

William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* in Historical Context

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Many critics have explored the theme in *Lord of the Flies* (1954) of a group of children's descent from civilization to savagery; of a loss of innocence on an Edenic island, where a mysterious and fearful "beast" causes the children to divide into factions, with murderous outcomes. The novel is, though, multilayered and complex: its plot, characterization, symbolism, and themes invite analysis of opposing dualities such as Christianity and paganism, innocence and guilt, childhood and adulthood, civilization and anarchy, collectivism and individuality, and democratic values as opposed to tyranny. The context of the novel's production, release, and reception was the immediate post-World War II era and the Cold War clash of ideologies between East and West. Author William Golding had been a junior officer in the Royal Navy during the war and witnessed firsthand its violence and cruelty. These experiences caused him to ponder the origins of violence and humanity's capacity for good and evil. This essay will explore these ideas and make particular reference to the novel's historical context, in a period British poet W. H. Auden called the *Age of Anxiety*.

World War II

Auden's 1947 poem explored themes of identity, materialism, isolation, and anguish in the postwar world. It was Auden's response to a war that had exposed the fragility of civilized society and given vent to atrocities that were as epic in scale as they were in barbarism. Nazi Germany systematically rounded up millions of Jews from all over Europe and Russia, stripped them of their possessions, transported them in freight trains to concentration camps, and then murdered them with poison gas. Disease, malnutrition, and brutality accounted for those who initially survived the mass exterminations. Nazi tactics included bombing cities and targeted civilians in places

such as Guernica in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War. Rotterdam suffered similar treatment in April 1940 as German bombs blitzed the city center, killing hundreds. Later that year the Nazis subjected Coventry in England to aerial bombing and hundreds more were killed. From September 1940 to May 1941 the Germans blitzed British cities, killing thousands in London, Liverpool, Manchester, Cardiff, Belfast, Glasgow, and many other large urban centers. The Royal Air Force retaliated by developing a heavy bomber force, which would target dozens of German cities including Berlin, Hamburg, Cologne, Munich, Essen, Bremen, Kiel, and Mannheim. This onslaught of destruction culminated in the 1945 bombing of Dresden, an attack that destroyed the medieval city while killing at least 35,000 civilians, many of them refugees from the Russian drive eastwards (Grayling 259).

Civilians suffered in other ways: in 1942, the Nazis destroyed the Czech town of Lidice in reprisal for the assassination of a Nazi official. All men in the town were executed immediately and the women and children sent to concentration camps, where most died. A small few of the children were adopted by SS families for “Germanisation.” Altogether, around 340 innocent civilians died as a result of the destruction of Lidice (Goshen 870-72). As the war turned against Nazi Germany, similar atrocities took place in a number of French towns, most infamously in June 1944 at Oradour-sur-Glane where approximately 640 civilians—the majority of whom were women and children—were murdered by members of an SS Panzer group (Hastings 185-98). In another notorious event, in March 1944 German troops executed more than 300 Italian civilians in Rome in retaliation for a deadly ambush by Italian partisans (Mikaberidze 24-5). These are indicative examples; many thousands of civilians lost their lives in similar retaliatory atrocities. Russian civilians were particularly vulnerable given Nazi ideology, which adjudged them as *Untermensch* (subhuman). Over 20 million Russians died in World War II, representing by far the biggest loss of life on the Allied side. Russian troops took their revenge on German civilians: Perhaps as many as two million women were raped as Russian troops rolled through Axis towns and cities in the war’s final days,

and in its immediate aftermath (Wheatcroft). German troops made prisoners of war by the Russians also suffered terribly: for example, only around six thousand of the 90,000 German troops captured at Stalingrad survived Russian incarceration to return home after the war (Roberts 134).

In the Pacific theater, casualties may have been fewer but the war was prosecuted just as fiercely: in 1941, Japanese Imperial forces killed more than 2000 American military personnel and civilians in a sneak attack on the American territory of Hawaii. In the war that followed, both sides committed atrocities. Perhaps because the Japanese lacked the ability to strike at the US mainland, their forces directed their anger and frustration at Allied troops and also towards the civilian populations of territories they conquered. Indeed, Japanese cruelty was one of the most notorious aspects of the war. For example, soon after the Pearl Harbor attack, the Japanese executed five American airmen captured after a raid on Tokyo. They tortured prisoners, used forced labor, and forced Korean women into acting as sex slaves for Japanese troops. A section of the military codenamed Unit 731 carried out lethal medical experiments on Chinese civilians and on prisoners of war (Dower 33-73). Japanese soldiers acted fanatically, carrying out suicidal attacks on their enemies, the most infamous being kamikaze attacks on US ships. Other suicidal attacks took place in the Aleutians and on Saipan. Both Japanese soldiers and civilians committed suicide in Okinawa rather than surrender to American forces. Japanese forces began and ended the war in the Philippines in barbaric fashion: in 1942, Japanese imperial forces captured approximately 75,000 American and Filipino troops on the Philippine island of Luzon. In what became known as the Bataan Death March, these troops were force-marched 65 miles to prison camps, with many thousands dying of exhaustion and dehydration, or killed by Japanese bayonets because they could not go on. When American troops retook the Philippines in 1945, perhaps 100,000 of capital city Manila's 700,000 population were killed in the fighting. During this period the Japanese Army tortured and murdered around 1,000 Christian hostages in an act referred to

by one Filipino inhabitant as “soldiery gone mad with blood lust” (qtd. in Dower 45).

In turn, the actions of the Japanese fueled American hatred towards them. In the United States, beginning in early 1942, 110,000 Japanese-Americans were incarcerated in concentration camps (Dower 79-80). In ferocious battles on tiny islands in the Pacific, American troops mutilated Japanese bodies for souvenirs, attacked hospital ships, refused to take prisoners or shot prisoners of war, and shot Japanese civilians in what one historian has called a “war without mercy” (Dower 62-70). A Marine who fought on Okinawa reflected that the “fierce struggle for survival ... eroded the veneer of civilization and made savages of us all” (qtd. in Dower 63). US strategic bombing was no less merciless: in *The Fog of War* (2003) Robert S. McNamara, an officer in the US Air Force during the war and later US Defense Secretary during the Vietnam War, explained that from 1941-45, but before the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the American aerial bombing campaign against Japan killed “50 to 90 percent of the people of 67 Japanese cities.” McNamara called the US-Japanese war “one of the most brutal wars in all of human history.” And of course the war ended when President Harry Truman authorized the use of atomic bombs on two Japanese cities, killing immediately between 190,000 to 230,000 people in what remains the only use of such weapons in anger (Bradford 608).

Good and Evil

It was in this maelstrom that William Golding learned harsh lessons about war and about himself. Originally from Cornwall in England, Golding studied at Oxford, publishing a book of poetry while attaining his BA degree in English Literature. He married in 1939 and was a school teacher when the war broke out. His rural upbringing and gentle middle class background left him ill-prepared for the horrors of war. Nevertheless, he enlisted in the Royal Navy in December 1940, initially serving aboard HMS *Galatea* in the North Sea. After a short period of time aboard *Galatea*, during which he participated in the search for the German battleship *Bismarck*, Golding transferred

to HMS *Wolverine*. This was a fortunate move: not long after, many of Golding's friends and ex-crewmates were killed when a German submarine sank the *Galatea* in the Mediterranean. HMS *Wolverine*'s main role was as an escort for Atlantic convoys—a hazardous and difficult mission, often undertaken in dreadful weather and harsh seas. Golding would later recall conditions onboard *Wolverine* as “cramped, crowded, and unavoidably liable to [lice] infestations” (qtd. in Carey 87). In October 1941, Golding was transferred to the Royal Naval Barracks at Portsmouth, where he survived a terrifying Luftwaffe bombing raid. Soon after, he successfully applied for an officer commission, eventually learning to pilot a troop landing craft. He took part in the Normandy landings in June 1944, and at Walcheren in the Netherlands, where his boat was one of only a few to survive an Allied assault on the heavily defended island (Reiff 27-8). As John Carey notes, “Memories of Walcheren haunted him for the rest of his life” (108).

Golding's war experiences caused him to question the roles of good and evil in the world, and to examine humanity's capacity for violence—two important themes of *Lord of the Flies*. He recalls his experiences at sea on the *Galatea* as “misery, humiliation and fear” (Carey 83) and he believed the lessons to be learned from war were about the nature of humanity rather than about nationalism and competing political or economic ideologies (Meitcke 2). “One had one's nose rubbed in the human condition,” he explained (qtd. in Gindin 4), and he came to realize that both sides in the conflict were capable of terrible acts of violence and cruelty. These things, he explained, “were not done by the headhunters of New Guinea or by some primitive tribe in the Amazon. They were done skillfully, coldly, by educated doctors, lawyers, by men with a tradition of civilization behind them, to beings of their own kind.” Man “produces evil,” he concluded, “as a bee produces honey” (qtd. in Sandbrook 344). To use a biblical analogy, humanity was not an innocent in the garden, corrupted thereafter by civilization; rather, humanity always had the capacity for evil and civilization could be a way to temper that inherent trait. Golding believed, for example, that only “certain

social sanctions” or “social prohibitions” separated the Allies from the Nazis (Gindin 4-5; Reiff 29).

These were controversial ideas and he pondered how he might express them in a work of fiction. As a youth he had read R. M. Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island* (1858), about a group of young castaways on a South Pacific island. Major themes of Ballantyne’s novel are the importance of Christianity, the civilizing influence of Christian missionaries, and the superiority of Anglo-Saxon values (Baker intro.). In *The Coral Island*, the boys encounter evil in the form of pirates and cannibalistic Polynesian natives. But what might happen, Golding wondered, if evil was within? He had observed how soldiers—many of them youths or barely out of their teens (Fussell)—had behaved in the war. How then might a group of “civilized” Western youths really behave if castaway and left to their own devices?

To achieve this didactic aim, Golding’s island is deserted; it has no indigenous inhabitants. In previous novels such as Ballantyne’s, Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (1883), Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), or Herman Melville’s semifictional *Typee* (1846), and in movies such as *The Idol Dancer* (1920), *Hula* (1927), *Bird of Paradise* (1932), and even *King Kong* (1933), natives are portrayed in ways that encourage readers/audience to deride native practices such as cannibalism, permissive sexual behavior, and “heathen” religious beliefs. In these stories, shipwrecked sailors or explorers typically maintain Western values, underpinning the superiority of Western civilization. However, the message is clear in these tales: while natives are expected to be heathen and savage, civilized Westerners exposed for too long to native practices may become corrupted. Golding avoids this possibility by removing natives from his tale. As the original title of the book—*The Stranger Within*—indicates, the children are left alone to discover that “the savage” resides within themselves. They abandon democratic ideas, split into factions, and create their version of a hunter-gatherer society. The children become superstitious, and nervous talk about a monster reifies into a protoreligion in which they provide sacrifices to the beast, even as they seek it out to kill it. Fear leads them to

gravitate towards the strong—those who can provide food and protection. In the process, they forget their humanity, turning on each other and losing the trappings of civilization.

Civilization and Savagery

This process unfolds gradually; initially Golding gives them the opportunity to enact familiar forms of self-government, but this endeavor eventually falls apart. In the story, the conch serves as the main symbol of authority and of order. The sound of the conch calls the children to an assembly where an election is held for leader between Ralph and Jack Merridew. Jack had demanded to be leader because he is “chapter chorister and head boy,” but the children insist on a vote. The conch proves to be the deciding factor: “The being that had blown that, had sat waiting for them on the platform with the delicate thing balanced on his knees, was set apart” (Golding 19). Ralph triumphs because the children rely on the democratic process they had known in their past lives. In turn, Ralph acts sensibly and responsibly, directing the children to gather food, build shelters, and tend to a fire in the hope that smoke will attract a passing ship and therefore effect rescue. This rational and logical approach is the kind of Victorian can do attitude that marked the children’s behavior in Ballantyne’s *Coral Island*. Unanimity soon falls apart, however; Jack remains envious of Ralph’s authority and works to build his own support. He reassigns the choir to the role of “hunters,” realizing intuitively that as time passed and the children got hungry and afraid, they would respond to a show of strength. Ralph happily, but naïvely, agrees to this arrangement—a show of appeasement that would end tragically.

Golding accomplishes the journey from civilized to savage in a number of ways. For example, the children discarding their school uniforms is an obvious symbol of the stripping away of a layer of civilization. The first person in the novel to strip naked is Ralph, in response to the heat of the island and the heaviness of his clothes, which are unsuited to this environment. However, in this early encounter with the island, Ralph is not yet ready to abandon past conventions and he collects his scattered uniform and reclothes. We

are told that Ralph finds this “strangely pleasing,” as if his school uniform provides some security and familiarity (Golding 12). In a similar vein, when Piggy meets Jack for the first time he is reduced to silence, intimidated by Jack’s “uniformed superiority” (Golding 17). Soon though, near-nakedness becomes a powerful totem and it is the painted camouflage of Jack’s hunters—white and red clay and black charcoal—that gives them a group identity and allows them to play the role of the savage.

The characterization of the novel’s four main protagonists, Ralph, Jack, Piggy, and Simon, provides a clear distinction between rationality/civilization and irrationality/savagery. Ralph represents order and reason; in advocating a signal fire, he is the one most focused on rescue, and the only one of the children who has a plan to make that happen. Elected leader, he resists any urges towards despotism, preferring instead consultation and cooperation. Of all the children, he is the one most representative of the civilized world from which they are now estranged. The closest he has to an ally in this regard is Piggy, a subject of ridicule from most of the children because he is overweight, shortsighted, and suffers from asthma. Nevertheless, Piggy supports the election process to choose a leader, follows Ralph’s instructions, is aware of the democratic power of the conch, and makes suggestions based on logic and reason.

In opposition to them is Jack, who has a strong sense of his own self-importance. He demands to be leader and is frustrated when the children choose to elect Ralph instead. Unlike Ralph, Jack regards the acquisition of power as an end in itself: he has no concern for the children and no plans to escape the island. He fuels the children’s fear of a beast so they will be drawn to him for protection. And when he eventually establishes his own camp and followers, he behaves in tyrannical fashion, enacting fearful rituals and brutal acts of violence. He represents the savage, the “stranger within” that Golding saw evidence of during the war.

The final main protagonist is Simon, a sensitive child who serves as the emotional and spiritual heart of the novel. Envisioned by Golding as a Christlike figure (Golding 24), Simon bravely faces up to the beast, discovering that it is merely the corpse of a parachutist.

This causes him to reflect on the divisions among the children and he realises the truth in what he had earlier suggested to the group: “maybe there is a beast . . . maybe it’s only us” (Golding 82). Before he is able to reveal this, however, Jack’s hunters strike him down in a frenzy of sacrificial violence. With this, Golding reveals, the savage has won and the beast has been exposed as an intrinsic part of human nature.

One by one, then, the symbols that underpin civilization are removed—the children’s clothes; the parliamentary authority of the conch; Ralph’s elected leadership; Piggy’s glasses (a symbol of the kind of bookishness that seems unnecessary on the island); the extinguishing of the signal fire (the ability to make fire is one trait that distinguishes humans from all other animals); Christian values; and finally all rationality and reason as the island becomes a scene of destruction, anarchy, and murder. These are the lessons, Golding believes, humanity must learn not only about the war but about itself (Meitcke 2). Golding admitted that his war experiences motivated him to write the novel: “It was simply what seemed sensible for me to write after the war when everyone was thanking God they weren’t Nazis. I’d seen enough to realize that every single one of us could be Nazis” (qtd. in Shaffer 54). This point wasn’t lost on one literary critic, Walter Ernest Allen, who compared events in the story to “the vilest manifestations of Nazi regression” (289). Furthermore, the two forms of leadership Golding proffers, through the democratic figure of Ralph and authoritarian Jack, engage with discussions that were then current about the origins of conflict and the “authoritarian personality” (Adorno).

The Atomic Age

As well as World War II, a second major context of the novel is the Cold War. The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki marked the end of the former and beginning of the latter. This was apparent immediately. For example, an American radio broadcaster reacted to the bombing on August 7, 1945, saying “There is reason to believe tonight that our new atomic bomb destroyed the entire Japanese city of Hiroshima in a single blast.... It would be the same as Denver,

Colorado, with a population of 350,000 persons being there one moment, and wiped out the next” (qtd. in Boyer 5). This realization of a Pyrrhic victory against the Japanese, and the understanding that the next war would be fought with atomic bombs, contributed to a mood of “triumphalist despair”: the “blinding light” of atomic warfare “had revealed in victory perils almost as terrifying as in defeat, holding out not the promise of an American Earth, but of no Earth at all” (Engelhardt 9, 55). *Lord of the Flies* was released in the final year of the Korean War, fought by United Nations forces including Great Britain and the United States against communist North Korea and its allies Russia and China. Both Presidents Truman and Eisenhower considered using atomic weapons, and as Niall Ferguson explains, the American public was very much in favor of that: “Asked if they favored ‘using atomic artillery shells against communist forces ... if truce talks break down,’ 56 percent of those polled said yes” (105).

This was the age of science fiction become science fact, with the total destruction of entire cities now possible. Developing missile technology quickly brought the United States in range of Soviet weapons, and vice versa. The immediate context of the novel is therefore the existential threat of atomic warfare, and this is included in the plot. Although all is not completely explained, it seems the boys were being evacuated from Great Britain to Australia because of the threat of war. This was likely inspired by a real-life evacuation of British children, under the auspices of the Children’s Overseas Reception Board, during the early years of World War II (Dangar). When Ralph insists his Navy father will rescue them, Piggy replies “Didn’t you hear what the pilot said? About the atom bomb? They’re all dead” (Golding 11). In addition, the detachable cabin in which the children land safely on the island is a piece of technology that did not exist in the 1950s. These novelties led critic Usha George to conclude that *Lord of the Flies* belongs to “the sub-genre of science fiction” (14). Indeed, when Golding first sent his manuscript to Faber publishers, the in-house reader responded: “Time: the Future. Absurd & uninteresting fantasy about the explosion of an atom bomb on the Colonies” (Cohen 223).

Lord of the Flies can be considered therefore as a dystopian novel, set in a world in which atomic warfare is a reality. Such was the impact of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the Cold War on society that literary treatments of these subjects were not uncommon. For example, Golding's work sits alongside other postapocalyptic novels such as George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* (1949), John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1957), Pat Frank's *Alas, Babylon* (1959), and Walter M. Miller Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1961). Aside from Piggy's comment about the atomic bomb, direct references to nuclear catastrophe are absent. However, fiery conflagrations sweep the island on two occasions, once when sparks from the signal fire ignite some nearby dry timber; and again when Jack starts a large fire in an attempt to flush out Ralph from his hiding place. The first fire possibly kills one child, who is never seen again on the island; the second fire does great damage to the environment and threatens to spread out of control. Fire is an important symbol in the novel. It represents the children's best chance of escape, but it is also a threat to life. In a sense also, it represents both the hopes and fears of humanity about the nuclear age: would atomic energy create unlimited, clean energy or would it extinguish all life on the planet? As Ian McEwan observes, "The boys set fire to their island paradise while their elders and betters have all but destroyed the planet" (159).

Lord of the Flies was created and released at a time when memories of World War II were recent and when humanity was still trying to understand how and why the world had descended so quickly into anarchy. Attempts had been made to underpin the rule of law: war crimes tribunals were set up at Nuremburg and Tokyo; and in 1945 a new organization, the United Nations, was established with the aim of peacefully solving future international disputes. The atomic destruction at Hiroshima and Nagasaki made such measures essential but in the atomic age it was difficult to judge the value of this new technology, or to predict how the future would unfold. Would the lessons of the last war have any value in this new science fiction age? Golding aspired to explicate his views on the universal human condition based on his experiences in World War II, which

helped formulate those views. As Whitley points out, Golding was “concerned to flesh out his truth as accurately as possible” (10) so while the atomic age might be the context and the future for both the children in his novel and his audience, he remained focused on the human condition. There are, therefore, no science fiction monsters in Golding’s work—no creatures created by radioactive fallout or mutation—only ordinary children but within whom the capacity for evil resides. Because of that recurring motif, *Lord of the Flies* has more in common with Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll Mr. Hyde* (1886) than it does with most 1950s science fiction literature. However, the novel offers a warning similar to that sounded in other postapocalyptic works of fiction: that in the absence of the structures of accountability and mechanisms of law and order, the children’s descent into savagery may also be the fate for wider civilization.

The novel ends with a rescue, of sorts, and in an anticlimactic fashion. Readers do not get to experience the violent demise of Ralph with which they had been teased throughout the final chapter. At the moment where his capture seems imminent, Ralph flees onto the beach, where he discovers an immaculately dressed Navy officer and a boat. When he turns to his pursuers, fierce savages just moments before, there is a shift in perspective—they are now just a “group of painted boys” and his nemesis Jack a “little boy” (186) too afraid to speak. Soon the children dissolve into tears at the realization of what they have done, and, as the author tells us, for their loss of innocence. The officer looks embarrassed: “What have you been doing? Having a war or something?” (185), he asks. The officer is shocked at Ralph’s response that two children have died. What the officer had previously referred to as “fun and games” (185) has had tragic consequences. He gazes at his ship, perhaps realizing that his profession is merely a grown-up version of these children’s “fun and games,” and he will soon take them back into a world in which an atomic war is unfolding (11). The boys may be naked and savage, disappointing the Navy officer who expects a group of “British boys” to “put up a better show” (186), but despite his neat, trim uniform and clean appearance, the killer

also resides within him. The unveiling of that horrific knowledge is Golding's greatest achievement, and it is difficult to pick fault with Dominic Sandbrook's observation about *Lord of the Flies*, that "few books better capture the dark side of the century that saw two of the bloodiest conflicts in human history, as well as the Holocaust and the nuclear arms race" (344).

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