AQA English Literature GCSE

Lord of the Flies: Themes

Civilisation and Savagery

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Civilisation and Savagery

Theme Summary



The conflict between **civilisation** and **savagery** is the central theme of *Lord of the Flies*. Throughout the novel, Golding explores whether human beings are naturally inclined to live peacefully within an organised society or whether, without the rules and structures of **civilisation**, they will inevitably descend into **savagery**.

The deserted island becomes like a testing ground where the boys must create their own society, allowing Golding to examine the struggle between order, cooperation, and morality on one side and violence, fear, and instinct on the other.

Ralph and Piggy represent **civilisation**, democracy, and rational thinking, while Jack and Roger increasingly embody **savagery** – embracing power, violence, and the rejection of rules. As the novel progresses, the boys' descent into violence underscores Golding's belief that the capacity for evil resides in everyone and that society's rules are essential for restraining humanity's inner savagery.

Presentation of the Theme



The Breakdown of Civilisation

Golding presents the boys as products of **British civilisation**. They are well accustomed to the rules, the **authority** and the **democratic** order. Their first actions on the island reflect their desire to recreate the society they have lost; hence, they choose Ralph as the 'elected' chief by a democratic vote. Ralph insists, ***"There aren't any grown-ups. We shall have to look after ourselves."*** This statement **reflects** his belief that **civilisation** requires cooperation, responsibility, and respect for authority.

However, as the story progresses, these **ideals** quickly begin to loosen. The boys soon start neglecting their practical responsibilities set for them, such as looking after and maintaining the fire, keeping and building shelters, and caring for the younger ones in the group. Instead, they start leaning towards hunting and entertainment over long-term survival.

As order begins to collapse, the narrator observes, **"The world, that understandable and lawful world, was slipping away"** (Chapter 5: Beast from Water). The **repetition** of **"world"** emphasises the loss of the structured society the boys once relied upon, while **"lawful"** **highlights** the disappearance of rules and authority. Through their actions and the gradual abandonment of their responsibilities, Golding demonstrates how fragile civilisation can be. Through this decline, Golding suggests that **civilisation** is not an **innate** human quality but a structure that must be actively maintained.

The Rise of Savagery

The ideal civilisation does not last long on the island, and **savagery** gradually begins to take over. Golding depicts this transformation as gradual rather than instantaneous, demonstrating how the boys' hunger for power, excitement, and fear drives them to leave their civilised society.



While Jack increasingly rejects rules in favour of hunting and dominance, Ralph desperately tries to preserve order. During his argument with Jack, Ralph insists, ***"Because the rules are the only thing we've got."*** The **emphatic** phrase ***"only thing"*** highlights how fragile civilisation has become and suggests that rules are the last barrier preventing the boys from descending completely into savagery.

Ralph later warns, ***"If I blow the conch and they don't come back; then we've had it. We shan't keep the fire going. We'll be like animals. We'll never be rescued."*** His continual use of ***"we"*** **indicates** his ongoing concern for the group's survival, and the comparison "like animals" expresses his worry that the boys will lose their humanity if they leave civilisation. Jack, on the other hand, publicly opposes democratic principles, saying, ***"Bollocks to the rules! "We're strong – we hunt!"*** represents his total rejection of law and order as well as his acceptance of brutality and violence.

Golding also uses **symbolism** to illustrate the boys' descent into savagery. Jack's painted face becomes a mask that frees him from guilt and responsibility. The narrator explains that ***"The mask was a thing on its own, behind which Jack hid, liberated from shame and self-consciousness."*** The mask **represents** the loss of individual identity and moral accountability, allowing Jack to **abandon** the expectations of civilisation and commit acts of violence without remorse. By concealing his identity, the mask **symbolises** how easily social restraint can disappear when individuals are freed from accountability.





The boys' increasing savagery is reflected in their behaviour. They become physically dirtier, perform **ritualistic** dances, chant ***"Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!"***, and eventually mistake Simon for the Beast, killing him in a frenzied act of collective violence. The **repetition** and **imperative verbs** in the chant create a rhythm, reflecting how the boys have abandoned reason in favour of instinct and bloodlust.

Later, Roger deliberately kills Piggy, and Jack triumphantly announces, ***"The conch is gone!"*** The destruction of the conch **symbolises** the complete collapse of order, reason, and democratic authority, marking the point at which **savagery** has fully replaced **civilisation** on the island.

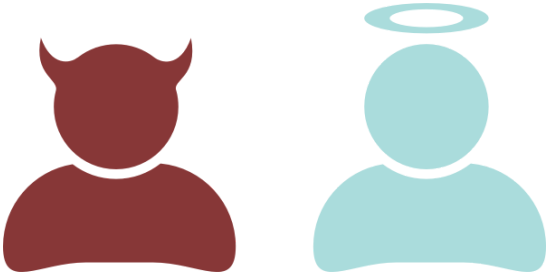
Golding's Message about Human Nature

Through the conflict between civilisation and savagery, Golding explores his belief that the capacity for evil exists within every human being. Golding doesn't only present evil as an outside force but, at the same time, shows how darkness lies within human nature itself.

This is shown when Simon realises that the Beast is not an actual creature, but a **symbol** of the boys' own inner fears and violent instincts. The Lord of the Flies tells Simon, ***"I'm part of you."*** This moment reveals Golding's **central message** that humanity's greatest threat comes from within rather than from external dangers.

Golding, through his writing, demonstrates that moral behaviour often depends upon the presence of laws, authority, and social expectations. Once these **restraints** are loosened, many of the boys willingly embrace violence, cruelty, and the desire for power.

Even Ralph begins to lose sight of his commitment to rescue and civilisation, showing that no individual is entirely immune to humanity's darker instincts. By the novel's conclusion, Golding presents civilisation as a fragile construct that constantly struggles against humankind's more **primitive** desires.



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Connections with Other Themes

Power and Leadership

It cannot be separated from the theme of **power**, as Jack's pursuit of authority is achieved by encouraging fear and violence rather than cooperation.

The contrasting **leadership** styles of Jack and Ralph reflect the wider conflict between the opposing impulses of **civilisation and savagery**. Golding emphasises this when the narrator observes, ***"The two boys faced each other. There was the brilliant world of hunting, tactics, fierce exhilaration, skill; and there was the world of longing and baffled commonsense."*** The **contrast** between the ***"brilliant world of hunting"*** and the ***"world of longing and baffled commonsense"*** **symbolises** the clash between Jack's instinctive desire for power and Ralph's commitment to order, responsibility, and reason.

Fear and the Beast

The theme also connects to **fear**, as the imagined Beast becomes the **catalyst** that drives many of the boys towards savagery and allows Jack to manipulate them into accepting his rule. As fear grows, the boys become less rational and more willing to abandon the rules and order represented by Ralph. Jack **exploits** this fear by presenting himself as a protector, using the threat of the Beast to strengthen his authority and draw the boys further away from civilisation.

Loss of Innocence

The **breakdown** of civilisation also leads to a profound **loss of innocence**. The boys are well-behaved schoolboys when they first arrive on the island, but over time, they develop the ability to kill, torment, and destroy. Their **metamorphosis** serves as an example of how easily savagery may take the place of innocence when civilisation collapses.



Through the connections between these themes, Golding's *Lord of the Flies* becomes more than a tale of survival and delves deeply into human nature. Golding raises the question of whether civilisation actually suppresses humanity's **innate** savagery or merely hides it behind **social norms** and expectations.