

Reflections of Small Town England in William Golding's *The Pyramid*

by Ailsa Poll

The Pyramid is recognised as being semi-autobiographical amongst Golding's work; I am not going to focus on this at the present time. I hope that the reader will accept that there are issues raised in the book which would be identifiable as reflections of his younger life, and of life in England during his youth, and would certainly be familiar to anyone with the author's cultural and historical background. In the near future there will be a biography by Professor John Carey, the first extended treatment of Golding's life, which will no doubt shed further light on any connections between Golding's life and that of Oliver, the protagonist of *The Pyramid*.

The book was written during the 1960s when class resentment between majority 'lower class' and minority 'upper class' people was common. In the post-war years after 1945 awareness of social hierarchy increased, and many people felt the injustice behind it. We meet Oliver, the narrator, aged eighteen, having just left school and filling in his time before going up to Oxford to study chemistry and physics. He lives in the small town of Stilbourne, typically English and appropriately named. Here the streets and people are clearly marked out in terms of social class, but there are also further hierarchies extending from the beautiful and good to the ugly and disreputable, all intermingled in the same community. Oliver's family are from the lower-middle class, with aspirations to the finer things in life. They would like to be treated favourably by their wealthier neighbours, but recognise the fact that they will always be looked down upon. From the very first incident in the book we are aware of Oliver's 'rank' among his associates: he is not good enough to be considered Bobby Ewan's equal, but he is high enough up the scale to be called

upon by him to help Evie Babbacombe and keep her secret.

Everyone in Stilbourne has their proper place and is expected to remain in it. We see this in the figure of Evie's mother, who is laughed at when she greets a lady of higher status than herself. The lady in question not only fails to respond to her greeting, but, we are told, is unaware that she has even been spoken to.

This social environment is presented to us as stultifying, heartless and loveless. Its effect on the inhabitants of the town is negative. The main characters all have their part to play in this, and many can be seen as victims of the situation. Oliver himself represents a 'typical' young man, looking for fun, friends, perhaps love, and definitely wanting experience of more worldly affairs, such as sex. Yet his desires are constantly thwarted in this social milieu. He believes himself to be in love with Imogen Grantley, the local beauty from a family of good reputation. He knows he can never hope for that love to be returned and contents himself with fantasies.

Evie, the woman who is available to Oliver, is unsuitable for him on a number of levels: first, the very fact that she is available makes her less desirable; second, her family background is such that, once he starts his affair with her, he sees her as someone with whom his newly discovered sexuality can be practised, but only in secret. This is not only because pre-marital sex was frowned upon in general, but most importantly because Oliver is concerned about the embarrassment it would cause his parents if he were to have to marry Evie, and his own family were to be openly connected with someone further down the social scale.

Evie herself has difficulties stemming from the social world in which she finds herself. She is a girl from the lowest class, abused by her father and neighbour. She works in and is surrounded by a world filled with men of higher rank, and she subsequently has liaisons with several of them before finally leaving town to become a prostitute (or so we assume). Evie's position is more or less fixed before we even meet her. Her background provides no hope for improvement, and the characters with whom she is involved – Oliver, Bobby, Dr. Jones - all take advantage of her without any thought as to how their behaviour might affect her. For them, she is someone to use and forget.

A number of characters enter Oliver's life, giving him the opportunity to show love and compassion. Evie is the most obvious, but equally on a sexual level we might consider Evelyn de Tracy, the theatre director brought in to help the amateur dramatic group. It is evident early on that de Tracy is a homosexual, but also very clear-sighted and perceptive. He demonstrates to Oliver how vain and ignorant the adored Imogen truly is, and how petty and narrow-minded his fellow performers are. They are puffed up with their own importance at being part of a production which excludes people like Evie. She may have a beautiful singing voice, but she comes from the 'wrong sort'. Oliver likes Evelyn and takes kindly to his offer of a drink and a chat, but he is innocent and naïve, and does not recognise Evelyn's sexuality. Worse still, Oliver's ignorance allows him to laugh at Evelyn when the latter is vulnerable. Oliver has little care for the feelings of others unless they fit within his own limitations and ideals. But his ignorance of the wider world is no real excuse for his callousness.

These characters and incidents all show how the limitations of a society can cause

tensions on both an individual and collective level. The whole amateur dramatic debacle elegantly demonstrates how the various stresses within a community can grow out of proportion and cause it almost to self-destruct. Norman Claymore's belief in his right to be at the head of proceedings, when he evidently has little talent to commend him, aggravates many of the 'lower class' participants. Some of them find it amusing, and some find it gives them the impetus to make a scene.

Oliver's mother personifies the limitations which the class structure imposed upon people at the time of the story and even at the time when the author was writing. She is seemingly very 'proper', taking the day off to go to Imogen Grantley's wedding, but as a spectator, not a guest. She lives the typical life of a lower middle class wife and mother of the 1930s, and indulges in curtain-twitching and self-righteous gossiping about the characters around her. It is to pacify her that Oliver undertakes his music lessons, plays his part in the theatrical production, and takes his place at university to study science. It is from her that he has learnt his prejudices. Yet in spite of the part she plays in this, we can still view her as another victim of the social hierarchy. She is simply conforming to the standards prevailing during her upbringing and acting on the desire to achieve the best she can for herself and her family.

The other character with whom Oliver has an important relationship is Miss Dawlish, the music teacher, also known as Bounce. She appears to come from a family higher up in the class structure; her father had been a musician and he owned a music shop. She has inherited both the shop and a large house. Perhaps she is the most eccentric of the characters in *The Pyramid*. However, her eccentricities also derive from her place in the social hierarchy of the town and its loveless environment. Living

alone in her big house, Bounce is an object of interest to the ladies of the square who gather tales about the inhabitants. Oliver visits the house for violin lessons and tells us that his mother uses him as a spy in order to gain useful tidbits about Miss Dawlish. For a small boy, the house and its owner are quite terrifying. He is never sure what to expect when he arrives home and recounts stories which make far more sense to adults than they do to him.

The main cause of Bounce's disappointment with the world and hence her strange behaviour comes from the character of Henry Williams. His entrance into her life gives Bounce a reason for living. Evidently she falls in love with him quite quickly. But she has two problems. The first problem is his inferior position in society. From the time Henry moves into Stilbourne, Bounce seems set on gaining his devotion; Oliver even says that he thought that Henry belonged to Bounce, because that is the way she treats him. All she achieves, however, is silent ridicule from Oliver's mother, who considers Bounce's behaviour as inappropriate, and who looks beyond Henry's immediately visible character to the man he really is. The second problem comes when Henry produces a wife and child, not previously known. Oliver imagines Bounce's humiliation and bitterness, while his mother laughs at her foolishness. She subsequently appears exasperated when Bounce allows Henry's family to move into her big house.

It would seem that Bounce loses everything to unrequited love: her hope for a happy relationship, her own space, her own money, her own mind and finally her dignity. We see Bounce through the eyes of Oliver, the central character. These are the eyes of a child growing up and beginning to realise the truth about the adult relationships

around him, yet again, as previously he had with Evelyn, and even Evie. Oliver lacks the warm feelings for Bounce that we might hope he would feel. His reflections on her actions throughout the years are never sympathetic and his greatest desire is always to get away from her, as if any connection between them would cause him embarrassment. His final reference to her confirms this when he declares that he was always afraid of her and hated her.

The theme of music runs through this novel, from piano lessons to the amateur dramatic production. Music is a representation of imagination in people, of a desire for something other than the stultifying life in Stilbourne. The characters who allow themselves to follow the music, de Tracy and Evie, are the ones who manage to get out. It may not work out for them (we cannot be sure how happy Evie is with life outside), but we can be sure that the lively and exciting figures have a chance outside of this dead world. For Bounce, her feeling of being trapped by music, because it is what her father wanted for her, means that she finally gets swamped by the conflict and escapes into madness. Oliver says about Bounce at the end of the novel that "You could say that the only time she was ever calm and happy, with a relaxed, smiling face, they put her away until she was properly cured and unhappy again". For Oliver, it is another example of him not following his dream. Instead of playing music he does as he is expected to and goes to university.

Oliver cannot empathise with the people in his life who have creativity and imagination. Through his relationships with them and his music we can see how his own imagination has been limited by his society, how it is no longer available to him as an option. Music and creativity might be expected to offer freedom to an

individual, a way of expressing feelings and emotions. But in the dead world of Stilbourne it can only be seen as either a means of imprisonment as it is for Bounce, a means of social repression, or a farcical representation of itself as it is in the town show.

The fact that the three characters that we see Oliver relate to, Evie, de Tracy and Bounce, can be linked through their talent in music also gives them a marginalised status. None of them fits into the society of the town and Oliver cannot risk moving away from the acceptance of that society by moving away from behaviour which fits the established norm. In his return at the end of the book he reinforces this when he recognises how he still fits in to the society of Stilbourne, but also that he will not change. His role in the development of poison gas in the war continued his path away from embracing life, the path he chose when he left for university, and he feels comfortable with the status which that has given him.

The idea that all of the characters in *The Pyramid* are so constrained by the society in which they live is not unusual. As a country England has been divided by social class, and it has seen fierce fights against such injustice. This makes the story familiar to readers in any age, especially English readers. Stilbourne evokes stultification, a retreat into old-fashioned values, and unfair limitations. These limitations will affect an individual's emotional, spiritual and imaginative growth, resulting in loss of personal responsibility, and a display of human flaws. This reflects the collective tensions created by the hierarchical world of small town England.

Works referred to:

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