AQA English Literature GCSE

Lord of the Flies

Context

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William Golding

Golding's Experiences



William Golding served in the **Royal Navy** during the **Second World War**, taking part in active service, including the D-Day landings and the Battle of Walcheren. Before the war, Golding believed that people were naturally good. However, witnessing violence firsthand completely transformed his beliefs.

Golding later explained that the war allowed him to see **"what people were capable of doing."** He became convinced that cruelty and violence were not limited to **dictators** or particular countries, but were part of human nature itself. These experiences form the foundation of *Lord of the Flies*, where ordinary schoolboys gradually become capable of murder and **brutality**.

Golding as a Teacher

Before and after serving in the Navy, Golding worked as an English teacher at a boys' grammar school for over twenty years. His daily interactions with children challenged the **romantic belief that children were naturally innocent.**



Golding observed how easily children formed groups, bullied one another and excluded those who were different. These observations influenced his decision to make the **protagonists** schoolboys. Rather than portraying childhood as **innocent**, Golding demonstrates that children possess the **same capacity for cruelty** as adults when social restraints disappear. This makes their descent into savagery far more shocking.

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World War Two and *Lord of the Flies*

The Second World War

William Golding published *Lord of the Flies* in **1954**, less than ten years after the end of the Second World War. The conflict (1939–1945) fundamentally changed how people viewed civilisation and humanity. Before the war, many believed that society was becoming increasingly civilised and progressive. However, events such as **the Holocaust**, the destruction caused by warfare and the use of **atomic bombs** on Hiroshima and Nagasaki demonstrated that even the world's most advanced nations were capable of extraordinary violence.



Golding wrote his novel in response to this changing view of humanity, questioning previous ideas about civilisation and morality. The **brutality** he witnessed shaped his view that even ordinary men could commit horrific acts when social rules collapsed and war broke out.

The Cold War

The novel was also written during the early years of the **Cold War**, a period of political and military tension between the **United States** and the **Soviet Union.** Although the two **superpowers** never fought directly, both possessed nuclear weapons, creating **widespread fear** that another global war could destroy civilisation.



Golding reflects these anxieties by placing the boys on the island because they are being evacuated from a world at war. Early in the novel, Piggy even suggests that an **atomic bomb** may have destroyed civilisation altogether. The dead parachutist, described as ***"a sign came down from the world of grown-ups"***, **symbolises** how the violence of the adult world literally falls into the boys' supposedly peaceful paradise. Rather than presenting the island as separate from civilisation, Golding suggests that it is simply a **microcosm** of the adult world.

The **symbolism** of Piggy's glasses is also used to reflect widespread fears of growing technology in warfare. The glasses are both used for rescue and maintaining civilisation (for lighting the signal fire) but are quickly corrupted to become a tool of violence. Golding suggests that **scientific advancements** require moral responsibility, mirroring concerns about nuclear weapons and the misuse of them.

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War in the Novel

Golding uses the boys' conflict to **mirror** the destruction caused by modern warfare. Ralph and Jack's rivalry becomes increasingly violent until the entire island is engulfed in flames. Ironically, the fire that is intended to kill Ralph ultimately destroys the island itself, reflecting fears that nuclear war would lead to **humanity's self-destruction.**

The arrival of the naval officer at the end of the novel initially appears to restore order. However, the officer himself is participating in the wider war beyond the island. His ironic question, ***"Having a war or something?"***, highlights Golding's message that **adults are no more civilised than children.** The boys have recreated, on a smaller scale, the same conflict that exists in the adult world.

Human Nature

Golding's View of Humanity

Unlike many writers before him, Golding believed that **evil** originates from within human beings rather than from external forces. He famously described *Lord of the Flies* as:

> ***"An attempt to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human nature."***



This means that Golding believed society becomes violent because people themselves possess the capacity for **violence**. Throughout the novel, the boys are not corrupted by the island; instead, the island removes the rules and **social restraints** that previously controlled their behaviour.

Simon recognises this truth when he realises that the **Beast** is not a physical creature but something that exists inside every human being. Golding therefore presents evil as an unavoidable part of human nature rather than something that can be defeated. Even characters that embrace civilisation and order, such as Ralph and Piggy, find themselves involved in acts of violence, highlighting how evil is **universal** and not limited to certain groups or nations.

Childhood and Education

Loss of Innocence

Victorian and **early twentieth-century literature** often portrayed children as naturally innocent and morally pure. Golding deliberately rejects this idea. Although the boys initially recreate the structures of school by holding assemblies, electing a chief and making rules, these civilised behaviours quickly disappear. Golding argues that innocence is **fragile** and easily replaced by fear, violence and the desire for power.

The deaths of Simon and Piggy demonstrate that childhood innocence cannot survive once civilisation collapses. Ralph's tears at the end of the novel **symbolise** not only his personal loss but humanity's loss of innocence after the Second World War.

British Society and Social Class

Class Differences

Although all the boys attend English schools, Golding subtly reflects the **rigid class system** that existed in 1950s Britain. These divisions are so deeply rooted in society that the boys recreate a class system on the island.

Piggy's **regional accent** and grammatical mistakes immediately separate him from the other boys, who are implied to have attended prestigious public schools. Despite being the most intelligent character, Piggy is mocked, ignored and excluded because of his social background. Even when civilisation disappears on the island, the hierarchy remains as the boys continue to **ostracise** Piggy.



Through Piggy, Golding **criticises** a society that values confidence, status and appearance over intelligence and reason.

British Imperialism

Golding wrote Lord of the Flies in a time where Britain prided itself on its **imperial power**, **moral superiority** and the belief it was a civilising influence. When Jack says ***"After all, we're not savages. We're English and the English are the best at everything",*** Golding displays the arrogance of British imperial ideology. He questions this assumption by showing how quickly the British orderly boys descend into **barbarity**. Golding challenges their **colonial** confidence by showing that the British are not inherently moral or civilised, and thus exposing the **hypocrisy of imperial pride**.

When they arrive on the island, the boys seek to 'colonise' it by imposing rules and claiming areas of land. When the boys announce, "***This belongs to us",*** Golding echoes Britain's imperial outlook. Their subsequent destruction and violence, leaving the island as a burning wreck, highlights how **colonial domination** is built on violence and arrogance, ending in devastation rather than civilisation.



Religion and Morality

Christian Symbolism

Golding incorporates **Christian symbolism** throughout the novel, but does not write a straightforward religious allegory. He uses these symbols to contrast innocence with human evil.



The island resembles the **Garden of Eden**, beginning as an untouched paradise before becoming **corrupted** by violence. The boys' descent into savagery mirrors the Christian ideas of humans 'falling' from goodness. This reinforces Golding's idea that humans are inherently flawed, drawing upon Christian ideas of 'original sin.'

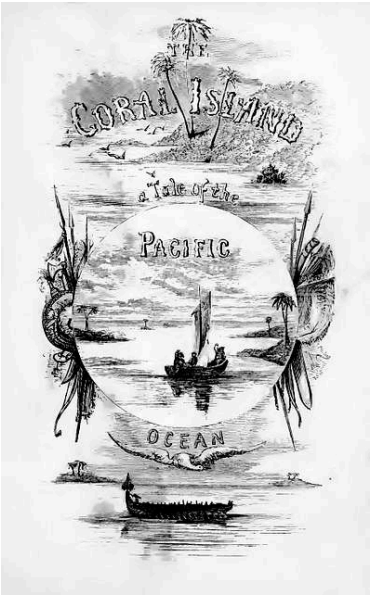
Simon is often interpreted as a **Christ-like figure** because he possesses moral insight and sacrifices himself while attempting to reveal the truth about the Beast. Meanwhile, the Lord of the Flies (the pig's head) alludes to **Beelzebub**, another name for the Devil.

However, Golding's purpose is not to argue that evil comes from supernatural forces. Instead, he suggests that humanity creates its own evil through fear, hatred and violence.

Literary Context

A Response to *The Coral Island*

One of Golding's biggest literary influences was R. M. Ballantyne's ***The Coral Island* (1857)**. The **'castaway'** genre allowed writers to explore the consequences of young people being left alone with the promise of adventure, without adult supervision or societal constraints.



Like *Lord of the Flies*, *The Coral Island* follows British schoolboys stranded on a tropical island. However, Ballantyne portrays the boys as courageous, moral and naturally civilised. Golding deliberately **subverts this optimistic tradition** by borrowing the names **Ralph** and **Jack**, but presenting them in a far darker way. Rather than proving the superiority of British civilisation, Golding demonstrates how quickly social order collapses when laws and authority disappear.

Through this **contrast**, Golding challenges the comforting belief that civilisation is permanent. Instead, he argues that civilisation depends upon individuals continually choosing morality over violence.

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