Ends of the Earth* trilogy we share 'the rites of passage' Golding creates for us and get the chance to gain new insights into the depths of human nature constantly exposed to the rituals of life.

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