



William Golding's View of Human Nature in Lord of the Flies

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Abstract

William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* offers a profound and unsettling exploration of human nature, challenging the optimistic belief that humans are inherently good and guided by reason. This paper argues that Golding presents a fundamentally pessimistic view of humanity, suggesting that evil is an intrinsic part of human nature that emerges when societal constraints are removed. Through the gradual degeneration of a group of schoolboys stranded on an isolated island, Golding reveals how fragile civilization is and how quickly individuals revert to primitive instincts. By analysing key characters—Ralph, Jack, Piggy, and Simon—this study examines the tension between order and chaos, reason and instinct, morality and savagery. It also explores the symbolic significance of the “beast” and the breakdown of social structures. Ultimately, the paper concludes that Golding views human nature as deeply flawed, requiring continuous discipline, ethical awareness, and societal regulation to prevent moral collapse.

Keywords: transformation, rationality, cooperation, well-being, demonstrating, marginalization

Introduction

Published in 1954, *Lord of the Flies* stands as one of the most significant literary responses to the moral crises of the twentieth century. Having witnessed the atrocities of World War II, William Golding rejected the notion that civilization inherently produces moral individuals. Instead, he argued that civilization merely suppresses darker human impulses, which can resurface under conditions of disorder and freedom from authority.

The novel narrates the story of a group of British schoolboys stranded on a deserted island after a plane crash. Initially, the boys attempt to establish order through democratic governance, rules, and cooperation. However, as time passes, their structured society deteriorates into chaos, violence, and ultimately murder. This transformation is not merely situational but reflects Golding's broader philosophical stance: that the seeds of evil exist within every individual. This paper explores Golding's portrayal of human nature through thematic analysis, character study, and symbolism. It argues that Golding's vision aligns with a pessimistic philosophical tradition, emphasizing the inherent capacity for cruelty and the necessity of social control.

Civilization vs. Savagery: A Central Conflict

The central theme of *Lord of the Flies* is the conflict between civilization and savagery. Civilization represents order, rationality, cooperation, and moral responsibility. Savagery, in contrast, symbolizes instinct, violence, and the rejection of rules. Ralph emerges as the primary representative of civilization. He values order, democratic leadership, and long-term survival. His focus on maintaining the signal fire reflects foresight and responsibility. Ralph's leadership is grounded in reason and collective well-being, demonstrating the ideals of civilized society. Jack, on the other hand, represents the pull toward savagery. Initially constrained by social

norms, Jack gradually abandons these restraints in favour of power, dominance, and primal satisfaction. His transformation is marked by his obsession with hunting and his increasing disregard for rules.

Golding uses this conflict to illustrate that civilization is not an inherent condition but a fragile construct. When external authority is removed, individuals are tempted to abandon moral constraints. The boys' descent into savagery suggests that without structure, human beings revert to instinctual behaviour.

The Nature of Evil: Internal Rather Than External

One of Golding's most important contributions to the discourse on human nature is his assertion that evil originates within individuals rather than from external forces. This idea is embodied in the concept of the "beast." At first, the boys believe the beast to be a physical creature lurking on the island. However, as the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that the beast is a manifestation of their own fears and inner darkness. Simon is the only character who fully understands this truth. His realization that "maybe the beast is only us" represents a pivotal moment in the novel. Golding suggests that the true danger lies not in external threats but in the human psyche itself. The encounter between Simon and the pig's head—the "Lord of the Flies"—further reinforces this idea. The head appears to speak, telling Simon that evil is inseparable from human existence. This moment symbolizes the inescapable presence of moral corruption within individuals.

The Role of Fear in Moral Breakdown

Fear is a powerful force in the novel, shaping behaviour and accelerating the collapse of order. Initially, fear manifests as a natural response to the unfamiliar environment. However, it soon evolves into irrational terror. The fear of the beast becomes a central obsession for the boys. This fear undermines their ability to think rationally and leads to paranoia and hysteria. Golding demonstrates how fear can distort perception and erode moral judgment. Jack manipulates this fear to gain control. By presenting himself as a protector against the beast, he consolidates power and fosters loyalty among the boys. This dynamic reflects real-world scenarios in which fear is used as a tool of political and social control. Ultimately, fear contributes to the boys' descent into violence, culminating in the tragic deaths of Simon and Piggy.

The Failure of Reason and the Marginalization of Piggy

Piggy represents intellect, logic, and scientific reasoning. His glasses symbolize knowledge and technological advancement. Despite his intelligence, Piggy is frequently ignored and ridiculed by the other boys. Golding uses Piggy's marginalization to critique society's tendency to undervalue rational thought. In contrast to Ralph's charisma and Jack's aggression, Piggy's intellectual approach lacks influence. The destruction of Piggy's glasses and his eventual death symbolize the collapse of reason. With Piggy gone, the last remnants of rationality disappear, leaving only chaos. This development underscores Golding's belief that reason alone is insufficient to maintain order if it is not supported by collective respect and moral discipline.

Group Mentality and the Loss of Individual Responsibility

Golding also explores how group dynamics influence human behaviour. Individually, many of the boys exhibit hesitation and moral awareness. However, within the group, they become

capable of extreme cruelty. The killing of Simon is the clearest example of this phenomenon. In a state of collective frenzy, the boys lose their sense of individuality and responsibility. The anonymity of the group allows them to commit acts they might otherwise resist. This depiction reflects psychological theories of crowd behaviour, suggesting that individuals are more likely to engage in violence when part of a collective. Golding's portrayal of group mentality emphasizes the danger of conformity and the loss of personal accountability.

The Symbolism of the Conch and Social Order

The conch shell is a powerful symbol of authority, order, and democratic governance. At the beginning of the novel, it establishes structure by regulating communication. However, as the boys descend into savagery, the conch loses its significance. Its eventual destruction marks the complete breakdown of social order. Golding uses the conch to illustrate the fragility of civilization. Its power depends on collective belief and adherence. Once these are lost, authority collapses.

The Inevitable Collapse of Civilization

The island initially functions as a microcosm of society, complete with leadership, rules, and shared goals. However, these structures gradually deteriorate due to internal conflict and lack of enforcement. Golding suggests that civilization requires constant maintenance. Without discipline and accountability, it cannot survive. The arrival of the naval officer at the end of the novel provides an ironic contrast. While he represents external authority, his presence also reminds readers of the larger war beyond the island, implying that savagery exists even in the adult world.

Conclusion

Lord of the Flies presents a deeply pessimistic view of human nature. Golding argues that the capacity for evil is inherent and can emerge when societal constraints are removed.

Through the boys' descent into savagery, the novel demonstrates the fragility of civilization and the dangers of fear, power, and group dynamics. Golding ultimately suggests that maintaining moral order requires continuous effort and self-awareness. His portrayal of human nature challenges readers to confront uncomfortable truths about themselves and society, making the novel a timeless exploration of the human condition.

References

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