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English 494

Study Questions on *The Inheritors*

William Golding’s novel, *The Inheritors*, takes us out of history and into prehistory. In so doing, the novel becomes a time machine by putting us in the place and time, and into the minds, of the Neanderthal. Since Neanderthals were by current definition not human (they preceded homo sapiens into Europe and other places by several hundred thousand years), yet they existed for a time alongside modern homo sapiens (it appears the last Neanderthals died out about 30,000 years ago), they have sparked the curiosity of many scientists and writers. What were they like? How different were they than human? How similar? Did they have culture and language and social structures like modern humans? Did humans and Neanderthals interact? (It appears that there might have been interbreeding, since somewhere between 1-4% of modern human DNA was contributed by Neanderthals. On the other hand, there has been a lot of speculation that they died out because of direct or indirect competition with modern humans.) In *The Inheritors*, Golden doesn’t so much try to answer these questions as to re-imagine them. By trying to give some narrative life to creatures who are *other*, that is, who stand in relation to modern humans, Golding is also trying to understand what it means to be human.

Golding wrote *The Inheritors* right after his more famous (or infamous) novel, *The Lord of the Flies*, a narrative about the descent of schoolboys into “primitive” tribes and into violence. Yet *The Inheritors* could be said to be a reversal of expectations (characterized by his use of H.G. Wells’ negative description of Neanderthals in his epigraph), for the characters and its forms of representation offer us surprises. Because the novel attempts to represent what is unrepresentable, that is, because it attempts to present a world from the perspective (to some extent) of the Neanderthals themselves, we have to be good close-readers. That is, we come to know the Neanderthals only through the human systems of language and narrative, but Golding tries to push these systems in ways to make them work in somewhat unfamiliar ways. As you read pay attention to the ways that language and narrative work in both familiar and unfamiliar ways.

1. This Neanderthal group is made up of 8 members: Lok, Liku, Fa, Ha, Nil, the old woman, Mal, and the young one. What are their roles? How do they interact? What kinds of ideas, practices, and relationship construct their sense of being inside or outside this group? How are the men and women, the young and old, defined?
2. The characters often speak of “picturing.” What does this mean to them? How does it work to connect them to each other and to their own sense of the world? How is this also a reflection of the writer’s and reader’s own need to picture an unfamiliar world? In other words, how do we decipher it to understand *what* is happening and how these characters are understanding it?
3. How does Golding organize his novel? In particular, what holds each of his chapters together? What organizes it?
4. On p. 35, Mal tells the story of the people. In some ways it creates a pre-text, which we use to understand the significance of the larger story. Think about the relationship.
5. Part of the novel stresses the unfamiliar *epistemology* (how they gather and construct knowledge) of the Neanderthal (e.g. look at pp. 76-77) and this aspect in turns leads to their ontology, their sense of being (e.g. look at pp. 78-79). How do they experience themselves within the world, or, rather, how does Golding *represent* their experience in language? (For example, look at pp. 107-108.)
6. The novel is about the meeting of the Neanderthal and the modern humans. How do they come to encounter each other and how do they interpret each other’s familiarity or unfamiliarity? In particular, the point of view of the novel changes from the Neanderthals (The People) to the humans (The New People) in chapters 10-12. Look at the different stories of old and new and think about how the modern human society differs from the Neanderthals.
7. While we can read *The Inheritors* as an attempt to imagine a real world, we can also read it (via the time travelling narrative) as a kind of parable of human ethical evolution. Is there some way to reconcile these two ways of reading and interpreting the novel?
8. *The Inheritors* offers us a kind of pre-history of extinction. What can we learn about it in terms that we have begun to think: that is, in terms of determinism and contingency, questions of the Anthropocene and the scales of Deep Time, in terms of literary form and genre?