

**The Conflict between the Good and Evil in man in Lord of the Flies by William
Golding**

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Abstract:

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.

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.

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). 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. 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).

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.

To achieve this didactic aim, Golding’s island is deserted; it has no indigenous inhabitants. 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.

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 (Gindin 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).

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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