

NAVIGATING THE ABYSS: EXISTENTIAL CRISIS AND SOCIETAL CRITIQUE IN WILLIAM GOLDING'S *FREE FALL*

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Abstract

William Golding, renowned for his penetrating exploration of human nature and societal breakdowns in novels like Lord of the Flies and Free Fall, was a British writer who delved into existential themes with profound insight. His works often scrutinized the moral complexities and inherent darkness within humanity's psyche. The present research paper aims to investigate how William Golding's novel Free Fall intricately explores the existential crisis of Sammy Mountjoy, a protagonist adrift in the tumultuous aftermath of World War II and how, through Sammy's journey, Golding critiques various societal institutions—religion, rationalism, war ideologies, and social structures—for their failure to provide meaningful guidance or stability in the face of human complexity. The metaphor of "free fall" encapsulates Sammy's state of moral and spiritual disorientation, reflecting a world devoid of coherent values. Religion in the novel is portrayed as both a source of solace and a mechanism of oppression, with characters like Ms. Pringle embodying the hypocrisy and cruelty within dogmatic beliefs. War serves as a backdrop of senseless violence and ideological conflict, exposing the ethical dilemmas and moral decay inherent in human conflict. Rationalism, represented by Sammy's science teacher Nick Shales, is critiqued for its reductionist approach to human existence, neglecting spiritual dimensions and ethical considerations. Golding's narrative challenges readers to confront the complexities of moral ambiguity and the search for meaning in a post-war society where traditional systems falter. Free Fall ultimately invites reflection on the enduring questions of

human nature and the consequences of institutional failures in shaping individual identity and purpose.

Key-words: *Free Fall, Ideology, Religion, Rationalism, War*

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Introduction:

William Golding, a Nobel Prize winner British novelist, is known for his 'parables of the human condition' (Britannica). His novel *Free Fall* delves into the existential crisis of Sammy Mountjoy, a character emblematic of post-war disillusionment and societal critique. Golding's exploration, as articulated to Baker, focuses on the profound consequences of lacking a structured system of values and morality ("Interview" 133). He likens this condition to a state of perpetual free fall, devoid of orientation or stability, echoing both scientific and theological dimensions. The novel, despite its initial reception, stands as a significant achievement in Golding's literary canon, paralleling the complexity of his previous work *Pincher Martin*.

Free Fall serves as a comprehensive critique of numerous societal institutions—religion, rationalism, war ideologies, fascism, socialism, communism, and social class discrimination—through the life of Sammy Mountjoy. Born into poverty in Rotten Row and adopted into a structured life that culminates in becoming a painter, Sammy embodies the struggle against institutional inadequacy to nurture a meaningful existence. Golding employs the title metaphorically, juxtaposing scientific free fall with the spiritual concept of falling from grace, reflecting his obsession with free will and its consequences. Sammy's journey epitomizes the postmodern condition, navigating through

irrationality, existential searching, and the haunting memories of wartime atrocities. Golding's critique extends to the limitations of human systems to provide comprehensive answers or stability in a chaotic world, echoing Sammy's quest for a unifying pattern amidst the fragmentary nature of existence.

Research Objectives:

The primary objective of this research is to analyze the existential crisis and societal critique presented in William Golding's *Free Fall*, focusing on the protagonist Sammy Mountjoy's journey. This study aims to explore how Golding critiques various societal institutions—religion, rationalism, war ideologies, and class structures—through Sammy's experiences. Additionally, it seeks to understand the novel's portrayal of the conflict between spiritual and corporeal realms, freedom and societal expectations, and the impact of post-war disillusionment on the individual psyche. The research will also examine Sammy's dissatisfaction with his art and ideological beliefs, highlighting the broader human struggle for autonomy and meaning in a fragmented world. By delving into these themes, the research intends to contribute to a deeper understanding of Golding's work and its relevance to postmodern existential thought.

Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative analytical methodology, focusing on a close reading and textual analysis of William Golding's *Free Fall*. The study begins with a comprehensive literature review of existing scholarship on Golding's work, particularly *Free Fall* and its thematic elements. Primary sources consist of the novel itself and relevant interviews with Golding, while secondary sources encompass critical essays, books, and articles that explore Golding's literary contributions and thematic concerns. The analysis is structured around key themes identified in the novel, such as the critique of societal institutions, existential dilemmas, and the protagonist's spiritual and artistic struggles. The research also draws on theoretical frameworks from

existentialism and postmodernism to contextualize Sammy's experiences within broader philosophical and cultural discourses. By integrating these approaches, the study aims to provide a nuanced interpretation of *Free Fall* and its reflection on the human condition. The MLA Handbook 7th edition is used for documentation of this research paper.

Discussion

Religion exerts a profound influence on the major characters in Golding's novel. Sammy, Philip, Ms. Pringle, and Father Watts-Watt all grapple with the burdens of hypocritical religious doctrines, suffering in various ways due to their dogmatic beliefs. Sammy, uncertain of his own origins as a slum boy from Rotten Row, cynically observes the corruption at the heart of religious institutions: "whores claim to be the daughters of clergymen; and despite all the glitter of court, the church won" (Golding, *Free Fall*, 12). He speculates about his father possibly being a parson, contemplating the professional facade of the church amid its internal moral decay (Golding, *Free Fall*, 13). Ms. Pringle, a spiritual mentor to Sammy, emerges as a sadistic figure who manipulates Scripture and doctrine to exert control. She harbours resentment towards Sammy for his adoption by Father Watts-Watt instead of marrying her, punishing him with cruel segregation and hypocritically preaching compassion while practicing cruelty. Sammy reflects on her hypocrisy, questioning how she can profess sorrow for human suffering while inflicting emotional pain on her students (Golding, *Free Fall*, 210).

Sammy's own spiritual journey oscillates between Ms. Pringle's rigid religious dogma and Nick's rationalistic worldview. He struggles to reconcile the mystical stories of the Bible with Nick's scientific explanations, finding religious laws irrelevant to his quest for rational understanding (Golding, *Free Fall*, 198). Despite his detachment from formal religious affiliation, religion permeates Sammy's life through societal expectations and personal conflicts, presenting a paradoxical source of both solace and torment in his tumultuous existence.

In William Golding's *Free Fall*, war emerges as a central theme scrutinized through the lens of human nature and societal ideologies. Golding posits that war, despite its inevitable occurrence, embodies the absurdity inherent in human existence. The novel critiques the institutionalized ideologies such as Nazism, fascism, communism, and socialism that fuel conflicts. Sammy, the protagonist, paradoxically welcomes war as a necessary evil, viewing external destruction as a reflection of his internal turmoil. His existential musings reveal a world plagued by anarchy both within individuals and across nations, where personal crimes pale in comparison to the scale of international atrocities termed 'international immorality' (Golding, *Free Fall*, 132). Sammy, grappling with his identity as an orphan and outsider, confronts war's disruptive impact firsthand when taken prisoner and subjected to torture by the Gestapo. Through encounters with characters like Dr. Halde, who embodies the conflicted moral landscape of wartime, Golding explores the ethical dilemmas and moral compromises forced upon individuals by global conflicts. Sammy's contemplation of war as a tragic consequence of humanity's flawed exercise of freedom underscores the novel's poignant reflection on the profound complexities of war and its enduring impact on the human psyche."

In Virginia Tiger's analysis, *Free Fall* emerges as a narrative grappling with the redemption of a fractured soul, its division emblematic of the pervasive scepticism of mid-twentieth century. The novel relentlessly explores the conflict between the spiritual and the corporeal realms. Nick Shales, a compassionate science teacher, embodies a staunch disbelief in spiritual dimensions, a perspective that ironically shapes his altruism and sense of justice within a rationalistic worldview largely unnoticed by his students (Golding, *Free Fall*, 213). Yet, the narrative posits that not all facets of existence can be rationalized; love, especially, defies logic: 'He denied the spirit behind creation; for what is nearest the eye is hardest to see' (Golding, *Free Fall*, 214). Sammy, questioning the limitations of science, challenges the notion that morals can be derived from natural laws, suggesting a world beyond scientific comprehension: 'Our mistake is to confuse our limitations with the bounds of

possibility and clap the universe into a rationalist hat or some other' (Golding, *Free Fall*, 9). Reflecting on Nick's death, Sammy confronts the ideological clash between faith and reason, critiquing the inherited patriarchal totems of religious belief that perpetuate violence and hypocrisy: 'You were innocent, you were good and innocent like Johnny Spragg, blown to pieces five mile above his own county of Kent' (Golding, *Free Fall*, 250). Ultimately, Sammy navigates a morally ambiguous world, acknowledging its savagery and amorality, resigned to a reality devoid of hope or clear choices (Golding, *Free Fall*, 226).

Tiger observes that Sammy's social standing is significantly influenced by recognizable class distinctions: residing in the impoverished Rotten Row slum, Sammy is a child of uncertain paternity, raised by his mother, Ma, in conditions deemed unhygienic and alien to societal norms (Golding, *Free Fall*, 17). Sammy critiques Beatrice's middle-class upbringing as stifling and closed-minded, contrasting it with his own lower-class perspective, which values spontaneity and personal freedom over societal conventions (Golding, *Free Fall*, 92, 98). His relationship with Taffy reflects his disillusionment with middle-class values, seeing their intimacy as constrained by Beatrice's upbringing and societal taboos (Golding, *Free Fall*, 120). Sammy's worldview is further shaped by his belief in impermanence and relativity, viewing sex clinically and questioning the traditional roles upheld by orthodox family life (Golding, *Free Fall*, 129). Reflecting on his education at a rigidly stratified grammar school, Sammy perceives it as shaped more by economic considerations than educational theory (Golding, *Free Fall*, 193). Despite being adopted by Father Watts-Watt, the rector, Sammy feels adrift, claiming his status in society without feeling rooted anywhere, emblematic of the social upheavals of World War II and the novel's broader critique of societal systems (Golding, *Free Fall*, 193).

Sammy aligns himself with the communist cause alongside fellow worker Reece Dai, highlighting the party's appeal to young idealists like himself who are willing to publicly champion its principles (Golding, *Free Fall*, 139). Dr.

Halde reflects on his own youthful flirtation with communism, dismissing it as a "generous fault" typical of youth (Golding, *Free Fall*, 139), echoing Golding's critique that communism is ultimately impractical. Sammy's disillusionment recalls Orwell's *Animal Farm*, where he cynically remarks, "Our army, in fact, was all generals," illustrating how even within supposedly egalitarian movements, power dynamics lead to exploitation (Golding, *Free Fall*, 96). The communists in the novel dismiss the impending war as a capitalist ruse, failing to recognize their own naivety and adherence to outdated doctrines: "nobody noticed this was not Marxism but the oldest routine in the world" (Golding, *Free Fall*, 89). Sammy reflects on his communist ideology in relation to his personal life with Taffy, asserting their right to privacy despite their political affiliations (Golding, *Free Fall*, 126). Sammy concludes that both the rationalist world of Nick Shales and the faith-driven world of Ms. Rowena Pringle are real, yet irreconcilable. He perceives a stark divide where others remain oblivious to the existence of the opposing worldview.

Sammy is a painter of considerable reputation, with his work featured in the Tate Gallery. He is a tormented spirit, yearning to be a free bird, yet his reputation confines him. The lack of artistic freedom and the constant interference in his private life trouble him deeply. His association with the Communist Party further complicates matters, making him a suspect in the eyes of the public. Sammy resents this intrusion, lamenting, "I am an artist. I can wear what hat I like... But I want to wear a hat in private" (Golding, *Free Fall* 7). He longs for freedom, much like Pincher, and refuses to surrender, stating, "There is a school cap, too. I had no more than hung it there, not knowing the other hats I should hang by it when I think the thing happened—the decision made freely that cost me my freedom" (Golding, *Free Fall* 7). Despite his defiance, Sammy feels trapped by his choices and the public scrutiny they invite. He insists that his ideological beliefs are a private matter and rebels against the watchdogs of society.

Sammy is dissatisfied with his art, feeling it cannot fully express his spirit. He declares, "My art is not enough for me. To hell with my art" (Golding, *Free Fall* 7). His condition reflects a universal human struggle, embodying the conflict between good and evil, spirit and flesh, freedom and surrender. Sammy's plight highlights the dilemma of the postmodern individual, illustrating the tension between personal freedom and societal expectations. Despite his torment, the Prometheus within him remains alive, marking him as a rebel in the vein of Pincher.

William Golding's *Free Fall* masterfully captures the existential struggles of Sammy Mountjoy, reflecting the disillusionment and societal critiques characteristic of the post-war era. Through Sammy's journey, Golding critiques various societal institutions, illustrating their failure to provide a meaningful framework for human existence. Sammy's inner turmoil and quest for freedom embody the universal conflict between spirit and flesh, freedom and societal expectations. His dissatisfaction with both his art and the ideologies surrounding him underscores the limitations of human systems in addressing the complexities of individual existence. Golding's portrayal of Sammy's spiritual and existential battles serves as a microcosm for the postmodern condition, highlighting the fragmented nature of human experience and the perpetual search for stability and meaning. Despite his tormented spirit and the constant interference in his private life, Sammy's rebellion against societal constraints and his yearning for personal freedom resonate with the broader human struggle for autonomy and authenticity. *Free Fall* stands as a profound exploration of the human condition, questioning the adequacy of rationalist and dogmatic approaches to life while affirming the enduring spirit of rebellion and the quest for freedom. Golding's novel invites readers to reflect on their own values and the societal structures that shape their lives, emphasizing the importance of personal integrity and the courage to confront existential dilemmas.

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