AQA English Literature GCSE

Lord of the Flies: Themes

Power and Leadership

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Power and Leadership

Theme Summary



Power and **leadership** are central themes in *Lord of the Flies*, allowing Golding to explore how authority can be used either to maintain civilisation or to encourage savagery. Through the **contrasting** leadership styles of Ralph and Jack, Golding presents two opposing forms of power: **democratic** leadership, based on cooperation, responsibility, and shared rules, and **autocratic** leadership, based on fear, violence, and control.

As the boys become increasingly **isolated** from society, their power struggle reflects the fragility of civilisation and the dangers of **unchecked authority**. Golding suggests that leadership is not simply about gaining power but about how that power is exercised, revealing that without moral responsibility, authority can quickly become corrupt and destructive.

Presentation of the Theme

Democratic and Autocratic Leadership

Golding introduces the theme of **power** when the boys decide to follow a democratic process and elect a chief amongst them to help them persevere and survive. Ralph is chosen through a democratic vote because he possesses the conch, which becomes a powerful **symbol** of authority, equality and civilised order. Ralph believes in an ideal **democratic** world where leadership entails responsibility, decision-making for everyone's benefit, and cooperation. His focus remains on building shelters, maintaining the signal fire and organising assemblies because rescue is always his priority.



On the other hand, Jack believes he should be the leader; he deserves it rather than earning it. His arrogant **declaration**, ***"I ought to be chief... because I'm chapter chorister and head boy"***, reveals his belief that status alone entitles him to **authority**. After Jack raised his point rather arrogantly, Ralph tried to share his responsibilities by letting him lead the hunters. Through this, Golding presents readers with the idea and possibilities of **cooperation**. However, Jack becomes increasingly frustrated with democratic decision-making and begins to undermine Ralph's authority.

The conflict between the two leaders represents the contrast between **democracy** and **dictatorship**. Ralph's **authority** depends on consent and shared rules, whereas Jack gains power through **intimidation** and **manipulation**. Golding suggests that **democratic** leadership requires trust and responsibility, while **authoritarian** leadership appeals to fear and selfish desires.



Power Through Fear and Violence

As the novel progresses, Jack increasingly relies on fear rather than respect to maintain his leadership. Jack takes advantage of the boys' terror of the beast; he starts presenting himself as the only person in the group who can protect them. He uses the protection as a mere facade, transforming leadership from guidance into domination.

Jack doesn't like Ralph's idea of **leadership**, and grows quite frustrated with it. He soon demands an overthrow of Ralph. He asks the boys, ***"Who thinks Ralph oughtn't to be chief?"***

The vote initially fails, and Jack establishes his own tribe shortly afterwards, abandoning democracy entirely. His use of face paint acts as a **symbol** of his transformation, allowing him to abandon guilt and embrace violence. Through Jack's actions, Golding shows that anonymity removes personal responsibility, making cruelty easier to justify.



Soon enough, Jack starts showing the true colours of his established **leadership**. His ways are more **tyrannical**; he uses rewards, punishment and fear to secure loyalty. The hunters obey because they fear punishment rather than respect their chief.

Golding writes, ***"Power lay in the brown swell of his forearms: authority sat on his shoulder and chattered in his ear like an ape."*** to describe Jack's growing authority. The **animalistic imagery** suggests that Jack's power is driven by instinct rather than reason. Golding therefore suggests that when leaders exploit fear to gain control, power becomes increasingly **oppressive** and violent.

The Corrupt Nature of Power

Throughout the text, Golding shows how **power** can corrupt individuals. He uses the struggle between Ralph and Jack to explore the corrupting nature of power and humanity's **instinctive** attraction to strong leaders in times of fear. Ralph demonstrates that effective **leadership** requires responsibility, cooperation and moral courage. Even when terrified, he fulfils his duty as chief, declaring, ***"I'm chief. I'll go. Don't argue."*** His willingness to face danger for the sake of the group highlights the selflessness expected of a true leader.

In contrast, Jack increasingly values personal power over the boys' welfare. His leadership becomes based on fear and violence, eventually contributing to Simon's murder, Piggy's death and the hunt for Ralph. The collapse of **democratic authority** is captured when ***"the conch exploded into a thousand white fragments and ceased to exist"***, **symbolising** the destruction of order, equality and civilisation on the island. From this point, Jack's rule is maintained entirely through fear and brutality, demonstrating how unchecked power can corrupt both leaders and followers.



Writing soon after World War II, Golding uses Jack's **tyranny** to reflect the rise of **totalitarian** leaders who used brutality, terror and propaganda to seize and maintain power. Through the breakdown of the boys' society, Golding suggests that civilisation depends on people prioritising duty over self-interest. Without rules, morality and accountability, power becomes destructive rather than protective.

Leadership as a Reflection of Human Nature



Golding also suggests that **leadership** reflects the character of the person who holds power. Ralph's authority is based on democratic values, responsibility, cooperation and concern for the common good. In **contrast**, Jack's leadership appeals to the boys' desire for excitement, power and violence. As fear grows, they willingly abandon democracy in favour of a leader who offers immediate rewards and protection. This is reflected when Jack rejects civilisation altogether, declaring **"Bollocks to the rules! We're strong – we hunt!"** His **forceful exclamatory language** shows that his leadership is founded on strength and intimidation rather than justice or equality.

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Piggy, by contrast, recognises the importance of maintaining order when he asks, **"Which is better, law and rescue, or hunting and breaking things up?"** The **rhetorical question** highlights the choice between **civilisation** and **savagery**. Ralph also embodies responsible leadership, declaring **"I'm chief. I'll go. Don't argue."**, showing his willingness to place the group's welfare above his own fear. Golding ultimately suggests that effective leadership depends not on strength or **charisma** alone, but on moral responsibility and respect for rules. Without these qualities, power becomes corrupt and society quickly descends into chaos.

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