AQA English Literature GCSE

Lord of the Flies: Themes

Human Nature and Evil

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Human Nature and Evil

Theme Summary



Golding presents **human nature** and **evil** as closely connected throughout *Lord of the Flies*. Through the boys' descent from civilised schoolchildren into violent savages, he suggests that evil is not an external force but an innate part of human nature. The island acts as a **microcosm** of society, allowing Golding to explore what happens when the restraints of **civilisation**, law and morality are removed.

By the end of the novel, Golding refers to ***"mankind's essential illness"*** – humanity's inherent capacity for violence, cruelty and **moral corruption**. The boys initially attempt to recreate order through the conch, assemblies and shared responsibilities, but fear, the desire for power and the instinct to dominate gradually **overpower** reason and compassion. Golding therefore suggests that **civilisation** suppresses humanity's darker instincts, but when these restraints weaken, **primitive impulses** quickly emerge.

Presentation of the Theme

The Beast as a Symbol



One of Golding's most powerful ideas is that the Beast does not exist as a physical creature; instead, it **symbolises** the darkness within human beings. While the younger boys fear an imaginary monster, Simon recognises the truth when he suggests, ***"Maybe there is a beast... Maybe it's only us."*** The hesitant **repetition** of ***"maybe"*** reflects how difficult it is to accept that evil comes from humanity itself. Golding **contrasts** Simon's insight with the boys' belief in an external threat to show how fear prevents them from recognising the true source of danger.



This idea reaches its **climax** during Simon's encounter with the Lord of the Flies. The pig's head declares, ***"Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill!... You knew, didn't you? I'm part of you? Close, close, close!"*** Through this **direct address**, Golding forces Simon and the reader to confront the idea that evil cannot simply be destroyed because it exists within individuals. The **symbolism** of the Lord of the Flies, whose name derives from Beelzebub, transforms the pig's head into a physical **embodiment** of humanity's inner corruption.

Golding further **reinforces** this message after Simon's murder, when Ralph and Piggy struggle with responsibility. Piggy insists, ***"It was an accident... We was scared!"***, attempting to justify the killing through fear, while Ralph repeatedly admits, ***"That was murder."*** Their **contrasting** reactions show how people may either confront or **rationalise** their own capacity for evil. Golding therefore suggests that the true Beast lies within human nature itself.

Civilisation Restrains Human Savagery



Golding presents the novel as a **gradual breakdown** of civilised behaviour once structures of authority are removed. At first, the boys value rules, cooperation and rescue, but these ideals are increasingly replaced by violence and the pursuit of power. Even Ralph, who **represents** order and democracy, is not immune to darker instincts. During the first successful hunt, he experiences ***"the desire to squeeze and hurt,"*** revealing that the thrill of violence affects even one of the novel's most morally responsible characters. Golding therefore suggests that the temptation towards violence is universal rather than confined to supposedly 'evil' individuals.

Jack's obsession with hunting develops this idea further. After killing a pig, the hunters have ***"outwitted a living thing, imposed their will upon it, taken away its life like a long satisfying drink."*** The **metaphor** compares killing to drinking, suggesting that violence becomes intoxicating as **moral boundaries** disappear. Golding presents brutality not simply as an act of survival, but as a source of pleasure, power and belonging.

The boys' moral collapse is most clearly revealed during Simon's murder. Driven by fear and collective hysteria, they chant, ***"Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!"*** before ***"the crowd surged... leapt... struck, bit, tore."*** Golding's violent listing of **dynamic verbs** transforms the boys into a single, **animalistic force,** while ***"bit"*** and ***"tore"*** suggest that instinct has replaced reason and morality.

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Golding shows that the boys do not become savage immediately; instead, their morality gradually breaks down as the influence of civilisation weakens. Even Ralph experiences violent impulses, while Jack increasingly **embraces** them. Civilisation therefore acts as a **restraint** on the darker instincts within human nature.

The Capacity for Evil

Throughout the novel, Golding challenges the **Romantic** belief that children are naturally innocent. Instead, he suggests that every individual possesses a capacity for cruelty which civilisation merely **suppresses**. Roger's development illustrates this clearly. Early in the novel, he throws stones near Henry, yet ***"there was a space round Henry... into which he dare not throw. Here, invisible yet strong, was the taboo of the old life."*** The **metaphor** of the ***"taboo"*** **symbolises** the lingering influence of civilisation, morality and law, preventing Roger from acting fully on his violent impulses.

As the island descends into chaos, these restraints disappear. Roger later deliberately releases the boulder that kills Piggy, becoming the novel's clearest example of sadistic cruelty. Unlike Jack, whose violence is largely connected to power and leadership, Roger appears to enjoy inflicting pain for its own sake. Golding therefore uses Roger to show how the removal of **social restraints** can allow violent impulses to develop into deliberate cruelty.



However, Roger is not the only character capable of evil. Even Ralph and Piggy take part in Simon's murder. Afterwards, Ralph admits, ***"That was murder,"*** while Piggy insists, ***"It was an accident... We was scared!"*** Their **contrasting** reactions reveal different responses to guilt: Ralph accepts responsibility, while Piggy attempts to justify what happened. Golding therefore suggests that the capacity for both good and evil exists within every individual.



Golding's portrayal of evil also reflects his experiences during the **Second World War**. The atrocities committed by ordinary people contributed to his rejection of the idea that cruelty belongs only to a few exceptional individuals. The island therefore becomes a **microcosm** of humanity, showing how easily violence can emerge when social restraints weaken.

Golding's Warning

Golding brings together the novel's major themes through his exploration of human nature. The collapse of civilisation, the rise of savagery, the abuse of power and the influence of fear all stem from the boys' inability to control their **darker instincts**. Jack gains authority not through reason or justice, but by appealing to their desires for violence and dominance.



The destruction of the conch, Piggy's death and Ralph's **transformation** from leader to hunted prey symbolise the triumph of savagery over morality and democracy. Golding also presents the island as a fallen **Eden**. Initially described as an unspoilt paradise, it is gradually destroyed by the boys. The early image of the Beast as a ***"snake-like"*** creature creates a **biblical allusion** to the serpent in the **Garden of Eden**, foreshadowing the corruption that follows.

Simon's death, as a **Christ-like figure** associated with compassion and truth, marks a further stage in this moral collapse. By the time the naval officer arrives, the island is engulfed in flames, **symbolising** the destruction of both civilisation and innocence. Yet the officer comes from an adult world already at war, reminding the reader that the boys' behaviour reflects the wider human world rather than an isolated failure.

Golding's message is captured in Simon's realisation: ***"Maybe there is a beast... Maybe it's only us."*** Evil is not presented as an external force, but as something rooted within human nature. Civilisation can restrain these impulses, but when those restraints collapse, violence and the desire for power can take control.



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