

“The Lord of The Flies”: Deconstructing the ideas of human civility

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ABSTRACT

‘The Lord of the Flies’ penned by Henry Golding challenges the notions and ideas we as human beings perceive ourselves to be, civilised, good-natured and kind, as compared to who we are in actuality. Golding, inspired by his own experience, crafts this brilliant narrative that wills its viewers to realise the sheer savagery human beings possess behind a veil of civility. It follows the popular narrative of characters having lost their way and finding themselves stranded on a deserted island. However, instead of exciting adventures with promises of mirth and triumph over the brutal forces of nature, Golding unravels his story to reveal the darkness and bloodlust in human nature that instantly begins to project on the loss of social order. He conveys his perceptions of the need for governance over humans because they are inherently violent. This research paper analyses the relationship between the characters to concepts of civility and savagery and explores the story’s subversion of the colonial narrative present in various other novels of the same trope. It also hopes to convey the criticism of the novel and its messaging and explain the significance and timeless nature of the novel that remains relevant to date.

Keywords: *Civility, Savagery, Bloodlust, Colonialism*

INTRODUCTION

‘Lord of the Flies’ details the multifaceted nature of humankind. It compares who we are to whom society, governance and social order force us to be. It entails a critical perspective on whether we can survive without these external forces that keep us bound but in check. The novel serves to remind us that just because we have reached a position of civility globally, it does not mean we are incapable of reverting to our supposed savage beginnings. This message carries prevalence even today, and the paper will further explore it.

Henry Golding was a British Naval officer who served his country during World War II. He witnessed the worst of human beings and the destruction that we are inherently and undoubtedly capable of doing. These experiences guided him to formulate the narrative of this book. He discusses the concept of civility humans impose on themselves and compares it to the brute savagery that humans refuse to unleash and only do so when pushed to the brink of sanity. This idea is the book’s basic premise, but it also discusses civility in other ways.

Colonialism is the process of a hegemonic country taking political control of a less developed country and exploiting the indigenous people and resources. These European countries justified their colonizing practices by advocating that they brought Christian values, civilization and industrial culture to the indigenous people's supposed savage and barbaric customs. The undertones of this myth remain to date. Many adventure novels came into being at the time about European men exploring the world and passing on their civilized ways to savages in faraway lands and accomplishing success. This theme is where the 'Lord of the Flies' subverts the myth of colonization and portrays British boys as equally prone to savage ways as anyone else is and that the readers must realize that colonialism is only exploitative and not beneficial.

However, as much as specific messages of the novel objectively carry relevance, many other qualities and ideas of civility, savagery and human beings do not make sense when viewed from a modern light. The novel carries multiple criticisms regarding how Golding perceived the world and his misconceptions about the topics he conveyed in the world he built for the book. The paper hopes to discuss these criticisms and shed light on truly deconstructing what civility meant to Golding and what it is seen in the present day.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following research papers have been instrumental in framing this paper. They have not only provided greater insight into the various developing themes but also expanded this author's perspective to understand Golding's writing in a better manner.

The first paper referred to was "Thomas Hobbes: Power in the State of Nature, Power in Civil Society" (Read, 1991). Golding's idea of the state of nature embodied many ideas Thomas Hobbes himself held. Both believe that humans are nasty, small, selfish and brutish in their most natural form. Hence, it was imperative to understand the philosophies and theories of Hobbes on civility before analysing Golding's ideas on the same.

Once the author better understood Golding's theories, it was essential to understand the ideas and theories and connect them to the book. The journal article "Ideas: Lord of the Flies" (Wittmeyer & Membrillas, 2014) helped in this pursuit. They gave a closer insight into the multiple themes and theories of the novel. The themes are political instability in an already fragile society, man's automatic gravitation toward power and the apparent relation between power and violence.

Furthermore, the journal article "From War to War: Lord of the Flies as the Sociology of Spite" (Diken & Laustsen, 2006) provided valuable context to the debate between performed civility and inherent savagery. These concepts and their definitions and functions as antonyms are vital to the genesis of the novel in Golding's mind and this research paper.

A substantial part of this research conveys how Golding expresses the colonialist narrative differently than many of his peers or authors before him did. The article “The savages in the forest: decolonising William Golding” (Hawlin, 1995) gave the author perspective on this subversion that Golding employed in writing this book. This subversion of the trope and further comparison to other adventure novels follow in the analysis.

Finally, this paper also aims to communicate the criticisms of how Golding failed in certain areas to explain the ideas of civility. The article “Lord of the Flies: Fool’s Gold?” (Townsend, 1964) helped formulate legitimate criticism that the literary community has associated with the novel. Each of these papers contributed a great deal of insight and knowledge that was absolutely crucial for the author’s comprehension of the subject matter.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research methodology that the author has utilised for this paper is non-empirical and non-doctrinal forms of research. The research takes a non-empirical approach as it requires a non-experimental but more theoretical approach by assessing the novel’s plotlines and themes. The research also employs non-doctrinal analysis because it does rely on secondary sources like journal articles and analysis of the novel through book reviews and video essays. The research definitely required its primary source, which is the novel itself but also relied on the multiple secondary sources available to understand the themes further in a more qualitative manner. The research also adopts a more critical and analytical perspective to uncover the merits and demerits of the novel in a nuanced way.

The research objectives are to explain the concepts of human behaviour concerning its implementation in civility compared to human nature during more instinctual savagery. It also aims to analyse the storylines from a modern perspective and apply the book’s ideals to the present era. Furthermore, it conveys Golding’s and the book’s perspective on the colonialist narrative and measures its problematic narrative in the present. Lastly, the research aims to explain the criticism associated with the book and its messaging.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

It is imperative first to provide a summary of the novel before analysing its themes of civility. The story begins with a plane crash into a deserted island where the lone survivors are young boys of British descent who range from ages six to thirteen. The plane was to carry out an evacuation during an unspecified war. Golding introduces the reader to Ralph and Piggy, who form a quick friendship. They find a conch, and Ralph uses this conch to call the rest of the survivors. All of them assemble at the beach, and the survivors include a boys’ choir led by Jack. Ralph and Jack form an instant rivalry when the boys elect the former as their leader. From then on, this rivalry intensifies and forms one of the main plotlines of the book.

The island is bountiful in its resources and beautiful in its appearance. However, the boys are unable to utilise these resources adequately and maintain order by following Ralph's rules. They decide on rules in Ralph's meetings but fail to implement those rules. This feature applies to maintaining a signal fire, building shelters, and keeping the younger boys calm, among other activities. Moreover, the younger boys keep having nightmares and feverish visions of a monster on the island called 'the beastie'. Jack is the first to develop a bloodlust; he hunts down and kills a pig with the rest of his group. He also vows to slay the 'beastie' if it is real. As the days go by, the boys find their sanities unravelling and their instinctual need for violence activating. Jack undermines Ralph's authority by revolting and taking a large part of the group with him. Ralph and Piggy attempt to make him see reason, but it is of no avail.

Simon, one of the boys, loses his sanity and talks to the decapitated head of the pig that Jack had killed. He terms this head the 'Lord of the Flies' and realises that there is no beast on the island. He runs towards the rest, only for the boys to turn violent beyond reason, and they kill him. The same urge to kill descends on Jack and Ralph, and their fight leads to the accidental death of Piggy, which forces Ralph to believe that his own death is near and rescue is impossible. However, at the last minute, a British army official enters the island and criticises the boys on learning of their savage behaviour. He scolds them by saying that this was no way for civilised British boys to behave. At the same time, Golding reminds the reader of the war Britain among other countries, continues to wage. Hence, proving that the British and the Europeans at large are not more civilised than those they consider savages.

At the story's very beginning, Golding makes a correlation between civility and political organisation. The boys attempt to organise themselves, create a hierarchy and divide the work to be able to survive on this island. This show of attempting to create smooth governance is integral to Golding's understanding of human behaviour and how he perceives social order creates better-mannered individuals.

Throughout this book, Golding believes that civility is associated with political organisation, and that the failure of such organisation leads to chaos, and savagery. Various philosophers have theorised the beginning of such organisation which in their opinion leads to the formation of a state. An integral theory to understanding the formation of state is the 'Social Contract Theory.' This theory entails the belief that the beginning of political organisation started with a mutual agreement among the people to live by certain rules and laws to ensure a better existence than the 'state of nature', a time before the entering into such an agreement. It has three proponents-Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean Jacques Rosseau (Read, 1991). While the underlying philosophy behind their understanding of this theory remains similar, their interpretations are vastly different. Golding's understanding of society without laws is most similar to Thomas Hobbes. Hence, it is essential to understand his version of the Social Contract Theory to better understand Golding's perspective, as well.

Hobbes (in Read, 1991) proposed his version of the social contract theory where he stated that humans, in the state of nature, were brutal savages and needed to surrender their natural rights for their own survival by entering into a social contract. His ideas about humans found their reflection in Golding's ideas too. Both of them further

believed that if the component of the political organisation finds itself withering away, the state of nature returns and jungle rule will prevail (Read, 1991).

Hobbes framed the social contract to theorise on the state's origination, and this was the theory he believed to be accurate. Other proponents after him, like John Locke and Jean Jaques Rosseau, put forth their theories where they suggested that affairs were not as terrifying as Hobbes assumed them to be and that human beings were happy in the state of nature, but they wanted to organise themselves willingly to ensure themselves the greatest possible happiness (Black, 1993). Golding, unfortunately, did not hold humans to such higher ideals and believed that humans were genuinely and naturally brutal savages.

Civility is associated with human beings having the ability to behave with each other in a polite and accommodating way. When humans are sufficiently civil with each other, we can develop a civilisation with smooth political coordination and governance. Civilisation is at the pinnacle of human development and our interactions with each other. Characteristics of a civilisation entail a society with effective communication, good governance, urbanisation and social stratification. Golding imagines a world on his island stripped away from civilisation, and he puts supposedly civilised human beings in it. What follows is his version of the results of an experiment to determine whether it is civility or savagery ingrained in humans (Sunderman, 1999).

Golding portrays savagery as the opposite of civility. The condition where humans return to their primitive states entails violence and bloodlust. Jack is the first to show signs of savagery and expressed his self-disgust when he could not kill a pig on their first day and said he would definitely not hesitate the next time. He also makes bold proclamations to kill the beastie if it were indeed real. He leads the boys' choir and a few other boys as hunters who, in the complete interest of savagery, dismember a pig and loudly chant about the blood that splattered. His descent into savagery and claim for power through violence make him a better, more attractive leader than Ralph to the boys.

On the other hand, Ralph starts his arc by representing the best civility. He uses his intellect and that of Piggy's to form order and cooperation, and the boys elect him as their chief. However, Ralph lacks the true power of a leader to convince people to perform their tasks and implement his rules. He also begins to find his sanity slip when Jack begins his attempts at revolting. Finally, Ralph too resorts to brute savagery and decides to fight Jack, but his endeavours are interrupted by the British army officer.

The novel poses an interesting dynamic between Ralph and Jack, who represent opposite ideas, but throughout its storylines, the audience can see moments of camaraderie between the two of them. These moments represent a more utopic idea that civility can coexist with instinctual human savagery. However, Golding does not explore this narrative. Instead, he continues to pit the boys against each other for the rest of the book. He does this to drive his point about how the most and least civil humans ultimately resort to savagery without supervision and political order.

It is imperative at this juncture for the author to remind the reader of Golding's own experiences. He wrote this book at a time when he had lost faith in humanity and its

supposed capacity to embody civility during times of extreme difficulty. He had just returned from serving the British Navy in the second world war and had seen the worst of humanity. He saw needless death and destruction in his service, which greatly impaled the way he saw human behaviour. He later returned to his job as a school teacher (Jones, 1984). He started writing this book because he wanted to tell a story about how kids would actually behave on a deserted island which, in his opinion, is different from kids seen in previous literary works like that of 'The Coral Island', for example. The fact that he chose to convey this violent perception of children proves the levels of his descent into cynicism about human nature.

Another refreshing aspect of this book is its subversive use of the trope of 'Robinsonade'. This word refers to the fictional narratives where the novel's main characters find themselves in fantasy locations with adventurous opportunities (Karagöz, 2014). This trope originated from 'Robinson Crusoe', but the reader can find it in novels like 'Treasure Island' and 'Gulliver's Travels' among others. Golding's main inspiration to subvert the trope was 'The Coral Island', written by Ballantyne in 1857. In that book, the boys have a fascinating adventure on an island that offers the reader enjoyment and no dread (Biles, 1972). Golding even uses the same names for his characters that Ballantyne uses to show the comparison and prove that it is impossible to expect humans to behave in a civil manner when society does not enforce them to behave well.

Moreover, as mentioned previously, this trope has a problematic connotation associated with it. The trope projects a colonialist narrative and states that the Europeans are choosing to colonise indigenous lands and people to provide them with European civility and noble Christian values. The truth behind colonialism is that the practice is exploitative, cruel and propagates racism, class differences, inequality and injustice. Golding takes a surprisingly progressive position by making his British boys emboldened with Christian values so savage and brutish. He makes the point that savagery is inherent in all humans, including the white people from Europe (Hawlin, 1995). In the book, Jack even states that they must be good at survival because they are British and the British are good at everything. However, as the novel progresses, Jack leads the entire group to madness, murder and bloodlust, which is decidedly not for the best. This is another manner in which the novel deconstructs the concept of civility.

While the novel has gained a position as a classic, it is not immune from ample criticism. Although Golding has made a genuine effort to break down the colonialist myths, he has also undertaken to propagate a few others. When Jack and the rest of the hunting group return after killing the pig, Golding wants to convey that these boys have jumped into the ocean, which is savagery. However, he conveys this descent by making the boys paint their faces, sport long hair and shout loud chants. This behaviour is what he associates with savagery, but it is not very respectful to indigenous cultures for whom these actions are sacred practices.

Another strong criticism of the novel is that there are no female characters to provide a more accurate picture of primitive society. Women and girls formulate half of the population, and for Golding to properly provide a correct picture, he must have included them in his narrative. Critics argue that he probably did not include girls

because they would have been a more stabilising influence in the otherwise gruesome story. Other critics argue that it would deeply shock the audience in the conservative society of the 1950s to see girls too actively partake in the bloodlust like the boys did in the story.

While these criticisms hold merit in the present world, this book was revolutionary when it came out and still holds a timeless quality because of its messaging and warnings. These warnings state that humans need society and can behave in their most civil manner only when present in such a civilisation. It makes a strong case for the need for smooth governance and proper implementation of laws. It is truly an iconic story that readers worldwide must provide their attention towards.

CONCLUSION

William Golding returned after his time serving in a war to bleak settings of a possible Cold War looming over. His past experiences and fears of a dark future send him down a path to re-examine the roots of human behaviour and challenges him to re-evaluate the concepts of morality, civility and society when a group of human beings find themselves stripped of their chains rooted in civilisation. What follows is a thought-provoking narrative that pushes the reader to consider human nature at its worst and challenges even the most determined believers of humanity.

Golding surpassed the existing literary trends of his time, like perpetuating colonialism and successfully carved a name for himself in classic literature through this novel. He contextualises the worst of humanity and provides a blueprint as to where we are to head if we refuse to cooperate and are determined to see the worst of one another. It would indeed be a rather bleak dystopia. Golding conveys the need for human beings to submit to an authority. It does not have to be a despotic authority who endeavours to take civil rights from individuals but a wiser authority equipped to rule efficiently and implement the rules they make with conviction.

Civility is integral to the persistence of human beings and humanity. Golding takes away civility from the boys, and out goes the values of morality, kindness and empathy. The reign of terror of bloodlust, violence, pride and a quest for unbridled power begins in the absence of civility. Hence, according to Golding, civility is one of the most crucial elements to the survival of human beings and their thriving.

Civility also entails cooperation and respect. Only through accurate and constructive cooperation and communication can human beings continue to thrive. Golding's messages carry more relevance than ever because the world suffers from a lack of global cooperation in the face of terrors propping up. Therefore, we must pay attention to his warnings and resort to respect, cooperation and civility before it is too late.

Only in the success of a collaborative and collective environment built by the bricks of civility and respect can individual ambitions and motivations thrive. That is the true deconstruction of the ideas of human civility in the 'Lord of the Flies' by William Golding.

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