



THEMES

To *Lord of The Flies* by William Golding

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MAJOR THEMES

Lord of the Flies, a direct product of the writer's experience of the Second World War, offers a number of themes which are the byproducts of the writer's serious concern for the future of civilization, rendered almost devastated by the cruelty of the Second World War.

- The major themes and ideas of the novel may be categorized as follows:
 - the theme of evil
 - a. is it innate or is it learnt?
 - the theme of childhood
 - the theme of human civilization in the twentieth century
 - the Biblical theme or the theme of sin and expiation.

THINKING ABOUT HUMAN DESTINY

A brooder on human destiny, Golding was obsessed with the large scale massacre owing to the atomic war and revealed his deep concern about what had gone wrong with our world.

- The world in all its diabolical perversions is reflected in the children's world on the uninhabited island.
 - o The abandoned boys on the island are driven by the instinct for survival as they search for food and arrange shelters.
 - With all his good senses Ralph was the natural leader and was accepted by all except Jack who eventually became not only the personification of evil qualities but also the cruellest autocrat who attracted others towards his ideals through temptations and terror.
 - Perhaps, in a sense, Ralph and Jack's relationship is symbolic of Golding's vision for humanity's future
 - o That, essentially, the evil side of humanity will overpower its good
 - And the only thing that can save humanity is a miracle, just as the sailor at the end stops the Hunters from killing Ralph

JACK REPRESENTS EVIL

From the very beginning of the novel Jack's cruelty and his going against nature are highlighted.

- Jack's intolerance, his material greed, his hankering for power are revealed as the basic evil qualities that led to murder and destruction.
 - o While Ralph, prompted by good sense, laid emphasis on signal fire and making shelters, Jack put emphasis on hunting and merry-making and broke away from the order created by Ralph to satisfy his sensuous pleasure.





- Jack could influence his group and became a successful hunter with the help of his group. Breaking up law and order is a serious offence according to Golding; he feels that man's evil nature remains suppressed only when he is under discipline.
 - Thus Jack's inherent evil nature was suppressed by the disciplined school life and he hesitated for a moment to kill the pig that had been trapped and yet, managed to escape, thanks to Jack's hesitation.
 - Jack felt ashamed and his face became white as he found that he still "held the knife aloft after the piglet tore loose from the creepers."
 - He said as an excuse that he was just waiting for a moment to decide where to stab.
 - Golding comments, "They knew very well why he hadn't: because of the enormity of the knife descending and cutting into living flesh; because of the unbearable blood."
 - After a few days Jack was totally changed and was able to enjoy brutal killing. Golding gives details of how Jack and his party enjoyed killing a sow that was surrounded by pigs.
 - "Jack was on the top of the sow, stabbing downward with his knife. Roger found a lodgment for his point and began to push till he was leaning with his whole weight. The spear moved forward inch by inch and the terrified squealing became a high-pitched scream. Then Jack found the throat and the hot blood spouted over the hands. The sow collapsed under them and they were heavy and fulfilled upon her" (Ch. 8).

RALPH USES DISCIPLINE TO CARRY OUT VIOLENCE

The two incidents indicate that the blood-thirsty nature of Jack and his party could be suppressed only through rigorous discipline.

- These very boys were angelic when they were disciplined in a civilized society, but on the island with no grown-up to discipline them, their beastly nature came up.
 - To quote from the text, "Each of them wore the remains of a black cap and ages ago they had stood in two demure rows and their voices had been the song of angels" (Ch. 8).

CONTEXT ABOUT THE BOYS' DISCIPLINE

His boys are indeed British private school boys:

- Regimented
- subjected to vicious discipline





- and indoctrinated with narrow, restrictive views of human nature.
 - Golding's long career as a teacher at Bishop Wordsworth's School in Salisbury was a kind of extension of his Naval service:
 - a passage from one mode of indoctrination and strict discipline to another.
 - The regression to savagery that marks *Lord of the Flies* is a peculiarly British scholastic phenomenon, and not a universal allegory of moral depravity.
 - Golding appears to be making a point about the irony of discipline:
 - One the one hand, we see it as a sign of an educated and civilized society
 - We use discipline to suppress evil
 - And create law and order for the benefit of the entirety of society
 - Yet, on the other hand, Golding illustrates that it is these very same values that fascists, dictators, governments and organisations use to carry out mass violence and atrocities, such as those he witnessed in WW2
 - And which provides much of the impetus for themes in this text

HOW JACK POSSESSES QUALITIES WE LOVE

Golding, however, did not intend to portray Jack as basically evil.

- As he said in an interview,
 - “Jack has got all the gallant elements—hunting, warrior instincts—that we like to think of in the Knights of the Round Table. He is not really bad. He is a man of anger, violence and action and wants to be a leader.”]
 - What Golding wants to say is that the traditional heroic qualities associated with leadership can also lead to destruction and violence if not harnessed properly and not taken in balance
 - This is a similar point that Shakespeare makes in *Macbeth*:
 - Like Jack, *Macbeth* possesses heroic qualities, but then takes those qualities to extremes, which leads to not only his destruction, but his wife's and nearly society's as well.
 - Similarly, In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, she explores the negative side of scientific creativity
 - On the one hand, we value science, but on the other, Shelley illustrates that if science is not guided by moral principles, it can create 'monsters'
 - Golding makes a similar point to Shelley; he illustrates how the power of science created possibly the most monstrous creation in human history: the atomic bomb
 - Advancement of science and technology made the time ripe for atomic explosion and aggravated the situation as a result of which modern civilization faces the threat of extinction.
 - The arrival of cruel autocrats vitiated the situation.
 - Roger in *Lord of the Flies* is one such autocrat—Golding calls him a kind of Hitler figure—who is noted for atrocity and murder:





- “But the Hitler figure is emerging and he is Roger. He just comes to the surface by the time the book ends. It is only the naval officer’s stepping in which stops Roger from dominating the whole thing as Hitler dominated what was first a reaction partly against Communism. He dominated this and turned it into the evil thing that it became.”

DISCIPLINE SUPPRESSES EVIL

Golding tried to make it clear that the sadistic nature of Roger and Maurice remained suppressed by the discipline and order in their previous life, but on the island their dormant evil nature became exposed.

- When the little boys were playing on the sands, building castles and decorating them with shells, flowers and interesting stones, Roger and Maurice came out of the forest, relieved of their duties at the fire.
 - “Roger led the way straight through the castles, kicking them over, burying the flowers, scattering the chosen stones. Maurice followed, laughing, and added to the destruction. The three littluns paused in their game and looked up. As it happened, the particular marks in which they were interested had not been touched, so they made no protest. Only Percival began to whimper with an eyeful of sand and Maurice hurried away. In the other life Maurice had received chastisement for filling a younger eye with sand. Now, though there was no parent to let fall a heavy hand, Maurice still felt the unease of wrong-doing. At the back of his mind formed the uncertain outline of an excuse” (Ch. 4).

GOLDING vs BALLANTYNE’S OPTIMISM IN *THE CORAL ISLAND*

Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island* represents, for Golding, an extremity of Victorian confidence and optimism in the civilised values of English schoolboy society.

- In Ballantyne’s novel, the boys, shipwrecked on the island, organise their skills and exercise their imaginations to duplicate the comforts and the values of the society they have temporarily lost.
 - Working with discipline, they build shelters and a boat, make various utensils for their convenience, and find a healthy and interesting variety of animal and vegetable food.
 - With the same kind of devotion to higher powers that characterises the more adult survival in the earlier *Robinson Crusoe*, the boys in *The Coral Island* radiate a confidence in their sense of community and organisation which would seem rather smug were they not also genuinely pious and aware of their luck.

HOW EVIL IS PORTRAYED IN BALLANTYNE’S *THE CORAL ISLAND*

Evil in the novel is externalised,

- represented by cannibals on the island whom the English boys defeat
 - they work together
 - and excel in both wit and virtue.





- Their rescue almost does not matter, for they have essentially recreated the world they came from.

BALLANTYNE'S CONCEPT OF CHILDREN

Ballantyne draws on a concept of the child that reaches back through the nineteenth century,

- at least as far as Rousseau and Locke,
 - the child as inherently either...
 - good
 - or neutral,
 - manifesting this goodness if left alone and uncorrupted by the adult world
 - or reflecting and recreating the healthy and civilised environment of his initial consciousness.
 - The ship-wrecked boys in Ballantyne's book also reach an uninhabited island
 - they were able to organise themselves on the pattern offered by the Victorian standard of life
 - and they were rescued at the end of the novel.
 - This confidence in civilised enlightenment, developed from a faith in human possibility in the eighteenth century to a particularly English social achievement in the nineteenth, is precisely what Golding, in *Lord of the Flies*, is determined to reverse.

GOLDING'S REVERSAL OF BALLANTYNE'S CONCEPT

The school children on the uninhabited island in a tropical area offered Golding an opportunity to reconstruct R.M. Ballantyne's well-known story of adventure described in *Coral Island*.

- Lord of the Flies is a reconstruction of *Coral Island* and Golding expresses his views through the modifications done on Ballantyne's story.
 - The external framework of the two novels remains almost the same:
 - in both the novels the children are left in an island where there is no grown up person to guide them
 - and finally they are rescued.
 - But the differences are well designed so that Golding's views on modern civilisation and on human nature become explicit.
 - While Ballantyne's novel has three children characters, Golding's novel has a good number of boys and all of them could not be rescued.
 - One was missing
 - and two were killed;
 - it was no accidental death, but death caused by other children who turned savage.





- o Thus the adventurous story of Ballantyne is reconstructed into a grim one with the message that evil lies in the very nature of man. The message is so explicit that most of the critics have treated the novel as a moral fable, and have interpreted the characters in terms of allegory.

GOLDING'S BELIEFS ABOUT MANKIND AND NATURE

Golding believed that our planet is being raped by man, and that it can be saved only if man tries to behave more humanly. He says:

- *We need more humanity, more care, more love. There are those who expect a political system to produce that, and others who expect the love to produce the system. My own faith is that the truth of the future lies between the two, and we shall behave humanly and a bit humanely, stumbling along, haphazardly generous and gallant, foolishly and meanly wise until the rape of our planet is seen to be preposterous folly that it is.*

THE PARABLE

Though *Lord of the Flies* can be seen a moral parable in the form of a boys' adventure story, in a deeper sense it is a war story.

- o The book's central emblem is the dead parachutist, mistaken by the boys for the Beast Beelzebub, diabolic Lord of the Flies.
 - o For Golding, the true shape of Beelzebub is a pig's head on a stick,
 - and the horror of war is transmuted into the moral brutality implicit (in his view) in most of us.
 - The dead parachutist, in Golding's own interpretation, represents History,
 - o one war after another,
 - o the dreadful gift adults keep presenting to children.
 - Golding's overt intention has some authority, but not perhaps enough to warrant our acceptance of so simplistic a symbol.

LTF vs GOLDING'S OTHER NARRATIVES

Judging *Lord of the Flies* a period piece means that one doubts its long-range survival, if only because it is scarcely a profound vision of evil.

- o Golding's first novel, *Lord of the Flies* does not sustain a critical comparison with his best narratives: *The Inheritors*, *Pincher Martin* (his masterpiece), *Free Fall* and the much later *Darkness Visible*.
 - o All these books rely upon nuance, irony, intelligence, and do not reduce to a trite moral allegory.





- Golding acknowledged the triteness, yet insisted upon his fable's truth
 - Man is a fallen being. He is gripped by original sin. His nature is sinful and his state perilous. I accept the theology and admit the triteness; but what is trite is true; and a truism can become more than a truism when it is a belief passionately held.

LTF's APPEAL

Lord of the Flies aspires to be a universal fable, but its appeal to American schoolchildren partly inheres in its curious exoticism.

- Its characters are implausible because they are humorless; even one ironist among them would explode the book.
 - The Christlike Simon is particularly unconvincing; Golding does not know how to portray the psychology of a saint.
 - Whether indeed, in his first novel, he knew how to render anyone's psychology is disputable.
 - His boys are indeed British private school boys:
 - regimented,
 - subjected to vicious discipline,
 - and indoctrinated with narrow, restrictive views of human nature.
 - Golding's long career as a teacher at Bishop Wordsworth's School in Salisbury was a kind of extension of his Naval service:
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A WARNING AGAINST VIOLENT TENDENCIES

Lord of The Flies is a well-told tale of a reversion to barbarism is a warning against tendencies in many groups that may become violent,

- and such a warning remains sadly relevant in the early twenty-first century.

REGRESSION TO SAVAGERY – A VICTORIAN LEGACY

Golding's fear of regression to savagery was not a new one, in the 20th Century

- In Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Hyde is a form of primitive man, an embodiment of the fears of Victorian Britain.
 - With their penchant for classification and control, the Victorians not only divided neighbourhoods into safe and unsafe, but also notoriously classified people into law-abiding and criminal types.





- Inspired by the evolutionary writings of his half-cousin Charles Darwin, Francis Galton used composite photography to determine the facial features shared by the “criminal type.”
 - Galton’s process superimposed the portraits of criminals, making their common traits appear bolder and their individual traits fade away, resulting in ghostly, almost-human “criminal” faces.
 - *Jekyll and Hyde* articulates in Gothic fiction's exaggerated tones late Victorian anxieties concerning degeneration, atavism, and what Cesare Lombroso called "criminal man."
 - *Lord of the Flies* appears to, in some ways, have inherited the theme of regression to savagery, but with a modern twist to it – incorporating the fear of nuclear war and the abuse of science as types of regression
 - The fear of the monstrous potential of science can also be seen as an inherited element of Gothic fiction
 - The fear of nuclear war may be seen as a modern equivalent to...
 - *Frankenstein*
 - *Edward Hyde (Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde)*

WAS GOLDING AN OPTIMIST OR PESSIMIST?

Golding refuted the charge of pessimism brought against him.

- “I am by nature an optimist,” he said.

Lord of the Flies may apparently look like an expression of utter frustration and pessimism, because the innocent and the good natured boys are killed and the rule of discipline and good sense is ousted by savagery.

- But this show is a real one, based on the experience of the evil forces active in the politics of Europe during the first half of the twentieth century.
 - That is why Golding said in an interview that whatever he depicted about man’s nature (in *Lord of the Flies*) was taken from life:
 - *You cannot write about man without including his evil nature and this evil is more prominent than good. He has the original evil—original sin as Christians would say, but he also has original good. Perhaps the colour of original good is not as strong as the colour of original evil. So original evil, when it is portrayed, appears to dominate the picture. So I don’t think pessimism has been a dominating concern of mine. It is simply there because it is what we notice.*

GOOD VS EVIL IN THE STORY

The author’s observation holds good when we find that the colour of what he says ‘original good,’ found in Simon, Piggy and Ralph, is not as strong as that of ‘original evil’ projected through Jack and his hunters’ party. The ‘original





evil' is not yet projected as the ultimate winner. The death of Simon and Piggy brought an element of purgation in the novel. The concluding part of the novel may be quoted as an example:

- *Ralph looked at him (the officer) dumbly. For a moment he had a fleeting picture of the strange glamour that had once invested the beaches. But the island was scorched up like dead wood— Simon was dead and Jack had.... The tears began to flow and sobs shook him. He gave himself up to them now for the first time on the island; great, shuddering spasms of grief that seemed to wrench his whole body. His voice rose under the black smoke before the burning wreckage of the island; and infected by that emotion, the other little boys began to shake and sob too. And in the middle of them, with filthy body, matted hair, and unwiped nose, Ralph wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy (248).*
 - Awareness of evil is the first step towards getting rid of it.
 - Ralph and the little boys had not earlier wept, for they had not been fully aware of the nature of evil.
 - Now that they weep for the end of innocence and for the darkness of man's soul, there is a sense of purgation caused by Simon's self-sacrifice and Piggy's murder.

'SIMON IS THE WHOLE POINT OF THE STORY'

Elaborating his view as revealed in the novel, Golding said that "Simon is the whole point of Lord of the Flies and Simon is Love."

- Lord of the Flies is thus an experiment with form which includes symbolic images and characters that explain the author's ideas. Explaining one such image Golding said,
 - *I felt a tremendous visional force behind the whole book. At the end, for example, there is a scene where Ralph is fleeing from the fire on the island, and the point is not just that the boy is being hunted down, but that the whole natural world is being destroyed. That idea was almost as important to me as Ralph himself: the picture of destruction was an atomic one; the island has expanded to be the whole great globe. The book is concerned with what human beings were doing to each other and to the world in which they lived.*

GOLDING AND HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

It was Frank Kermode who said:

- "Golding's novels are simple in so far as they deal in the primordial patterns of human experience and in so far as they have skeletons of parable. On these simple bones the flesh of narrative can take extremely complex forms. This makes for difficulty, but of the most acceptable kind, the difficulty that attends the expression of what is profoundly simple."

