

## RESEARCH ARTICLE



## William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*: A laboratory demonstration of human behaviour sans the restraints of civilization

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### ABSTRACT

The publication of *Lord of the Flies* brought Sir William Golding worldwide recognition as a writer to reckon with. The novel put him instantly at par with some of the greatest novelists of all time. Though at a cursory glance, the novel seems to be utterly simple and many may think it to be absurd of making children as the only characters, yet it has the most convincingly absorbing plot and narrative technique. The children and the kind of role they play, puts it in an anti-romantic stance and, hence, the novel stands as a dystopia. Evil in any form is fundamental to human nature. It just needs a scope and an opportunity to unleash itself. These children, who otherwise would be adored, are seen at their worst. When the controls of a civilized society are unavailable, the same children go berserk and become worse than grown-ups. The novel, therefore, is a laboratory demonstration of human behaviour when the restraints of civilization are not there.

**Key Words:** laboratory, human behaviour, civilization, disorganization, terror tactics, anti-romantic

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Nobel Laureate Sir William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1953) has become a compulsory stop on route of any surveyor of the English novel published in the second half of the twentieth century. During an atomic war, an aeroplane carrying a group of young English school boys is shot down and the party is marooned on an island in the Pacific. The boys, with no elders around, initially try to organize themselves by laying down rules and calling assemblies by means of a conch. Their leader, at this stage, is Ralph, symbolizing the good, helped by an

obese, asthmatic Piggy, symbolizing practical commonsense. But the group slowly regresses to savagery led by the hot-blooded choir leader Jack Merridew, symbolizing evil. There ensues a spate of killings by Jack and his hunters who have let loose a reign of terror and work on fear psychosis. Just at the moment when Ralph is about to be killed by Jack, a naval officer arrives on a rescue ship and escorts the boys back to civilization. However, the Edenic island is on fire and in this realistic novel, Golding shows symbolically the fall of man;

democracy is made to bow down before dictatorship; evil wins at the expense of good; and civilization loses at the hands of barbarism.

*Lord of the Flies* is indeed a demonstration under laboratory conditions of the forms assumed by human behaviour once the restraints of civilization have removed. It is with a definite purpose in mind that Golding lands his characters on an uninhabited island and not on an inhabited one. This island is at a distance from civilization which restraints humans from doing what they would naturally enjoy doing. "Man", as Rousseau said, "is born free but is everywhere in chains" (*The Social Contract*, 1762. Web. N.pag.). These chains arrest us and we cannot be our natural selves living within the precincts of civilization where everything is dictated and where man as an individual is sacrificed at the altar of the wielders of executive power. Individual opinions do not matter; it is the majority who controls the oars and rows the boat where they will.

Writing in the aftermath of World War II, Golding deliberately experiments in a refreshing and realistic mode. His is not the romanticized utopia or the escapist bliss of Ballantyne's *Coral Island*, of which, the novel is an anti-thesis. His group of boys is intensely alive and real. They talk as real school boys would do and their actions do not have a single tinge of artificiality.

When they arrive on the island, their pilot is already dead, but they try to make up for the absence of grown-ups by attempting to frame their own laws under the guidance of the democratically elected Ralph, who wields the conch, the symbol of authority and Ralph's comrade Piggy. But this society is destined to remain a dream because Jack and his hunters unleash terror on the island and with the ceremonial chant, "Kill the beast. Cut his throat. Spill his blood" (86), they hunt both beasts and humans.

Helped by Roger the sadist, Jack soon wins over a larger fellowship who track down Piggy, route Simon the mystic and kill several others besides. The darkness of man's heart is personified in Jack Merridew and his troupe of hunters. The *Old Testament* Beelzebub is the head of a pig, which Jack puts atop a stick to placate an illusory beast. But as Simon understands, and as it turns out to be, the true Lord of the Flies is inside the children

themselves. Externally the children are safe, but there is an internal tug-of-war between conscience, which forbids and lust for power which forces the animal instincts in human to adopt the path the children ultimately tread.

*Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels* and *Coral Island* all tilt towards romanticism or satire but though Golding too uses the same setting, yet his interpretation of it and storytelling are in a fresh realistic light. The island is his laboratory and the boys are his little guinea pigs set free to build or demolish. The school master works away at experiments; as is historically proven, human's first efforts at organization are utterly baffled by brawnier and numerically stronger savages. The civilization, which acts as a watch-dog or a policeman, is remote from the island and cannot order the humans into observing the minimum norms of etiquette; the humans act on their natural instincts.

Golding's island is a tropical paradise and his brilliant description of it brings it alive: "...this was an island: clambering among the pink rocks with the sea on either side..." (37). It is this docile environment which goes up in flames towards the end of the novel. The hunters killing the sow, which still suckles its young, shows that spiritual blight has set in and this reaches a hiatus in the scene where Piggy is killed and the conch is shattered into a thousand white fragments, when "...the sea breathed again, in a long, slow sigh, the water boiled white and pink over the rock and when it went, sucking back again, the body of Piggy was gone" (223). Golding's choice of words makes the novel throb with life and we are virtually sailing on a sea of symbols which are not always easily discernible.

The author's post war frustration comes out effectively – he has proved through his experiment that humans will descend to savagery once the restraints of civilization have been removed. He consoles the readers that evil is natural to man and this novel is a comforting one.

When Conrad wrote on the same theme in *Heart of Darkness*, he too chose the tropics as his setting and his evil-doers too are Englishmen. The success of the two novels is a tribute to the authors who delved into the crevices of the human heart and tried to fathom the conventionally projected

ideal gentlemen – outside the boundaries of their country they could successfully compete in doing evil and win against uncivilized tribes by their zeal and rationality.

Golding's resounding success with *Lord of the Flies* is made explicit in the words of E. L. Epstein, who sees his achievement as having "...combined and synthesized all of the characteristically twentieth-century methods of analysis of the human being and human society and used this unified knowledge to comment on a 'test-situation'. In this book, as in few others at the present time, are findings of psychoanalysts of all schools, anthropologists, social psychologist and philosophical historians mobilized into an attack upon the central problem of modern thought: the nature of the human personality upon society" (250).

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