

Criticism

Diane Andrews Henningfeld

Henningfeld is a professor at Adrian College. In the following essay, she explores how Golding's novel can be interpreted in a variety of different ways—including as political, psychological, and religious allegory.

Lord of the Flies, William Golding's first novel, was published in London in 1954 and in New York in 1955. Golding was forty-three years old when he wrote the novel, having served in the Royal Navy during the Second World War. According to Bernard Oldsey, "The war appears to have been an important influence on him."

Lord of the Flies is deliberately modeled after R. M. Ballantyne's 1857 novel *The Coral Island*. In this story, a group of English boys are shipwrecked on a tropical island. They work hard together to save themselves. The only evil in the book is external and is personified by a tribe of cannibals that live on the island. The book offers a Victorian view of the world: through hard work and earnestness, one can overcome any hardship.

By giving his characters the same names as those in Ballantyne's book and by making direct reference to *The Coral Island* in the text of *Lord of the Flies*, Golding clearly wants readers to see his book as a response to the Victorian world view. Golding's view is a much bleaker one: the evil on the island is internal, not external. At the end of the book, the adult naval officer who invokes *The Coral Island* almost serves as Ballantyne's voice: "I should have thought that a pack of British boys—you're all British, aren't you?—would have been able to put up a better show than that." Golding's understanding of the world, colored by his own experiences in World War II, is better represented by Ralph's weeping "for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy."

Initially, critics commented less on the novel as a work of art than on its political, religious, and psychological symbolism. For example, James Stern in a 1955 review for *The New York Times Book Review* wrote "*Lord of the Flies* is an allegory on human society today, the novel's primary implication being that what we have come to call civilization is at best no more than skin deep."

Indeed, many critics have argued that *Lord of the Flies* is an allegory. An allegory is a story in which characters, setting, objects, and plot stand for a meaning outside of the story itself. Frequently, the writers of allegory illustrate an abstract meaning by the use of concrete images. For example, George Orwell, in *Animal Farm*, uses animals and the barnyard as concrete representations of the Russian Revolution. Often, characters in allegories personify some abstract quality. In the medieval drama *Everyman*, for instance, the concrete character Everyman stands for all of humanity.

While it is possible to read *Lord of the Flies* as allegory, the work is so complex that it can be read as allegorizing the political state of the world in the postwar period; as a Freudian psychological understanding of human kind; or as the Christian understanding of the fall of humankind, among others.

As a political allegory, each character in *Lord of the Flies* represents some abstract idea of government. Ralph, for example, stands for the good-hearted but not entirely effective leader of a democratic state, a ruler who wants to rule by law derived from the common consent. Piggy is his adviser, someone who is unable to rule because of his own social and physical shortcomings, but who is able to offer sound advice to the democratic leader. Jack, on the other hand, represents a totalitarian dictator, a ruler who appeals to the emotional responses of his followers. He rules by charisma and hysteria. Roger, the boy who takes the most joy in the slaughter of the pigs and who hurls the rock that kills Piggy, represents the henchman necessary for such a totalitarian ruler to stay in power.

Such a reading takes into account the state of the world at the end of the World War II. For many years, leaders such as British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt led democratic countries against totalitarian demigods such as Germany's Adolf Hitler and Italy's Benito Mussolini. Further, in the early 1950s, the world appeared to be divided into two camps: the so-called Free World of Western Europe and the United States, and the so-called Iron Curtain world of communist eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. At the time of the writing of *Lord of the Flies*, the world appeared to be teetering on the brink of total nuclear annihilation. Thus, by taking into account the historical context of *Lord of the Flies*, it is possible to understand the work as political and historical allegory, even as a cautionary tale for the leaders of the world.

Freudian psychological critics, on the other hand, are able to read *Lord of the Flies* as an allegory of the human psychology. In such a reading, each of the characters personifies a different aspect of the human psyche: the id, the super ego, and the ego. According to Freud, the id (located in the unconscious mind) works always to gratify its own impulses. These impulses, often sexual, seek to provide pleasure without regard to the cost. Jack's impulse to hunt and kill reaches its peak with the killing of the sow pig, a killing rife with sexual overtones. Jack never considers anything but his own pleasure; thus he can be considered an allegorical representation of the id. The superego is the part of the mind that seeks to control the impulsive behavior of the id. It acts as an internal censor. In *Lord of the Flies*, Piggy serves this role. He constantly reminds Ralph of their need to keep the fire burning and to take proper responsibility for the litluns. By so doing, he urges Ralph to control Jack.

Piggy understands that Jack hates him, because he stands between Jack and his achievement of pleasure. Further, just as the superego must employ the ego to control the id, Piggy cannot control Jack on his own; he must rely on Ralph to do so. Finally, the ego is the conscious mind whose role it is to mediate between the id's demand for pleasure and the social pressures brought to bear by the superego. Freud calls this mediation process the reality principal; that is, the notion that immediate pleasure must be denied in order to avoid painful or deadly consequences. Ralph clearly fills this role. He attempts to control Jack and engage his energy for the tending of the fire. To do so requires him to put off the pleasure of the hunt in order to secure rescue. In a Freudian reading of *The Lord of the Flies*, Golding seems to be saying that without the reinforcement of social norms, the id will control the psyche.

Finally, it is possible to read *Lord of the Flies* as a religious allegory. In such a reading, the tropical island, filled with fruit and everything needed for sustenance, becomes a symbol of the Garden of Eden. The initial identification of the beastie as a snake also brings to mind the story of the Fall of Man. Indeed, it is possible to read the fall of the parachutist as the event which leads to the ouster from Eden of the boys. Further, Jack's identification with hunting and Ralph's identification with shelter as well as their natural antagonism appear to be allegorization of the Cain and Abel story. Indeed, it is only the intercession of the adult who comes looking for them which saves Ralph from murder. Many critics have attempted to read Simon as a Christ figure; he is the one boy who has the true knowledge which can save them. Like Christ, he is martyred. Unlike Christ, however, his death seems to have no significance for the boys; his knowledge dies with him.

More recently, critics have recognized the technical and artistic skill exhibited by Golding in *Lord of the Flies*. Especially notable is the way in which Golding fuses allegorical structure with strong, realistic descriptions, well-developed characterizations, and a coherent, fast moving plot. The description of the death of Piggy, for example, demonstrates Golding's skill with realistic, graphic prose:

The rock struck Piggy a glancing blow from chin to knee; the conch exploded into a thousand white fragments and ceased to exist. Piggy, saying nothing, with no time for even a grunt, traveled through the air sideways from the rock, turning over as he went. The rock bounded twice and was lost in the forest. Piggy fell forty feet and landed on his back across the square red rock in the sea. His head opened and stuff came out and turned red. Piggy's arms and legs twitched a bit, like a pig's after it has been killed. Then the sea breathed again in a long, slow sigh, the water boiled white and pink over the rock; and when it went, sucking back again, the body of Piggy was gone.

Golding also provides strong characterizations. While it is possible to see each boy fulfilling an allegorical role, none of the characters (with the possible exception of Simon) functions solely as part of the allegory. This can perhaps best be seen in the development of Jack. During the first trip into the jungle, he is unable to kill the pig with his knife; by the end of the book he is hunting human quarry. Jack's growth from choirboy to murderer is accomplished with great skill.

Finally, Golding writes a fast-moving, suspenseful adventure story. The book moves quickly from the first days on the beach to the final hunt scene, reaching a feverish pitch that is broken abruptly by the appearance of the naval officer, just as it appears that Ralph will be killed. While the appearance of the adult, however, closes the action, it does not provide us with a happy ending. Indeed, at the moment of the climax of the adventure story, Golding suddenly reminds us of the allegorical nature of the book: the naval officer's cruiser is a weapon of war. Although we feel relief over Ralph's rescue, we suddenly understand that the adult world is little different from the world of the island, a place where men hunt and kill each other indiscriminately, a place where men can blow up the entire planet, our island in the sea of the universe.

Source: Diane Andrews Henningfeld, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1997

Paul Slayton

*In the following excerpt, Slayton finds *Lord of the Flies* to be a parable about modern civilization and human morality, and describes Golding's literary techniques.*

Lord of the Flies is William Golding's parable of life in the latter half of the twentieth century, the nuclear age, when society seems to have reached technological maturity while human morality is still prepubescent. Whether or not one agrees with the pessimistic philosophy, the egocentric psychology or the fundamentalist theology espoused by Golding in the novel, if one is to use literature as a "window on the world," this work is one of the panes through which one should look.

The setting for *Lord of the Flies* is in the literary tradition of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Johann Wyss's *The Swiss Family Robinson*, and like these earlier works provides the necessary ingredients for an idyllic utopian interlude. A plane loaded with English school boys, aged five through twelve, is being evacuated to a safe haven in, perhaps, Australia to escape the "Reds," with whom the English are engaged in an atomic war. Somewhere in the tropics the plane is forced to crash land during a violent storm. All the adults on board are lost when the forward section of the plane is carried out to sea by tidal waves. The passenger compartment, fortuitously, skids to a halt on the island, and the young passengers escape uninjured.

The boys find themselves in a tropical paradise: bananas, coconuts and other fruits are profusely available. The sea proffers crabs and occasional fish in tidal pools, all for the taking. The climate is benign. Thus, the stage is set for an idyllic interlude during which British fortitude will enable the boys to master any possible adversity. In fact, Golding relates that just such a nineteenth century novel, R. M. Ballantyne's *Coral Island*, was the inspiration for *Lord of the Flies*. In that utopian story the boy castaways overcame every obstacle they encountered with the ready explanation, "We are British, you know!"

Golding's tropical sojourners, however, do not "live happily ever after." Although they attempt to organize themselves for survival and rescue, conflicts arise as the boys first neglect, then refuse, their assigned tasks. As their "society" fails to build shelters or to keep the signal fire going, fears emanating from within—for their environment is totally non-threatening—take on a larger than life reality. Vines hanging from trees become "snake things" in the imaginings of the "little'uns." A nightmare amidst fretful sleep, causing one of the boys to cry out in the night, conjures up fearful "beasties" for the others. Their fears become more real than existence on the tropical paradise itself when the twins, Sam 'n Eric, report their enervating experience with the wind-tossed body of the dead parachutist. Despite Simon's declaration that "there is no beast, it's only us," and Piggy's disavowal of "ghosts and things," the fear of the unknown overcomes their British reserve and under Jack's all-too-willing chieftainship the boys' retreat from civilization begins.

In the initial encounter with a pig, Jack is unable to overcome his trained aversion to violence to even strike a blow at the animal. Soon, however, he and his choirboys-turned-hunters make their first kill. They rationalize that they must kill the animals for meat. The next step back from civilization occurs and the meat pretext is dropped; the real objective is to work their will on other living things.

Then, killing begins to take on an even more sinister aspect. The first fire the boys build to attract rescuers roars out of control and one of the younger boys is accidentally burned to death. The next death, that of Simon, is not an accident. He is beaten to death when he rushes into the midst of the ritual dance of the young savages. Ironically, he has come to tell the boys that he has discovered that the beast they fear is not real. Then Piggy, the last intellectual link with civilization, is killed on impulse by the sadistic Roger. Last, all semblance of civilized restraint is cast-off as the now-savage tribe of boys organizes itself to hunt down and kill their erstwhile leader, Ralph, who had tried desperately to prepare them to carry on in the fashion expected of upper middle-class British youth.

That Golding intended *Lord of the Flies* as a paradigm for modern civilization is concretely evident at the conclusion of the work. During the final confrontation at the rock fort between Ralph and Piggy and Jack and his tribe, the reader readily forgets that these individuals in conflict are not adults. The manhunt for Ralph, too, seems relative only to the world of adults. The reader is so inclined to lose sight of the age of his characters that Golding must remind that these participants are pre-adolescents: The naval officer who interrupts the deadly manhunt sees "A semicircle of little boys, their bodies streaked with colored clay, sharp sticks in hand...." Unlike that officer, the reader knows that it was not "fun and games" of the boys that the naval officer interrupted. The officer does not realize—as the reader knows—that he has just saved Ralph from a sacrificial death and the other boys from becoming premeditated murderers. Neither is the irony of the situation very subtle: The boys have been "rescued" by an officer from a British man-of-war, which will very shortly resume its official activities as either hunter or hunted in the deadly adult game of war.

Golding, then, in *Lord of the Flies* is asking the question which continues as the major question haunting the world today: How shall denizens of the earth be rescued from our fears and our own pursuers—ourselves? While Golding offers no ready solutions to our dilemma, an understanding of his parable yields other questions which may enable readers to become seekers in the quest for a moral world. Even if one disagrees with Golding's judgment of the nature of human beings and of human society, one profits from his analysis of the problems confronting people today....

Golding is a master at his trade and *Lord of the Flies* has achieved critical acclaim as the best of his works. Indeed, a dictionary of literary terminology might well be illustrated with specific examples from this piece of prose. The development of the several focal characters in this work is brilliantly and concretely done. In addition, the omniscient narrative technique, plotting, relating story to setting and the use of irony, foreshadowing, and certainly, symbolism are so carefully and concretely accomplished that the work can serve as an invaluable teaching aid to prepare students to read other literature with a degree of understanding far beyond a simplistic knowledge of the surface events of the story. Golding's characterizations will be used in this rationale to illustrate these technical qualities of the novel.

A strength of *Lord of the Flies* lies in techniques of characterization. There are five major characters who are developed as wholly-rounded individuals whose actions and intensity show complex human motivation: Ralph, Jack, Roger, Simon and Piggy. A study of these characterizations shows the wide range of techniques for developing persona utilized by Golding and by other authors:

Ralph, the protagonist, is a rather befuddled everyman. He is chosen for leadership by the group for all the wrong reasons. Ralph does not seek the leadership role; he is elected because he is older (12 plus), somewhat larger, is attractive in personal appearance and, most strikingly, he possesses the conch shell which reminds the boys of the megaphone with which their late adult supervisors directed and instructed them. In the unsought leadership role Ralph demonstrates courage, intelligence and some diplomatic skill. On the negative side he quickly becomes disillusioned with the democratic process and without Piggy's constant urgings would have cast aside the chief's role even before Jack's *coup d'etat*. Ralph also demonstrates other weaknesses as he unthinkingly gives away Piggy's hated nickname and, more significantly, he gets caught up in the mob psychology of the savage dance and takes part in the ritualistic murder of Simon. Thus, by relating causes and effects, Golding reveals Ralph's change from a proper British lad to group leader to his disenchantment and finally to his becoming the object of the murderous hunt by the boys who once chose him as their leader.

Jack, the antagonist, is developed as the forceful villain. Outgoing, cocky and confident, Jack marches his choir boys in military formation up the beach to answer the call of the conch. Jack is a natural leader who, except for his exploitative nature, might have been a congealing force for good. Instead, his lust for power precipitates the conflict with Ralph and Piggy's long-range planning for rescue. To attain leadership, Jack caters to boyish desires for ready delights and after he is assured that his choir boys will follow in this new direction, he resorts to intimidation to increase his following. In Jack, Golding has developed a prototype of the charismatic leader who gains adherents by highlighting the fears and fulfilling the ephemeral needs and desires of followers.

Roger, "the hangman's horror," is a stereotyped character who does not change. He readily sheds a thin veneer of civilization which has been imposed upon him by the authority of the policeman and the law. So easily his arm loses the restraints which had once prohibited him from hitting the littl'uns with tossed rocks to a point where he can kill Piggy on impulse. It is but one more small step for him to proclaim the ritual dance must end in killing and to premeditate the murder of Ralph.

Simon is the quintessential Christ-figure. A thin, frail little boy, subject to fainting spells, he alone has the mental acumen and the courage to go onto the mountain and disprove the existence of the "beast." He is martyred for his efforts by the group which no longer wishes to hear his "good news."

Piggy, the pragmatic intellectual, is of necessity the most steadfast in motivation. He is tied to civilization by his physical weaknesses. Overweight, asthmatic, and completely dependent for sight upon his spectacles, the life of the happy savage has no allure for him. Without the aids of civilization, such as eye glasses and allergy shots, he cannot long survive. Consequently, he must reject the ephemeral allures offered by Jack and steadfastly hold, and seek to hold Ralph, to maintaining

the smoke signal, his only hope for the aid and succor of rescue. His steadfastness in this aim enables him to call up the uncharacteristic courage to make the last appeal to Jack and his tribe before the rock fort because "right is right." His plea is to no avail; the sadistic Roger releases the boulder which throws Piggy from the cliff to his death.

Another minor character, Percival Weems Botts, is developed as a stereotype to demonstrate the fragility of rote learning. This "littl'un" who can only recite his name and address as a response soon forgets even that as all trappings of civilization are lost by the boys.

Thus, Golding's techniques of characterization afford superior examples of the writer's craft and apt material to use to help students learn to interpret authorial voice and to respond to a piece of literature as a level beyond the denotative.

Lord of the Flies has earned for itself and its author great critical acclaim. It has also been extolled by teachers for the excitement it can engender in readers and as a work in which the motivation of characters is readily understood by adolescent readers. Despite these accolades for the novel as a work of literary art and as a teaching tool, *Lord of the Flies* has on occasion aroused the ire of would-be censors.

Some have opposed the use of the novel in the classroom because of the use of "vulgar" language. Certain words, notably "sucks," "ass," and the British slang word "bloody," are used. It is patently obvious that there is no prurient motivation behind the author's choice of these words. Not one of these words is ever used outside of a context in which the word appears to be quite naturally the word the character would use. The choir boys may well sing like "angels," as is stated; nevertheless, these are perfectly normal pre-adolescent boys. Given the proclivities of such youth the world over, verisimilitude would be lost had they, amongst themselves, always spoken like angels.

The sexual symbolism of the killing of the sow has also raised some puritanical brows. This violent scene is described in terms which might well be used to describe a rape. Such symbolism is fully justified, however, if the author is to be allowed to make his point that the motivation of the boys, casting away the cloak of civilization, is no longer merely securing food. Rather, they have moved from serving practical needs to an insane lust for working their will upon other creatures. The next step is the slaughter of their own kind.

Objection, too, has come upon that very point: children killing children. One must remind those who object to this violence that this piece of literature is a parable. Children are specifically used to show that even the innocence of childhood can be corrupted by fears from within. Those who would deny Golding this mode of establishing his theme would deny to all authors the right to make their point in an explicit fashion.

The most vociferous denunciation of *Lord of the Flies* has been vocalized by those who have misread the book to the point that they believe it deals with Satanism. The symbolism of the title, which is the English translation of the Greek word "Beelzebub," is surely being misinterpreted by such folk. In fact, theologian Davis Anderson states unequivocally that "Golding is a Christian writer."

Anderson defines the central theme of *Lord of the Flies* as a statement of what it is like to experience the fall from innocence into sin and to experience damnation. Thus, a theologian sees the novel as one dealing with the Christian doctrine of original sin and of the rupture of man's relationship with God! Consequently, one who would attack this novel as an exercise in Satanism assuredly holds an indefensible premise.

Source: Paul Slayton, "Teaching Rationale for William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*," in *Censored Books: Critical Viewpoints*, Nicholas J. Karolides, Lee Burress, John M. Kean, eds., The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1993, pp. 351-57