

Owen Schalk
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Ms. Smith

Intrinsic Evil in William Golding's Lord of the Flies

If all the rules and regulations of our government were to suddenly vanish, how would humanity react? Would every man, woman and child revert to barbaric savagery in order to survive, or would they band together to form a stable civilization much like the one that had once reigned? *try not to be too passive* It appears that William Golding, author of Lord of the Flies, falls into the former school of thought. His novel about schoolboys surviving together on a deserted island explores the idea of humans freed of responsibility, and their barbarous reaction to this sudden lack of administration. One of the themes that is most prevalent in his novel is one of evil existing within everybody. Golding develops this theme throughout the novel through the use of symbolism, characterization, the degeneration of the boys' humanity, and philosophical discussion.

The presence of the "beast" in the novel is representative of the barbaric nature within all of the boys. The multiple iterations in which it appears support this argument. First, it is described as a "snake-thing" (pg. 35) by a boy with a mulberry-colored birthmark. In Genesis 3 of the Old Testament, Satan appears as a serpent, and tempts Adam and Eve into eating the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. This is the first appearance of Satan in the Bible, which is significant because the beast is described in a similar way the first time it is mentioned in Lord of the Flies. Importantly, this reference to the beast is soon followed by tragedy, as the boy

with the birthmark is accidentally killed in what was intended to be a controlled fire. The fact that the initial mention of the beast is followed so soon by death is very significant, as it is the first event that erodes the innocence of the boys. This idea of the beast representing the devil, and therefore the evil within all the boys, is further elaborated on in Chapter 8 when Simon is accosted by the pig's head in the forest. The head, labeled "the Lord of the Flies", informs Simon that the beast is not something that can be hunted and killed, but it is part of all of them. It should be noted that the Hebraic translation of "Lord of the Flies" is "Beelzebub", which is a contemporary name for the devil. So both forms of the beast are incarnations of Satan, and therefore representations of evil. This makes the head's declaration that it is part of all of them so crucial to the themes of the novel; it is saying that there is a sinister force inside all of them. This evil is shown in a number of ways, but most prominently through characterization.

The development of the characters throughout the novel shows this internal evil revealing itself. This is displayed very prevalently in the evolution of Roger's character. In Chapter 4, he throws small rocks at Henry, but directs them all to miss, as his target is protected by "...the taboo of the old life" (pg. 62). This is an important moment not only in Roger's character development, but the evolution of all the boys. It shows that their past lives in Britain are still influencing their decisions on the island, even though they are no longer constrained by their country's government. Later, in Chapter 11, Roger rolls a massive boulder off of Castle Rock and aims it for Piggy, who is thrown to the sea and killed by its impact. This is a significant event in the degeneration of the boys. The fact that nobody protests the murder shows that they no longer abide by the rules that once controlled their lives, and they have totally given

themselves to this new, savage way. Another depraved act involving Roger is the vicious killing of the sow, whose impaled head would soon after haunt Simon's hallucinations. It is a totally ferocious onslaught akin to the predators of the wilderness, with such alarming word choices as "...the air was full of sweat and noise and blood and terror", "...the terrified squealing became a high-pitched scream", and, after the kill, "...they were heavy and fulfilled upon her." (pg.135). This horrific imagery is capped by the reveal that Roger's spear had gone directly into the pig's rectum, which the boys have a hearty laugh over. These word choices, along with this appalling revelation and the indifferent reaction of the boys, make it almost relatable to a rape in terms of disgusting animalism and savagery. It shows just how far the boys have come since hitting someone with pebbles was considered a deplorable prospect. A second character whose internal evil reveals itself in such a predominant way is the main antagonist, Jack Merridew. It should be said that Jack was never as good-natured or innocent as the other boys, but at his worst he was merely an ill-mannered choirboy. As the novel progresses, however, he develops into a cold-hearted tyrant whose evil Roger could only hope to rival. He is constantly trying to undermine Ralph's leadership, establish himself as chief, and towards the end of the book, murder his foe and leave his head as an offering to the beast - "Roger sharpened a stick at both ends." (pg. 190). Jack's development from petulant schoolboy to feared leader is very gradual. The first glimpse of the evil to come occurs in Chapter 3, when he is feverishly occupied with the goal of hunting down a pig he had previously wounded. This obsession grows, and soon all Jack can think about is hunting. It is this pervasive blood lust that first drives a wedge between Jack and Ralph, and culminates into the violent power struggle towards the end of the book. But while Roger and Jack

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are the two most notable examples of evil revealing itself, they are not the only ones who succumb to its bestial temptations. ✓


The declining humanity of the boys is also present in the other characters. Even the protagonist, Ralph, begins to lose his handle on reason as the novel goes on. In the beginning, he is adamant that the boys should focus their efforts on maintaining a fire to signal any passing planes or ships. He is so unwavering in this objective that a rift begins to grow between him and Jack over their differing ideals. As the book progresses, however, Ralph himself begins to forget the importance of the once indispensable signal fire. He draws a blank while arguing for its maintenance ("The fire's the most important thing on the island, because, because -") (pg.142), and later simply repeats the word "smoke" while attempting to vouch for its significance. Another example of an innocent boy losing his senses can be seen in Percival Wemys Madison. At the beginning of the novel, Percival recites his name and address like an incantation that connects him to the world outside the island. Not much is heard from Percival after this until the final pages of the book, where he is described as being unable to remember his address ("Percival Wemys Madison sought in his head for an incantation that had faded clean away.") (pg.201). This is showing that there is some type of ominous force existing within the upstanding boys as well. But while it is clear that wickedness can infect even the most virtuous of people, would it be reasonable to say that evil exists within everybody? ✓

Many great minds have weighed in on this matter. John Locke, an English philosopher, believed that man is a social animal by nature, and that the idea of society will always trump the concept of careless hedonism. However, another philosopher by the name of Thomas Hobbes disagreed with Locke, believing that society would not exist

if the power of the state was not present to enforce it. Locke also wrote that humans can intrinsically tell right from wrong, and are capable of separating lawful outcomes from unlawful outcomes. He specified that humans will always be able to tell the difference between something that is theirs and something that belongs to another person. Once again, Hobbes' philosophy contrasted sharply with Locke's. It was his belief that our understanding of what is right and wrong - or what is ours and what is not - is so minute that without the rule of a government, it would be practically non-existent. The novel's two primary colliding forces, Ralph and Jack, can be compared to the clashing philosophies of Hobbes and Locke. Ralph, on the side of John Locke, is quite practical and has a comprehension of what is right and wrong. He represents the humanity that continues to thrive during times where no state is around to govern. Jack, meanwhile, fully embodies the doctrine of Thomas Hobbes. In the absence of a government he completely reverts back to his latent savagery, and seems to have little understanding of what is right and wrong; or rather, little concern. Near the end of the novel, though, it appears that Ralph is beginning to show signs of lapsing into the Hobbes school of thought. He starts to lose control of his rational state of mind, and forget the reasons why rescue is so imperative to his plan. It is in these ways that Golding enforces his idea that evil exists inside everybody.

It is hard to say how somebody older would survive in a situation similar to the one the schoolboys are found in. It would seem logical to assume that they would be much more organized than the children, but if William Golding is correct about evil existing inside everybody, the circumstances might decay in a similar fashion. Golding's novel Lord of the Flies uses the preceding examples of symbolism, characterization, declining

humanity, and philosophical debate to express his theme of evil within everyone.



Works Cited

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1954. Novel.

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Formal Outline

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- I. **Thesis statement** – The theme of evil existing within everyone develops throughout the novel through the use of symbolism, characterization, and the degeneration of the boys' humanity.
- II. **Topic sentence** – The presence of the "beast" in the novel is representative of the animalistic nature within all of the boys.
- a. During Simon's hallucination, the beast claims that it is a part of all of them.
 - i. "... I'm part of you? Close, close, close!" (pg. 143)
 - b. The multiple iterations of the beast reflect its sinister nature; snake-thing = the devil, "Lord of the Flies" = Beelzebub.
 - i. "He wants to know what you're going to do about the snake-thing." (pg. 35)
- ***Transition sentence** – The evolution of the beast can also be seen in the transformation of the boys.
- III. **Topic sentence** – The development of the characters throughout the novel shows this internal evil revealing itself.
- a. Roger, at first unable to hit another boy with a rock, murders Piggy with a boulder.
 - i. "... invisible yet strong, was the taboo of the old life." (pg. 62)
 - b. Jack's transformation from ill-mannered schoolboy to cold-blooded tyrant.
 - i. "He's going to beat Wilfred." (pg. 159)
- ***Transition sentence** – This loss of humanity is not only present in Jack and Roger; it pervades the other boys as well.
- IV. **Topic sentence** – The ~~loss~~ declining humanity of the boys ~~represents~~ ~~to lose his handle on reason~~ shows them reverting to their natural savagery.
- a. — ~~to lose his handle on reason~~
 - i. "The fire's the most important thing on the island, because, because -" (pg. 142)
 - b. Percival no longer remembers his address
 - i. "Percival Wemyss Madison sought in his head for an incantation that had faded clean away." (pg. 201)
- ***Concluding sentence** – It is in these ways that Golding enforces his idea that evil exists inside everybody.
- V. **Conclusion** – William Golding's novel Lord of the Flies uses these examples of symbolism, characterization, and declining humanity to express his theme of evil within everyone.