

# A tainted view of society

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* is "An unfashionable aberration, a throwback to earlier, simpler forms of literature in which symbolic, fablelike elements predominate over psychological or social realism" (Magill 1126). *Lord of the Flies*, a novel in which a group of English school boys are stranded on an island and struggle to survive, is a supposed portrayal of humanity in general. *Lord of the Flies* presents an unrealistic and false projection of humanity due to Golding's distorted, personal view of society, tainted by his life experiences and opinions. The beginnings of Golding's inability to objectively portray humanity starts with Golding's childhood. As a child Golding lived a lonely life, interacting only with his mother, father, and nanny. Lacking peers with whom to play, Golding enveloped himself in books. These books became his companions and took the place of social interaction, forming a deep and lasting influence. It is widely held in psychological fields that a child's personality and resulting world views are largely formed in early childhood (Longstreth 441). Consequently, his books became ingrained into his mind-set as they influenced both his personality and his perceptions. By reading stories romanticizing adventure, such as *The Swiss Family Robinson*, *The Coral Island*, and *Robinson Crusoe*, Golding formed the concept at a young age that these books presented reality (Bernard 122). Golding read them as factual reports, unable as a child to recognize them as the entertainment and fable-like stories their authors intended them to be. Golding's favorite authors, H. G Wells, Jules Verne, and Edgar Rice Burroughs, overexaggerated their characters and their behavior in order to create sensationalism. This literary technique, very prominent in Golding's own *Lord of the Flies*, diminishes the ability of *Lord of the Flies* to

present a serious idea. This mistaken reality, one of implausible, outlandish adventures, that Golding absorbed from children's literature he so loved, which heavily influenced his writing. *Lord of the Flies* is too bizarre and fantastic. The chances of an airplane full of boys crashing on a deserted island and turning into barbarians, killing each other, is completely unrealistic. Elementary aged boys would not hunt down a pig and sacrifice its head on a stick like Jack and the other boys did. *Lord of the Flies* fails to be a believable plight from which humanity can be accurately depicted because of Golding's early influences. Golding's childhood's favorites further impacted *Lord of the Flies* by setting the tone and style for his writing. Golding's admiration for fantasy-based adventure tales works shone clearly in his own writings through the form of imitation. Parallels can be drawn between H. G. Wells, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Golding's own *Lord of the Flies*. Both Swift and Golding present humans as savage and greedy with an obsession with the foul and impure (Dunning 120). Both books feature escapism and survivalism, appealing to the fantastic side of human nature. The strongest influence is seen through Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*, whose main characters, Ralph and Jack, find themselves stranded on an island (Scott-Kilvert 68). Golding puts no effort into masking his identical scenario as his own main characters, Ralph and Jack, are also stranded on an island. While admiration and respect for another author is acceptable, even respectable, it severely limits Golding's expression of his own ideas as he tries to imitate that which is too simplistic for his goal. Using characters so simplistic and flat as pre-pubescent boys leaves no opportunity for character development or clear, strong personalities. Golding is led

astray as he attempts to pay tribute to his favorite childhood authors through *Lord of the Flies*, which is written on an elementary reading level. However, this further contaminates his writing as the style he mimics is not a good tool for exemplifying mankind. Golding's life experiences with children's literature distorted his writing style to that which is inappropriate and ineffective for his message. Through *Lord of the Flies*, man is presented as being ultimately evil, a perception Golding developed after his involvement in World War II. He enrolled as a Lieutenant in the Royal Navy of England for five years, actively serving on several ships and manning a rocket-launcher. These experiences changed his view of humanity and became one of the most influential factors on his writing. *Lord of the Flies* was written nine years after Golding's dismissal from the Navy, but the war remained fresh in his mind. The slaughter of man and violence in the name of nationalism shaped Golding's perceptions, darkening his view of man. Golding stated that "I believe that man suffers from an appalling ignorance of his own nature" (Magill 1130). This fatalistic and savage outlook can be seen in the novel when Simon is killed to the chant of "Kill the Beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!" (Golding 152). Golding came to this conclusion because of what he witnessed in the war. He later said that "World War II was the turning point for me. I began to see what people were capable of doing" (Magill 1130). This then was Golding's motivation behind *Lord of the Flies*. While war is indeed violent and horrific, something that would scar any man, it cannot be used as the primary indicator of man's true nature. Man is too complex and conclusions cannot be drawn from a singular dimension such as war. Therefore, the negative portrayal of humanity through *Lord of the Flies*

is inaccurate because it is based on Golding's perceptions, formed through a horrific yet limited event in his life which he used to project the complete and entire picture of humanity. Further limiting Golding's view of man was his exposure to just that, man. First and most obvious, Golding only used boys as characters in his projection of society, taking away any credence *Lord of the Flies* might have. In the very beginning of the book, when the boys are pulling themselves together, Piggy asks, "Aren't there any grownups at all?" to which Ralph responds "I don't think so." As Ralph and Piggy assess their situation, the absence of girls is not even noted. Instead they are but are instead concerned only about the lack of adults. Humanity in no way can be comprehensively and accurately portrayed without the presence of women. Golding's writing typifies male-dominated patriarchal literature as he only portrays society through boys. Golding's life, which was predominantly filled with male influences, led to his flawed gender biased perceptions. Growing up, Golding preferred his father and so the beginnings of male domination. His mother's suffragist works and her fight for women was obviously ignored by Golding as he further oppressed woman with his so called social commentary (Magill 1127). Other male influences include his five years in the navy and his career as an English teacher at a boys school. His work at the school is by far the largest ink blot of testosterone on Golding's paper that represents his view of man. One critic belittles *Lord of the Flies* so much as to say that "The boys never come alive as real boys. They are simply the projected annoyances of a disgruntled English school master" (Riley 126). He did in fact use his observations as a teacher to shape the characters with their languages and mannerisms (Scott-Kilvert 68).

Golding did not portray society with his novel but instead portrayed his experiences with young school boys. The lack of any women in the book, with all male characters greatly reduces any credibility Lord of the Flies might have held. He reduces humanity to a one dimensional, id-driven child, which is in no way an accurate representation, but instead biased and chauvinistic. Furthermore, Golding's Lord of the Flies cannot be held as a classic due to its limited appeal and necessary knowledge of Judeo-Christianity. Lord of the Flies takes on the form of Judeo-Christian morality in which humanity is held back by original sin (Riley 198). Golding adopts sin-based theology, that man is incipiently evil, and that left to his own devices, will return to immorality. Innate sin is proven as the boys, untouched by society and left by themselves to develop, become more and more evil as the book progresses. The very acceptance and truth of his statements rely upon the acceptance of traditional Christianity as represented through many metaphors. For instance, the character Simon is a Christ figure, because he is a visionary, loving, carries the message of truth, but is killed by his peers. During one scene, Simon has a conversation with a slaughtered pig's head on a stick, the Lord of the Flies. "Lord of the Flies" originates from the Hebrew word Ba al zevuv, or Satan, into which the Greeks adopted Beelzebub which is the lord of filth and dung (Leeming 159). Therefore, to understand the deeper meaning behind the conversion between Christ and Satan, or Simon and the pig, one must subscribe to orthodox Christianity as well as have at least a basic knowledge of Hebrew. Demonstrating a classic struggle of the war torn, Golding stated, "Man is a falling being, he is gripped by original sin" (Scott-Kilvert 68). In order to fully understand some

of the classic themes in *Lord of the Flies*, one must have a full understanding of Christianity, an unreasonable expectation for an author to place on an audience if he wishes to impact more than a select few. In *Lord of the Flies*, Golding is not accurately portraying society as a whole because he is too specific in religious formatting. Golding further pollutes his view of society with his obsession with ancient civilizations and culture. In the novel, as the Ralph and Piggy attempt to find the other boys, Ralph blows on a conch to summon them, a ritual used by primitive man. One of the most influential factors on his writing was learning ancient Greek (Scott-Kilvert 66). Golding had a background in Greek and Latin literature, with an interest in Egyptian lifestyles. Golding first developed his appreciation for Greek literature as a child, as he read the works of Homer and delved into the *Odyssey* adventures (Bernard, 120). He related the Egyptian use of symbolism and mystery through darkness, which is a prominent theme in *Lord of the Flies* (Scott-Kilvert, 65). In college, Golding studied English literature avoiding anything modern. Golding loved primitive subjects and ancient writing styles, which can be seen in his own work. Golding also took up the Greek ignorance of logic and science, leading to the use of imagination and fantasy over provable real evidence of human nature. “No general conclusions about the human condition can properly be drawn from *Lord of the Flies*. Golding has started with a private theory about Man and has then provided some imaginary and highly selective evidence to support it” (Riley 196). Golding’s obsession with that of the past went too far as he once said that he thought of himself as being Egyptian, a wholly ludicrous idea which further perpetuates the ridiculousness of accepting one man’s twisted view of

society (Scott-Kilvert 65). While acceptable as a tribute, primitive subjects and Greek life can no longer be used to represent society as they do not allow for man to learn or adapt in anyway since the Greek time period. Greek and Egyptian society must be disregarded as any basis of reality and are not an accurate source from which to draw societal perceptions, as Golding did. Every event in one's life is like a drop of water on a lens of life. Golding's lens, his perceptions, are clouded and muddled by his life experiences, distorting his view of mankind. His lens is blurred by his fascination with children's adventure stories and ancient Greek and Egyptian cultures, disallowing him to see outside the realm of the imaginary and the extinct. Furthermore, his perceptions are narrowed and contaminated with his use of Christianity as a model, as well as his war experiences which limit the range of which Golding could understand human nature. Golding's lens is thoroughly encrusted with the crud of his male-dominated, fantasy based life. Golding, while providing entertaining children's literature, in no way wrote a classic portrayal of humanity through *Lord of the Flies*.