

Lord of the Flies by William Golding

Historical Context: Lord of the Flies

 EXPLORING Novels, 2003

Golding and World War II

"When I was young, before the war, I did have some airy-fairy views about man.... But I went through the war and that changed me. The war taught me different and a lot of others like me," Golding told Douglas A. Davis in the *New Republic*. Golding was referring to his experiences as captain of a British rocket-launching craft in the North Atlantic, where he was present at the sinking of the *Bismarck*, crown ship of the German navy, and participated in the D-Day invasion of German-occupied France. He was also directly affected by the devastation of England by the German air force, which severely damaged the nation's infrastructure and marked the beginning of a serious decline in the British economy. Wartime rationing continued well into the postwar period. Items like meat, bread, sugar, gasoline, and tobacco were all in short supply and considered luxuries. To turn their country around, the government experimented with nationalization of key industries like coal, electric power, and gas companies as well as the transportation industry. Socialized medicine and government-sponsored insurance were also introduced. Such changes, and the difficult conditions that produced them, suggest the climate of the postwar years in which Golding wrote [Lord of the Flies](#).

The Geography of a Tropical Island

Although highly romanticized in both Western fiction and nonfiction, life on a typical tropical island is not all that easy. The weather is usually very hot and humid, and there is no breeze once one enters the jungle. While fish abound in the surrounding waters and the scent of tropical flowers wafts through the air, one must still watch out for sharks, and one cannot live on a diet of fruit and flowers. James Fahey, a naval seaman who served in the Pacific islands during the war, concluded: "We do not care too much for this place, the climate takes the life right out of you."

The Political Climate of the [1950s](#)

The rise of the Cold War between the [Soviet Union](#) (USSR) and the western powers after the end of World War II signaled a new phase in world geopolitics. Actual wars during the 1950s were confined to relatively small-scale conflicts, as in Korea (involving the [United States](#)) and [Vietnam](#) (involving the French). The nonviolent, yet still threatening, sabre-rattling between the USSR and the United States, however, reached a peak with the first successful hydrogen bomb test by the United States on November 1, 1952, at Eniwetok Atoll in the Pacific. A second device, hundreds of times more powerful than the [atomic bombs](#) dropped over Japan, was successfully detonated on March 1, 1954, at Bikini Atoll. In the United States, public fallout shelters were designated for large cities, allegedly to protect citizens from the rain of radioactive materials produced by such nuclear explosions. Schoolchildren practiced taking cover under their desks during regular air raid drills. Also in 1954, Canada and the United States agreed to build a "DEW" line (Distant Early Warning Line) of radar stations across the Arctic to warn of approaching aircraft or missiles over the Arctic. In short, the atmosphere of the first half of the 1950s was

one of suspicion, distrust, and threats among the big powers. An atomic war on the scale that *Lord of Flies* suggested did not seem out of the realm of possibility during the early 1950s.

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Themes and Construction: Lord of the Flies

 *EXPLORING Novels*, 2003

Themes

Good and Evil

During their abandonment on the island, Ralph, Piggy, Simon, and many of the other boys show elements of good in their characters. Ralph's calm "stillness," and his attentiveness to others' needs, make him a potentially good person. Good may be defined here as something just, virtuous, or kind that conforms to the moral order of the universe. Piggy's knowledge and belief in the power of science and rational thought to help people understand and thus control the physical world for their mutual benefit are also obviously a force for good. Simon, always ready to help out, sensitive to the power of evil but not afraid to stand up to it, is perhaps the strongest representative of the forces of good in the story.

Yet all of these characters ultimately fall victim to the forces of evil, as represented by the cruelties of the hunters, especially Jack and Roger. Piggy loses his glasses, and thus the power to make fire. This power, when controlled by the forces of reason, is a powerful tool for good: it warms the boys, cooks their food, and provides smoke for the rescue signals that are their only hope for survival. But in the hands of those with less skill and knowledge, the fire becomes an agent of destruction—first unintentionally in the hands of those who are ignorant of its powers, then purposefully when Jack and the hunters use it to smoke out and destroy their opponents. It is Simon's bad luck to stumble upon the feasting group of boys with his news about the "man on the hill" just as the group's ritual pig hunt is reaching its climax. Simon's ritual killing, to which Piggy and Ralph are unwitting yet complicit witnesses, is perhaps the decisive blow in the battle between the forces of good and evil. Later Piggy loses his life at the hand of the almost totally evil Roger, who has loosed the boulder from Castle Rock. Now, without Piggy's glasses and wise counsel and Simon's steadfastness, Ralph is greatly weakened, and to survive he must ultimately be rescued by adult society, represented by the British captain. It is important, however, to note that Jack, too, is defeated because he cannot control the forces of evil. It is Jack's order to use fire to destroy Ralph's hiding place

that virtually destroys the island, although, ironically, it is the smoke from that fire that finally attracts the British ship and leads to the boys' rescue.

Appearances and Reality

At several points in the story, Golding is at pains to stress the complexity of human life. During the novel, neither a firm grasp of reality (represented by Piggy's scientific bent and the island's ocean side) nor the comfort of illusions (seen in Ralph's daydreaming, Simon's silent communion with [nature](#) among the candlebud trees, and symbolized by the sleepy lagoon side of the island) is enough to save the boys from the forces of evil. The sun, which should represent life and the power of reason, can also be blinding. Yet darkness is no better, as can be seen when the littluns' fantasies and fears are only further distorted by nighttime shadows. This sense of complexity is perhaps best summed up by Ralph, speculating on how shadows at different times of day [change](#) the appearance of things: "If faces were different when lit from above or below—what was a face? What was anything?" This comment can also relate to the power of the painted faces of Jack's hunters to remove the hunters from a sense of individual responsibility for their masked deeds.

Reason and Emotion

Because of Golding's great interest in Greek and Roman mythology, this theme is sometimes summarized by critics as the conflict between the Apollonian and the Dionysian aspects of life. This refers to the Greek gods Apollo, the [god](#) of reason, and Dionysus, the god of wine and emotion. Most characters in the story show elements of both reason and emotion. Piggy, with his interest in science and fact, may seem to represent the life of reason, while Jack and the hunters may seem to represent the emotional side of life. To Golding, however, matters are not that simple. Just as in Greek mythology the grave of Dionysus is found within the temple of Apollo at Delphi, so in the story reason and emotion may battle with each other within the same character. Thus when Roger first throws rocks, his arm is conditioned by rational society to avoid hitting the littlun Henry. Later his emotions will overcome his reason and he will loose the boulder that kills Piggy. Sometimes Golding shows the struggle between reason and emotion using two characters, as when Ralph the daydreamer struggles to remember the rational ideas Piggy told him about rescue. In the end, reason, in the form of the British captain, seems to triumph over the runaway emotion that has led to the destruction of the island and at least two of its temporary inhabitants. But the reflective reader will remember that the world to which the captain will presumably be trying to return has, in fact, been destroyed by an atom bomb. This suggests that in the end the grand achievements of science, compounded with the irrational emotions of warring powers, may have spelled the doom of humanity.

Morals and [Morality](#)

Golding himself has said that the writing of *Lord of the Flies* was "an attempt to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human nature." Golding sets a group of children, who should supposedly be closest to a state of [innocence](#), alone on an island without supervision. In this fashion, he can test whether the defects of society lie in the form of society or in the individuals who create it. Ralph tries to maintain order and convince the boys to work for the common good, but he can't overcome the selfishness of Jack and his hunters. By the time Piggy makes his plea for the return of his glasses—"not as a favor ... but because what's right's right"—Jack and his gang can no longer recognize a moral code where law and cooperation is best and killing is wrong. As the author once commented, "the moral is that the shape of a society must depend on the ethical nature of the individual and not on any political system."

Construction

Point of View

All novels use at least one perspective, or point of view, from which to tell the story. This may consist of a point of view of no single character (the omniscient, or "all-knowing" point of view), a single character, multiple characters in turn, and combinations or variations on these. Golding uses the omniscient point of view, which enables him to stand outside and above the story itself, making no reference to the inner life of any of the individual characters. From this lofty point he comments on the action from the point of view of a removed, but observant, bystander. Golding has commented in interviews that the strongest emotion he personally feels about the story is grief. Nevertheless, as the narrator he makes a conscious decision, like the British captain at the end of the story, to "turn away" from the shaking and sobbing boys and remain detached. The narrator lets the actions, as translated through the artist's techniques of [symbolism](#), [structure](#), and so on, speak for themselves. Even so dramatic and emotional an event as Piggy's death is described almost clinically: "Piggy fell forty feet and landed on his back across that square red rock in the sea. His head opened and stuff came out and turned red."

Symbolism

A symbol can be defined as a person, place, or thing that represents something more than its literal meaning. The conch shell, to take an obvious example in the story, stands for a society of laws in which, for example, people take their turn in speaking. The pig's head is a more complex example of a symbol. To Simon, and to many readers, it can have more than one meaning. On a rational level, Simon knows the pig's head is just that: a "pig's head on a stick." But on a more emotional level, Simon realizes that the pig's head represents an evil so strong that it has the power to make him faint. When he thinks of the head as "The [Lord of the Flies](#)," the symbol becomes even more powerful, as this title is a translation of "Beelzebub," another name for the Devil. Similarly, the fire set by using Piggy's glasses, when controlled, could be said to represent science and technology at their best, serving humans with light and heat. When uncontrolled, however, fire represents science and technology run amok, killing living things and destroying the island. Simon himself can be said to symbolize Christ, the selfless servant who is always helping others but who dies because his message—that the scary beast on the hill is only a dead parachutist—is misunderstood. Throughout the story, the noises of the surf, the crackling fire, the boulders rolling down hills, and trees exploding from the fire's heat are often compared to the boom of cannons and drum rolls. In this way, Golding reminds us that the whole story is intended to repeat and symbolize the atomic war which preceded it.

Setting

In the setting for *Lord of the Flies*, Golding has created his own "Coral Island"—an allusion, or literary reference, to a book of that name by R. M. Ballantyne. Using the same scenario of boys being abandoned on a tropical island, *The Coral Island* (1857) is a classic boys' romantic adventure story, like Johann Wyss's *The Swiss Family Robinson*, in which everyone has a great time and nobody dies or ends up unhappy. Golding, however, has quite different ideas, and he has used the setting in his story to reinforce those concepts. Yes, the island can be a wonderful place, as the littluns discover by day when they are bathing in the lagoon pool or eating fruit from the trees. But at night the same beach can be the setting for nightmares, as some boys fancy that they see "snake-things" in the trees.

Golding builds a similar contrast between the generally rocky side of the island that faces the sea, and the softer side that faces the lagoon. On the ocean side of the island, "the filmy enchantments of mirage

could not endure the cold ocean water.... On the other side of the island, swathed at midday with mirage, defended by the shield of the quiet lagoon, one might dream of rescue; but here, faced by the brute obtuseness of the ocean... one was helpless." Thus the setting reinforces Golding's view of human nature as a struggle of good intentions and positive concepts like love and [faith](#) against the harshness of nature and human failings like anger.

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