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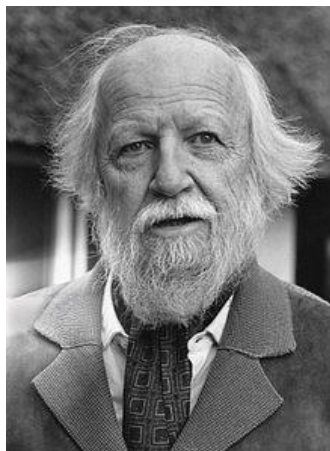
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Thematic Evaluation of William Golding's Novel, *Lord of the Flies*

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William Golding (1911-1993)

Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Golding

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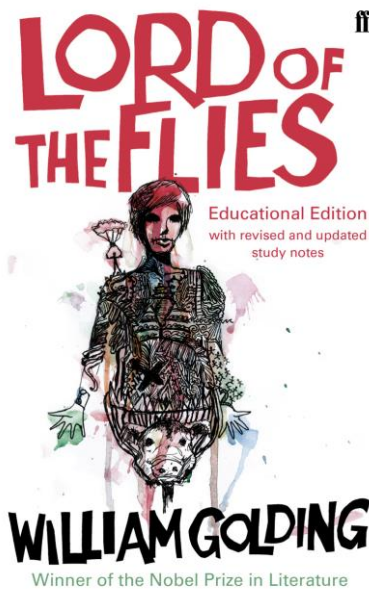
Thematic Evaluation of William Golding's Novel *Lord of the Flies*

Abstract

This research study aims at attempting to assess thematically the underlying ideas implied by the novel, *Lord of the Flies*. The novel reflects quite effectively the social and cultural conditions of the contemporary times. It revolves around the idea of the evil which is inherent specifically in human nature and in society at large. The author asserts the view that man is evil by nature. It is that culture and pressure of civilization which stops that evil from emerging sometimes, but as soon as that sociological and civilizational barrier has been removed, then the human heart comes out in its true shape and shows the bestial instinct quite fearlessly.

Moreover, the author has also woven a web of thematic elements that holds together the novel, *Lord of the Flies* in a clever, artistic way. Above all, the thematic elements involved in the novel are the emergence of evil, the loss of civilization, the motif of power, the fate of the intellectual, the uncertainty of life, rules and orders, loss of innocence, primitivism, symbolic manifestations and the tone of pessimism. I have applied the methods of historical and textual approaches for the evaluation of the thematic concerns of the novel.

Key Words: Golding, Lord, Flies, Evil, Thematic, Evaluation, Civilization, Motif



Courtesy: <http://lordofthefliescover.com/>

Introduction

The English Nobel laureate, Sir William Gerald Golding (1911-1993) published his first novel, *Lord of the Flies* in 1954. Like many other contemporary novelists, Golding seems to have been influenced by the annihilation and the aftermaths of the Second World War. The novelist creates a microcosm dominated by the evil impulses which are inherent in human beings.

The Story

The novel tells us the story of the marooned English schoolboys, probably aged between six and twelve who have got scattered on a fictitious island far off in the Pacific Ocean, as a result of an air crash occurring during an evacuation of the boys from the nuclear war that had broken out in Europe. This coral island which is uninhabited and undiscovered so far awaits the advent of the young representatives of the modern world.

After the crash of their plane, the plane is destroyed but the pilot manages to drop the boys safely through a passenger-tube. After landing on the Island, the schoolboys thus become the only inhabitants of the island. They somehow succeed in organizing themselves on the island. We first meet Ralph and Piggy. They discover a conch and Piggy shows Ralph how to blow it and so it begins its role to call the other boys.

As a result of the blowing of this conch by Ralph and Piggy, all the scattered boys on the island begin to come together. Once all the boys are gathered on the island, a talk about the supposed leader of the boys starts. Jack wants to be the leader of the boys, but due to the blowing of the conch for the gathering of the boys and his impressive personality Ralph is unanimously elected with the exception of the Choir, as the leader for the boys on this Island. With this Jack goes on the war path with Ralph and all his supporters.

All the boys now are divided into two hostile groups. One group including Piggy, Simon, Sam, Eric and the twins are led by Ralph who represents the good and discipline. Ralph blows the conch, builds shelters, stresses on the lighting of the fire on the top of the mountain and

hopes to be rescued. On the other hand, Roger, Maurice and Robert are led by Jack who represents evil in the novel. They are always after hunting as a sport. Thus from the very beginning, the seed of rivalry is sown, that would explode in course of time, in the form of viciousness and homicide.

With the death of Piggy and Simon representing wisdom and divine help, Ralph remains all alone, frustrated, low spirited and frightened of death due to the brutality of Jack and his team. Sam and Eric are also forced to side with Jack. The vengeful Jack and his merciless group being in pursuit of Ralph set all the forest on fire; the setting of fire forces Ralph out while he is hiding in the bushes and he runs to save himself from Jack and his brutal team; while running madly on the beach, he tumbles down where the naval officer sailing by, gets hold of him and others. First, the naval officer takes all this mad running and their mad pursuit of Ralph, to be a kind of sport, but upon finding exactly what has happened, he becomes serious and sad. It is ultimately the fire which symbolizes hope and rescue, saves the boys.

A Thematic Novel – A Reformative Mood

Lord of the Flies may be classified as a thematic novel, sociological novel or allegorical novel. It calls our attention to the evil inherent in human nature in particular and in society at large. It reflects symbolically the author's notion of the breakdown of civilization and the ultimate triumph of good over evil. Indu Kulkarni, in his *The Novels of William Golding* (2003, p.10) talks about this phenomenon very effectively, "Golding presents the conflict between good and evil with the intention of reforming human nature like most other allegorists."

Golding's work seems to be reformative and he seems to preach about the notion of evil inherent in man, which needs to be purged if society is to maintain its sanity. Indu Kulkarni says that Golding examines the phenomenon of social rebels, deviant behavior, terrorism and chaos which is symptomatic of a diseased, unloving, inhuman and intolerant society. Ralph, Piggy and Simon and their colleagues are said to be representative of the principle of good, while Jack, Roger, Robert and their accomplices and even Maurice are the embodiment of evil in the novel.

Turning into a Savage Mode

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As the story progresses, most of the characters begin to forget about their civilization and their civilized behaviors; they turn into savages (Jack's camp) and cause a threat to all who are still not fully turned into unruly savages. Jack's camp (representing evil) overcomes that of Ralph's camp (representing good) and as a result of the savagery and brutality of Jack's camp, Simon and Piggy lose their lives. Even the conch, the symbol of authority, democracy and discipline is smashed and "Lord of the Flies" (refers to Beelzebub or Satan; the enemy of God, who hates Man) seems to laugh at these human efforts and he begins his rule over this far off, temporarily human-inhabited island.

Thematic Evaluation

The Emergence of Evil

“Without the bounds of civilization, without an imbedded natural morality, the boys regress. Ralph's initial leadership is marred by his uncertainty and inadequacy” (Encyclopedia of Censorship, 2009, p. 331). William Golding is of the view that evil is an intrinsic part of the human being and that it gradually comes to the forefront, when Man is put in a natural and unrestricted milieu. In the very start of the novel, obviously there seems to be no evil on the island. All the boys are in a state of euphoria when they found themselves away from adult supervision. We can hear the words “Sche-aa-owl” and “Whizzoh” from their mouths. In the words of the author, “A storm of laughter arose and even the tiniest child joined in; they laughed and tumbled and shouted on the mountain.” (LOF, p 23 & 32) As the story moves along, the evil comes to the surface in most of the major characters with the exception of Ralph and Piggy who are said to be the bright side of humanity in the novel. When Ralph is elected as leader of the boys, a sort of antagonism arises between Ralph and Jack. It is out of this ill will that Jack becomes evil incarnate. Although, at the school he used to be the symbol of discipline and was in charge of the Choir-boys, on the island he becomes so relentless that he sets the entire island on fire.

The killing of two innocent figures, Simon and Piggy, indicates the culmination of emerging evils in the novel. The first two episodes of the mock-hunt put forth a kind of prelude to the death of Simon. During the third mock-hunt, Golding describes the death of Simon as,

-----The beast (Simon) was on its knees in the centre, its arms folded
over its face. It was crying out against the abominable noise something about

a body on the hill. The beast struggled forward, broke the ring and fell over the steep edge of the rock to the sand by the water. At once the crowd surged after it, poured down the rock, leapt on to the beast, screamed, struck, bit, tore. There were no words, and no movements but the tearing of teeth and claws.

(LOF, Chapter 9, p 168)

As Simon comes out of the forest to inform the boys about the dead body of a man on the top of the hill, the hunters think of him as the beast, stab him with their spears and thus put him to death. Similarly, the way for Piggy's death is also paved when the blood thirsty Roger being out of his mind, almost verging on insanity, pushes down a huge rock which strikes Piggy on the head and kills him on the spot.

Loss of Civilization

Lord of the Flies is a philosophical allegory about the nature of evil and the precariousness of civilization.” (Ifor Evans, 1940, p 363) Golding has explicitly revived the notion of an English philosopher Thomas Hobbes who says that Man in a state of nature would be corrupt, brutal and antisocial. He suggests that civilization provides us with a kind of sanctuary; where we can peacefully promote our social values. When this veil of civilization is taken away; man morally and socially degenerates and his brutal qualities come to the surface.

This deterioration and loss of social values increasingly appears in *Lord of the Flies*. As soon as the boys find that they are on the island, they immediately start thinking about the constructive activities. They call the assemblies, lay down rules, and assign duties, making huts and so on, before they find themselves indulging in destructive activities. They start throwing stones, calling names and even killing each other. Jack out of his negligence, discontinues his duty of lighting fire on top of the mountain. It is in the absence of social taboos, that the mock-hunt turns into the pig-hunt and ultimately into the man-hunt. Being unaware of their action, Simon is killed by the frenzied hunters. Similarly, the lighting of the fire, the only hope of rescue is transformed into the burning of the entire forest.

Hope and Faith of Ralph

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The character of Ralph has been fortified by Golding as an astute politician of the Post War era, who is sanguine about the future of the boys. Ralph strongly believes that one day they would be rescued from the island. Even Ralph's unconscious has apprehended the loss of civilized life on the island. One night, when he is sleeping in his hut, he dreams about the life he once used to enjoy in England. Golding has explicitly given an account of that childish experience in the following words.

Supposing they could be transported home by yet, then before morning they would land at that big airfield in Wiltshire. They would go by car; no, for things to be perfect they would go by train; all the way down to Devon and take that cottage again. Then at the foot of the garden the wild ponies would come and look over the wall.....

(LOF, p 181)

Desperation

Contrasting with that ingenuous phenomenon undergone by Ralph, we can hear a desperate cry from Ralph's mouth when he finds himself fallen at the feet of the naval officer. Tears roll down from his innocent cheeks when Ralph looks at the officer and his friends around him. This state of nostalgia reminds him of that nasty game they have played on the coral island.

Ralph looked at him dumbly. For a moment he had a fleeting picture of the strange glamour that had once invested the beaches. But the island was scorched up like dead wood—His voice rose under the black smoke before the burning wreckage of the island; and infected by that emotion, the other little boys began to shake and sob too.

(LOF, p 223)

The Motif of Power

Almost all the principal characters in *Lord of the Flies* seem to possess in a way, a gifted power. They may be termed as the embodiments of different powers existing within a society. Golding has attributed democratic power to Ralph. On the island, a twelve year old boy with fair hair is selected as a chief by the majority of the boys. Since then he tries to maintain discipline

on the island. He calls meetings of the boys and also assigns them various responsibilities. He suggests the lighting of fire on the top of the mountain. It is he who explores that they have arrived on the uninhabited island. He also proposes the building of shelters on the beach. He encourages the Littluns who are afraid of the beastie. In fact, he can be called the hero of the novel. As a democratic chief he is assisted by Piggy and Simon (Intellectuals). Later he is embarrassed, when the boys ignore him as a chief; and no more cooperate with him. On the other hand, Jack and his group of hunters challenge his authority. They chase him till the arrival of the naval officer.

According to Santawana Halder, “The changes in Jack's character display the truth that ‘all power corrupts’ Jack’s hankering for power and obsession for hunting attach him to the evils of materialism” (William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, 2006, p 112). Jack is the representative of the autocratic power in the novel. Apparently, he promises to obey all the decided rules and conventions of the island, but violates them when his authority is on stake. Once he said,

“I agree with Ralph. We’ve got to have rules and obey them. After all, we’re not savages. We’re English; and the English are best at everything. So we’ve got to do the right things.”

Evil of Hypocrisy

Contrasting with the above words spoken by him, later he speaks to Piggy regarding the significance of the conch as a symbol of authority on the top of the mountain “The conch doesn’t count on top of the mountain,” said Jack, “so you shut up” (LOF, p. 46). This affirms the evil of hypocrisy ingrained in him. We can obviously observe his domineering behavior when he proposes to be the chief of the boys, but is disheartened when majority of the boys vote for Ralph. He is no doubt an adventurous-minded person and is busy all the time at pig-hunting. He is bold, reckless and brutal in his actions. He defies the authority of Ralph by neglecting the lighting of the fire on the mountain top. He connives against the position of Ralph; he threatens Sam and Eric not to side with Ralph. Although he does not believe in the existence of the beast yet, he is obsessed with the fear of the unknown. Once he gets scared by the dead parachutist,

when he climbs up to the top of the mountain in search of the beast. He soothes the Littluns by offering the head of the Pig as a sacrifice to the beast.

The Spiritual Power

The spiritual power is vested in the character of Simon. He is a Christ-like figure and is helpful to all those who are in need. It is his farsightedness which helps the boys in the discovering of the real truth about the beast seen by the twins. He further ensures the boys that there is no beast on the island. Although he himself is a victim to some sort of hallucination, he does not believe in the existence of the beast. "I don't believe in the beast," Simon mumbles confusedly. (LOF, p 115) Simon believes that the real beast exists within man himself.

"Roger edged past the Chief, only just avoiding pushing him with his shoulder. The yelling ceased, and Sam 'n Eric lay looking up in quiet terror. Roger advanced upon them as one wielding a nameless authority." (LOF, p 201)

The above lines refer to the brutal power exercised in the novel. The most brutal action ever performed in the story is the death of Piggy at the hands of the unsympathetic Roger. After killing Piggy, he turns to threaten Sam and Eric to side with Jack's tribe. It is by the use of Roger's vicious tactics that Jack and his fellows forcibly bring Sam and Eric to their side. Hence, the author has presented Roger as a concrete manifestation of brute force.

The Intellectual Power

The intellectual power in the novel rests with the fat boy, Piggy. We first meet him when he comes out of the undergrowth and guesses with insight about the other boys who may be lying scattered on the island. After his first meeting with Ralph, Piggy says "I expect there's a lot more of us scattered about." (LOF, p 09) Piggy is scientific in most of his designs. It is he who introduces the conch to Ralph and also teaches him how to make a sound out of it. He also advises the boys for building huts on the beach. He is very much anxious about the Littluns. He tries his best to calm them and also tries to arrange for their safety. When the Littluns feel afraid of the existence of the .beast on the island, Piggy answers them that there is nothing to be afraid

of on the island. The death of Piggy at the hands of Roger implies that intellectual power cannot withstand brutal power.

The Fate of the Intellectual

The tragic and unexpected deaths of the noble men also seem to have a thematic interest in the novel. It is the intellectuals who have always brought humanity out of the abyss of ignorance and barbarism in every society. Unfortunately, they have never been given their rightful prestige and honor in the society. William Golding has realistically depicted the true condition of the contemporary intellectuals in *Lord of the Flies*. Both Simon and Piggy are men of knowledge and understanding. It is because of their sagacity that they contested against the evil forces on the island. It is with the tragic deaths of Simon and Piggy, that the evil overwhelms the entire island. E.M. Forster in his famous novel “Howard’s End” also corroborates this point of view by saying that civilization depends on those people who are gifted with insight and understanding.

The Uncertainty of Life

After World War II, people began to wonder whether life was good or bad. This element of uncertainty may be seen in most of the Post War literary masterpieces. *Lord of the Flies* also reflects the contemporary approach to life. The plot of the novel has minutely been saturated with uncertain events. The dramatic air crash seems to be the first unexpected event, which gives further impetus to the uncertain situations on the island. The sudden deaths of Simon and Piggy are unexpected dealings. All the boys give the impression of both hopefulness and despair. The head of the slain pig looks to Simon as if it is the Lord of the Flies. The mock-hunt staged by Jack and his hunters turns into a man-hunt and ends in Simon’s death. Ultimately, the arrival of the naval officer at the eleventh-hour is the last unexpected happening that leads the boys to the world which is more uncertain than the coral island. Further, the fear of the unknown and the existence of the beast have enhanced the atmosphere of uncertainty on the island. In the words of the author,

“They talk and scream. The Littluns. Even some of the others.

As if-----”

“As if it wasn’t a good island.”

Astonished at the interruption, they looked up at Simon’s serious face.

“As if” said Simon, “the beastie, the beastie or the snake-thing, was real. Remember?” (LOF p, 56)

Rules and Order

Lord of the Flies is deeply concerned with rules and order in a society. Ralph is very much disappointed when he saw that they were getting disorganized and the rules were going out of order. All the boys are unhappy over losing a golden chance of rescue when they allow the fire to die out. Ralph calls a meeting to decide about certain rules and discipline on the island. Ralph said, “The thing is: we need an assembly” (LOF, p 86). They decide that the fire had to be regularly maintained. They also manage to provide fresh water for drinking in coconut shells. Ralph also pacifies the boys by telling them that there was no beast or any other fearful thing on the island. In addition, the boys have also chosen a suitable place for the lavatory. In the words of Ralph, “We chose rocks right along beyond the bathing-pool as a lavatory. That was sensible too.” (LOF, p 87) The disorder in the novel further spreads when Piggy shows his disapproval of the rumor of the existence of the beast on the island. With this censure, a bitter quarrel starts between Piggy and Jack. Rules and orders were slowly going out of control. At that moment, Ralph reminds them about the rules, but Jack says that he does not care about them. Thereafter, the boys separate into hostile groups. Jack does not want Ralph giving orders to the boys.

Piggy’s intellectualism is appealing to all, but it could not control the commotion which was emerging among the boys. Further, the breaking of the conch and Piggy’s glasses as well as the collapse of the huts on the beach, are redolent of the failure of civilization and the end of the rule of law.

Loss of Innocence

Lord of the Flies starts with the innocent playfulness of the boys on an uninhabited island. They take delight in their boyish adventures. All the boys except Piggy are happy, when they find themselves without any adult supervision. While reinforcing the absence of grown-ups on the island, we hear the following words from the boys,

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“Isn’t there a ship then?”
‘Isn’t there a man here?’
“Aren’t there any grown-ups?”
“No”
“Then we’ll have to look after ourselves.” (LOF, p, 21 & 22).

No sooner do the boys find themselves isolated from the rest of society, their happiness knows no bounds. They begin enjoying playing, dancing, laughing, swimming and hunting. These cheerful activities become a prologue to the tragic end of the novel. The memorable lines on the last page of the novel reflect Golding’s striking theme of his novel:

“Ralph wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man’s heart,
and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy”
(LOF, p 223)

The last scene of the novel seems to be reminiscent of the devastation brought by the Second World War. All the tragic deeds and inimical undertakings on the island were brought about by Jack and his tribe. When Ralph tumbles down before the navel officer, he begins to recollect all the events of the past and so uncontrollable tears and sobs overtake him. On the black, scorched island, Ralph finds himself surrounded by unrestrained hunters with wooden spears, painted faces and long hair. He weeps for the loss of innocence and the loss of his friends, more than for himself getting hurt.

Primitivism

The primitiveness of man and the darkness of his heart also carry thematic importance in the novel, *Lord of the Flies*. Painted faces and long hair of the characters, the building of castles and making of huts, the rolling of stones, hunting of animals, drinking of water with Coconut shells, roasting of meat, the making of fire, living in caves and taking delight in killing and dancing, and so on, are the discernible symptoms of primitivism in the novel. The Castle Rock which is a symbol of primitiveness is of great attraction to Jack and his savage hunters.

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“With ludicrous care he (Ralph) embraced the rock, pressing himself to it above the sucking sea. The sniggering of the savages became a loud derisive jeer” (LOF, p, 195)

“The shivering, silvery, unreal laughter of the savages sprayed out and echoed away. A gust of rage shook Ralph. His voice cracked” (LOF, p, 197)

Symbolic Manifestations

A number of symbols have been used by Golding to heighten and highlight his thematic concerns of the novel. The head of the pig killed by the hunters symbolizes the emergence of evil which is the most dominant theme in *Lord of the Flies*. When a pig is killed by Jack and his hunters, Jack cuts off the head of the slain pig and stabs it with a wooden spear and then inserts that spear into a rock. It is believed to be a sacrifice to the beast. The beast seems to be the symbol of evil in the novel. All the boys have realized the existence of the beast on the island. All the boys are afraid of the beast as well. Simon in hallucination experiences the Pig’s head as the lord of the flies which speaks to him. Meanwhile, Simon comes out and looks at the Pig’s head which is surrounded by flies. The Lord of the Flies (the title refers to the Evil One; Satan; enemy of God and hater of Man) scares Simon and tells him that he is present in all the boys. Thus the very title of the novel is also symbolic of the emergence of evil and its conflict with the saint-like figure Simon. It also testifies to Golding’s view that evil is inherent in human nature and can be separated only through selfless sacrifice.

The sporadic mock-hunts and the fretful cries of the boys, “Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!” symbolize their deterioration into savages and their remoteness from civilized life and behavior.

Fire has got both positive as well as negative connotations in *Lord of the Flies*. In the beginning, it becomes a symbol of hope but at the end it becomes a symbol of disappointment. The responsibility of lighting the fire is unanimously assigned to Jack and his group of hunters.

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Ralph and Piggy insist on the maintenance of the fire. They think that the smoke rising out of the fire may attract the passersby and thus they would be rescued. But all the hopes of the boys are dashed to the ground; when Jack and his hunters neglect the fire and the hope of their rescue is gone, when they see a ship passing by the island. At the end, the fire serves as a symbol of disappointment when all the forest is set on fire. It is Jack who sets the fire in order to get Ralph out of the forest and arrest him but the destructive nature of fire turns all the forest into ashes. Thus the negative and positive connotations of fire coincide with the concept of good and evil thematically represented in the novel.

Piggy's glasses symbolize wisdom and intellectuality in the novel. It is the glasses which are used to make fire on the island. Ralph's survival depends mostly on the guideline provided by Piggy. It is Piggy who knows about the conch and teaches Ralph how to blow it. Piggy's death at the hands of merciless Roger and the breaking of the glasses, symbolize the triumph of evil over good and the fate of the wise counselors in society.

The major characters chosen by the author also carry a symbolic significance. Ralph is a symbol of civilized life and behavior. He brings unity and discipline among the boys on the island. Jack represents brutality and evil. Piggy is an epitome of intellectuality and farsightedness, while Simon signifies saintliness in *Lord of the Flies*.

The Tone of Pessimism

As an allegory, *Lord of the Flies* depicts the post-World War years and its aftermath of pessimism. Initially, William Golding was a school teacher. He was well aware of child psychology. Later, during the War time, he gave up that profession and joined the Royal Navy. When the War came to an end, he once again returned to the profession of teaching. The experiences of the war and the bleak aspect of human nature had left a deep pessimistic impression on the mind of the author.

The fictitious island manifests an atmosphere of warfare as well as the hide out of the English school boys. It is in view of the war that the boys have been evacuated by the pilot of an aircraft. At the end of the novel we have an intervention by the British naval officer. The boys

being rescued by the officer may or may not bring any drastic change in the behavior of the boys. There is dramatic irony with the fact that the boys are safely taken away from the coral island, to the world where the war is already being waged by the adults. Thus nobody can escape from the tone of pessimism prevalent in the novel.

Conclusion

The theme in *Lord of the Flies* like that of most of the other novels by the same author, revolves around the concept of the emergence of evil and its conflict with that which is good. This leitmotif has been presented very well through a well-knit plot, the universality of the myth, realistic portrayal of characters, apt and perceptible symbolism, thematic imagery, graphic and imaginative descriptions and last but not least, his unique narrative style which makes the story gripping and full of suspense. As the story progresses, the thematic concern of the novel is enhanced and integrated by so many motifs intertwining in the novel including, loss of civilization, the motif of power, the fate of intellectuals, the uncertainty of life, rules and orders, loss of innocence, primitivism, symbolic imagery, and the tone of pessimism prevailing to the very end of the novel.

The Encyclopedia of British Writers, 1800 to the Present, Volume 2 (2009, p 51) sums up the very crux of the novel: “In Golding’s novel, the society formed by his castaways is presided over by the ‘Lord of the Flies’ or ‘Beelzebub, and reveals the innate depravity of human nature. Ralph, a representative of reason, and piggy, who stands for intellect are overcome by the brute violence and bloodlust of Jack and his henchmen before Ralph’s last minute reprieve.”

Yet, with all that pessimism and presence of evil, there is still a ray of hope at the end of the novel, with the arrival of the naval officer and the rescue of the boys.

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