

**“ARE HUMAN BEINGS INNATELY EVIL?”
WILLIAM GOLDING, *LORD OF THE FLIES***

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Summary of the novel¹

1. *Lord of the Flies* is a 1954 novel by Nobel-prize winning British author William Golding.
2. During a wartime evacuation, an airplane crashes on a remote island. The only survivors are young boys, their ages ranging from middle childhood to preadolescence.
 - 2.1. Ralph, described as “fair”, seems delighted when he realizes there are no adults around,
 - 2.2. Piggy, a fat, asthmatic boy, who convinces Ralph of the need to put things right and act proper. By blowing on a conch they find near the lagoon, Ralph calls a meeting and becomes the leader. He makes three rules: to have fun, to survive, and to maintain a fire to signal any passing ships.
 - 2.3. Opposing Ralph is Jack Merridew. He accepts Ralph’s leadership at first, but soon a rift opens up between them over leadership. The other boys don’t want to follow the rules: they want to play instead of working to keep the fire alive. When Jack’s hunter clique lets the fire go out, the rift grows deeper, as Ralph blames Jack for losing their chance at being rescued.
 - 2.4. Meanwhile, the smaller children (termed “littluns”) grow afraid. They think a beast lives on the island.
3. While the children are asleep, an aerial battle takes place over the island, and a dead pilot parachutes down.
 - 3.1. In the darkness, two boys tending the fire see something billowing (the parachute caught in the branches of a tree) and believe it is the beast.
 - 3.2. Ralph, Jack, and Roger go on an expedition and when they see the dead pilot and the parachute they mistake him for the beast.
 - 3.3. A new meeting is called. Jack calls for the others to make him leader, and, when he receives no support, storms off to the other side of the island followed by his hunters and soon by most of the other boys. From a bastion of stones they name Castle Rock, Jack and his hunters paint their faces and hunt pigs.
 - 3.4. Jack and the hunters kill a pig and place its head on a stick with the intention of propitiating the beast.
 - 3.5. While Ralph and Piggy feel powerless, only **Simon** wants to check whether their fear of a ‘beast’ is justified.
 - i. He goes into the forest and finds the pig’s head which he names “Lord of the Flies”.

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¹ Cf. https://www.supersummary.com/lord-of-the-flies/summary/?utm_source=web&utm_medium=share 1

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- ii. In a supposedly hallucinatory experience the pig's head talks to him, warning him that the real beast is in the heart of the boys themselves.
 - iii. He discovers the body of the pilot and understands that it had been mistaken for the beast.
 - iv. He rushes down to tell the truth to the other boys
 - v. But the boys who are holding a ceremonial dance, get into a frenzy and beat Simon to death (significantly, Ralph and Simon are among the murderers).
- 4. Jack steals Piggy's glasses, so that he can deprive Ralph of the power to make the fire and advocate it for himself.
- 5. When Ralph, Piggy, Sam, and Eric journey to Castle Rock to take the glasses back, Jack ignores Ralph's authority, captures Sam and Eric, then attacks Ralph. Above them, Roger loosens a rock that hits Piggy as it is falls, shattering the conch and killing Piggy.
- 6. That night, Ralph steals back to Castle Rock, where Sam and Eric tell him he is to be hunted. The next day, betrayed by Sam and Eric, Ralph flees the hunters, who try to smoke him out with a fire that eventually burns the entire island.
- 7. Ralph kills or injures several hunters as he flees, and as the fire forces him to the beach and the hunters close in, he looks up to see a naval officer standing on the beach. The officer seems to understand what has happened. With heavily-armed ships standing out at sea, he tells the boys he will take them with him.

Classical interpretations

- 8. Some interpreters see the novel as "an implicit tribute to the humanizing power of social institutions".²
 - 8.1. The boys do try to establish a form of government: a conch that calls the assembly and gives order to the discussions, the appointment of a leader, some rules of behavior.
 - 8.2. However neither rules nor authority hold for long especially under the pressure of fear.

"As a social allegory of human regression the novel is more easily (perhaps too neatly) explainable as the way in which, when the civilized restraints which we impose on ourselves are abandoned, the passions of anger, lust and fear wash across the mind, obliterating common sense and care, and life once again becomes nasty, brutish and short."³
 - 8.3. Cf. the verdict of the naval officer who rescues the boys at the end:

"I should have thought," said the officer as he visualized the search before him, "I should have thought that a pack of British boys—you're all British, aren't you?—would have been able to put up a better show than that—I mean—" "It was like that at first," said Ralph, "before things—" He stopped. "We were together then—"

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² Maurice L. McCullen, "Lord of the Flies: The Critical Quest", in Jack Biles and Robert Evans (Eds.), *William Golding. Some Critical Considerations*, 1978, 215.

³ Bern Oldsey and Stanley Weintraub, "Lord of the Flies: Beezlebug Revisited", *College English* 25/2 (1963), 97

- 8.4. However we know that the reason why the boys are stranded on the island is that the adult world is at war and in the process of destroying itself. In other words, the social institutions have not worked with adults either.
- 8.5. As for the naval officer's remark, what is the "British way" that would have allowed the boys to "put up a better show"? It is not the elimination of violence, but its disciplined enforcement to subject others (imperialism).
- 9. For others, the novel is modeled on the fall from a state of original innocence:
 - "The first part [of the novel] shows the boys in a state of innocence, and the second shows them in a primitive state of evil. [...] This contrast points directly to the theme of the novel: the loss of innocence is the acquisition of the knowledge of evil, which corrupts man and darkens his heart".⁴
 - 9.1. There are several problems with this interpretation too:
 - "the Edenic quality of the island paradise is compromised from the beginning, for, although the essentials of life are abundant, so are the essentials of pain, terror, and death: the fruit which makes them ill, the animals which awaken their bloodthirstiness and greed, the cruel war in the air above them, the darkness and the unknown which beget their fears."⁵
- 10. Then, the fall into chaos, murder, self-destruction could be attributed to the failure to yield to the principles of reason represented by the character of Piggy and his glasses (which allow the kindling of the fire)
 - "having rejected reason, [human beings are] left with only savagery and force - with Jack the authoritarian man"⁶
 - 10.1. However, there are many ambiguities in the character of Piggy too. He (representing reason) knows that there is no beast, that monsters do not exist – but fails to acknowledge the reality of the irrational aspects of humanity and the need to deal with them – especially the fears and the passions (jealousy, ambition).
 - "*Lord of the Flies* is an allegory on the disintegration of society due to a tragic flaw in human nature: man fails to recognize, and thereby appease, the irrational part of his soul. [...] The plight of the boys becomes an allegory for the plight of modern man, who denies and fears the irrational. Mankind's essential illness is irrational fear."⁷
- 11. In the end, what causes the unraveling into violence, murder, and the destruction of the island by fire is
 - 11.1. The fear that triggers a fight for survival
 - 11.2. compounded by jealousy (between Ralph and Jack)
 - 11.3. and Jack's will to power

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⁴ E. C. Bufkin, "Lord of the Flies: An Analysis", *The Georgia Review* 19/1 (1965), 44.

⁵ Oldsey, *quoted above*, 97

⁶ McCullen, *quoted above*, 223

⁷ John F. Fitzgerald and John R. Kayser, "Golding's Lord of the Flies: Pride as Original Sin", *Studies in the Novel*, 24/1 (1992), 78.

12. Which means that the real 'beast' is inside the human heart and because it is irrational, reason and social institutions are powerless against it.

Will to power

13. Jack's will to power: in a situation of crisis, survival depends not on reason, rules, democratic principles (all powerless) but on the emergence of a leader capable of imposing his will over everyone else (Nihilism).

- 13.1. This will to power is illustrated when Jack, having established his control over the hunters, decides to enforce his authority by arbitrarily punishing Wilfred:

"He's going to beat Wilfred." "What for?" Robert shook his head doubtfully.

"I don't know. He didn't say. He got angry and made us tie Wilfred up. He's been"-he giggled excitedly-"he's been tied for hours, waiting- But didn't the chief say why?".⁸

"This dialogue occurs after Simon's death and before Piggy's, and though it concerns a beating rather than a death, it seems a more powerful indictment of Jack and his hunters than the murders. Simon is killed in darkness, the final spasm of an orgy, and the murder is a collective act. Piggy is killed by Roger. In neither case was a decision made by the chief. The deaths of Simon and Piggy, horrid as they are, are primitive equivalents of manslaughter, crimes of passion. Wilfred's beating, however, is carried out at Jack's whim, for no reason except to demonstrate his control."⁹

- 13.2. Crucially then, Jack asserts his rule by finding a solution to the fear of the 'beast': his is the idea of leaving the pig's head on a spike to propitiate the beast.

"Jack held up the head and jammed the soft throat down on the pointed end of the stick which pierced through into the mouth. He stood back and the head hung there, a little blood dribbling down the stick". (129)

"Instinctively the boys drew back too; and the forest was very still. They listened, and the loudest noise was the buzzing of flies over the spilled guts. Jack spoke in a whisper. "Pick up the pig." Maurice and Robert skewered the carcass, lifted the dead weight, and stood ready. In the silence, and standing over the dry blood, they looked suddenly furtive. Jack spoke loudly. "This head is for the beast. It's a gift." The silence accepted the gift and awed them. The head remained there, dim-eyed, grinning faintly, blood blackening between the teeth. All at once they were running away, as fast as they could, through the forest toward the open beach". (129)

- 13.3. "It is possible to argue, as Piggy does, that demons do not exist and that a cool rationalism will expose the deception. The impotence of this program is, Golding shows, due to the fact that man comes to cherish the demons because they endorse his own will to power".¹⁰

What to do with the fear?

14. Is Jack's will to power the only way of dealing with the disintegrating power of fear? Is there any way the beast can be seen for what it really is?

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⁸ William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, Penguin Publishing Group, 149.

⁹ Ted E. Boyle, "Golding's Existential Vision", in Biles and Evans, *quoted above*, 23f.

¹⁰ David Anderson, "Is Golding's Theology Christian?", in Biles and Evans, *quoted above*, 6.

15. In Golding's novel this alternative way is represented by the character of Simon.

"Jack may appear to be the demagogic dictator and Roger his sadistic henchman; Ralph may be a confused democrat, with Piggy his "brain-trust"; but the neatness of the political allegory is complicated by the clear importance of the mystical, generalization-defying Simon [...] who alone among the boys has gone up to the mountain top and discovered the truth, is sacrificed in a subhuman orgy."¹¹

"Simon represents the antidote for a rationalism that cannot see. Simon's insight into the beast offers the boys the possibility of salvation on the island [...]. Simon's knowledge, had it been believed, would have made up for the defects in Piggy's. Piggy's knowledge coupled with the ability to see beyond mere appearance would have made Ralph's regime resilient to the inroads of Jack's barbarism."¹²

16. When Ralph reveals the 'finding' of the beast to the group, there is a clash between Simon and Piggy: Simon wants to do something about it, but Piggy refuses to face the beast and comes up with a new iteration of the initial plan: keep the fire lit so that the boys can be rescued.

"The beast had teeth," said Ralph, "and big black eyes." (117)

For a while they sat in depressed silence. Then Simon stood up and took the conch from Piggy, who was so astonished that he remained on his feet. Ralph looked up at Simon. "Simon? What is it this time?" A half-sound of jeering ran round the circle and Simon shrank from it. "I thought there might be something to do. Something we—" Again the pressure of the assembly took his voice away. He sought for help and sympathy and chose Piggy. He turned half toward him, clutching the conch to his brown chest. "I think we ought to climb the mountain."

The circle shivered with dread.

Simon broke off and turned to Piggy who was looking at him with an expression of derisive incomprehension. "What's the good of climbing up to this here beast when Ralph and the other two couldn't do nothing?"

Simon whispered his answer. "What else is there to do?"

His speech made, he allowed Piggy to lift the conch out of his hands. Then he retired and sat as far away from the others as possible.

Piggy was speaking now with more assurance and with what, if the circumstances had not been so serious, the others would have recognized as pleasure. (121)

"I said we could all do without a certain person. Now I say we got to decide on what can be done. And I think I could tell you what Ralph's going to say next. The most important thing on the island is the smoke and you can't have no smoke without a fire." Ralph made a restless movement. "No go, Piggy. We've got no fire. That thing sits up there—we'll have to stay here." Piggy lifted the conch as though to add power to his next words. "We got no fire on the mountain. But what's wrong with a fire down here? A fire could be built on them rocks. On the sand, even. We'd make smoke just the same." "That's

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¹¹ Oldsey, *quoted above*, 96

¹² Fitzgerald and Kayser, *quoted above*, 85.

right!” “Smoke!” “By the bathing pool!” The boys began to babble. Only Piggy could have the intellectual daring to suggest moving the fire from the mountain. “So we’ll have the fire down here,” said Ralph. He looked about him. “We can build it just here between the bathing pool and the platform. Of course—” He broke off, frowning, thinking the thing out, unconsciously tugging at the stub of a nail with his teeth. “Of course the smoke won’t show so much, not be seen so far away. But we needn’t go near, near the—” The others nodded in perfect comprehension. There would be no need to go near. “We’ll build the fire now.” (121)

17. As Piggy wins the day, Simon disappears:

“Where’s Simon?” “I don’t know.” (124)

“You don’t think he’s climbing the mountain?” Piggy broke into noisy laughter and took more fruit. “He might be.” He gulped his mouthful. “He’s cracked.” (125)

18. Simon goes into the forest to face the ‘beast’: first he finds the pig’s head erected by Jack and then discovers the body of the pilot and the parachute which the other boys had mistaken for the beast:

19. Simon finds the pig’s head

Simon stayed where he was, a small brown image, concealed by the leaves. Even if he shut his eyes the sow’s head still remained like an after-image. The half-shut eyes were dim with the infinite cynicism of adult life. They assured Simon that everything was a bad business. “I know that.” Simon discovered that he had spoken aloud. He opened his eyes quickly and there was the head grinning amusedly in the strange daylight, ignoring the flies, the spilled guts, even ignoring the indignity of being spiked on a stick. He looked away, licking his dry lips. (129)

A gift for the beast. Might not the beast come for it? The head, he thought, appeared to agree with him.

Run away, said the head silently, go back to the others. It was a joke really—why should you bother? You were just wrong, that’s all. A little headache, something you ate, perhaps. Go back, child, said the head silently. (129)

[...] “You are silly little boy,” said the Lord of the Flies, “just an ignorant, silly little boy.” Simon moved his swollen tongue but said nothing. “Don’t you agree?” said the Lord of the Flies. “Aren’t you just a silly little boy?” Simon answered him in the same silent voice. (134)

“Well then,” said the Lord of the Flies, “you’d better run off and play with the others. They think you’re batty. You don’t want Ralph to think you’re batty, do you? You like Ralph a lot, don’t you? And Piggy, and Jack?” Simon’s head was tilted slightly up. His eyes could not break away and the Lord of the Flies hung in space before him. “What are you doing out here all alone? Aren’t you afraid of me?” Simon shook. “There isn’t anyone to help you. Only me. And I’m the Beast.” Simon’s mouth labored, brought forth audible words. “Pig’s head on a stick.” (134)

“Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill!” said the head. For a moment or two the forest and all the other dimly appreciated

places echoed with the parody of laughter. “You knew, didn’t you? I’m part of you? Close, close, close! I’m the reason why it’s no go? Why things are what they are?” (135)

There was blackness within, a blackness that spread. (135)

Simon was inside the mouth. He fell down and lost consciousness. (135)

The Lord of the Flies hung on his stick like a black ball. Simon spoke aloud to the clearing. “What else is there to do?” (136)

20. Simon discovers the truth about the beast: it is the dead pilot and his parachute caught in the branches of a tree:

He found his legs were weak and his tongue gave him pain all the time. When the wind reached the mountain-top he could see something happen, a flicker of blue stuff against brown clouds. He pushed himself forward and the wind came again, stronger now, cuffing the forest heads till they ducked and roared. Simon saw a humped thing suddenly sit up on the top and look down at him. He hid his face, and toiled on. The flies had found the figure too. The life-like movement would scare them off for a moment so that they made a dark cloud round the head. Then as the blue material of the parachute collapsed the corpulent figure would bow forward, sighing, and the flies settle once more. Simon felt his knees smack the rock. He crawled forward and soon he understood. The tangle of lines showed him the mechanics of this parody; he examined the white nasal bones, the teeth, the colors of corruption. He saw how pitilessly the layers of rubber and canvas held together the poor body that should be rotting away. Then the wind blew again and the figure lifted, bowed, and breathed foully at him. Simon knelt on all fours and was sick till his stomach was empty. Then he took the lines in his hands; he freed them from the rocks and the figure from the wind’s indignity. (137)

The beast was harmless and horrible; and the news must reach the others as soon as possible. He started down the mountain and his legs gave beneath him. Even with great care the best he could do was a stagger. (138)

21. Simon tries to reach to other boys to reveal to them that there is no beast – but the others are in the midst of a sort of Dionysian dance and in their frenzy they kill Simon:

There was a blink of bright light beyond the forest and the thunder exploded again so that a littlun started to whine. Big drops of rain fell among them making individual sounds when they struck. [...] “Going to be a storm,” said Ralph, “and you’ll have rain like when we dropped here. Who’s clever now? Where are your shelters? What are you going to do about that?” (142)

Jack leapt on to the sand. “Do our dance! Come on! Dance!” (142)

He ran stumbling through the thick sand to the open space of rock beyond the fire. Between the flashes of lightning the air was dark and terrible; and the boys followed him, clamorously. Roger became the pig, grunting and charging at Jack, who sidestepped. The hunters took their spears, the cooks took spits, and the rest clubs of firewood. A circling movement developed and a chant. While Roger mimed the terror of the pig, the littluns ran and jumped on the outside of the circle. Piggy and Ralph, under the threat of the sky,⁷

found themselves eager to take a place in this demented but partly secure society. They were glad to touch the brown backs of the fence that hemmed in the terror and made it governable. “Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!” (142)

The dark sky was shattered by a blue-white scar. An instant later the noise was on them like the blow of a gigantic whip. The chant rose a tone in agony. “Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!” Now out of the terror rose another desire, thick, urgent, blind. “Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!” (143)

Again the blue-white scar jagged above them and the sulphurous explosion beat down. The littluns screamed and blundered about, fleeing from the edge of the forest, and one of them broke the ring of biguns in his terror. “Him! Him!” The circle became a horseshoe. A thing was crawling out of the forest. It came darkly, uncertainly. The shrill screaming that rose before the beast was like a pain. The beast stumbled into the horseshoe. “Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!” The blue-white scar was constant, the noise unendurable. Simon was crying out something about a dead man on a hill. “Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood! Do him in!” (143)

The sticks fell and the mouth of the new circle crunched and screamed. The beast was on its knees in the center, 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. (143)

Then the clouds opened and let down the rain like a waterfall. The water bounded from the mountain-top, tore leaves and branches from the trees, poured like a cold shower over the struggling heap on the sand. Presently the heap broke up and figures staggered away. Only the beast lay still, a few yards from the sea. Even in the rain they could see how small a beast it was; and already its blood was staining the sand. Now a great wind blew the rain sideways, cascading the water from the forest trees. On the mountain-top the parachute filled and moved; the figure slid, rose to its feet, spun, swayed down through a vastness of wet air and trod with ungainly feet the tops of the high trees; falling, still falling, it sank toward the beach and the boys rushed screaming into the darkness. The parachute took the figure forward, furrowing the lagoon, and bumped it over the reef and out to sea. (143)

The tide swelled in over the rain-pitted sand and smoothed everything with a layer of silver. Now it touched the first of the stains that seeped from the broken body and the creatures made a moving patch of light as they gathered at the edge. The water rose farther and dressed Simon’s coarse hair with brightness. The line of his cheek silvered and the turn of his shoulder became sculptured marble. The strange attendant creatures, with their fiery eyes and trailing vapors, busied themselves round his head. The body lifted a fraction of an inch from the sand and a bubble of air escaped from the mouth with a wet plop. Then it turned gently in the water. Somewhere over the darkened curve of the world the sun and moon were pulling, and the film of water on the earth planet was held, bulging slightly on one side while the solid core

turned. The great wave of the tide moved farther along the island and the water lifted. Softly, surrounded by a fringe of inquisitive bright creatures, itself a silver shape beneath the steadfast constellations, Simon's dead body moved out toward the open sea. (144)

Conclusion

22. Why is evil winning over the world? Why, as in the adult's world, the boys too have given over to violence, murder, and end up destroying the island?

22.1. A possible answer might be hidden the final page of the novel

22.2. When confronted by the naval officer about what has happened, Ralph breaks into tears along with all the other boys:

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—Simon was dead—and Jack had. . . . The tears began to flow and sobs shook him. He gave himself up to them now for the first time on the island; great, shuddering spasms of grief that seemed to wrench his whole body. 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. And in the middle of them, with filthy body, matted hair, and unwiped nose, **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.** The officer, surrounded by these noises, was moved and a little embarrassed. He turned away to give them time to pull themselves together; and waited, allowing his eyes to rest on the trim cruiser in the distance. (189)

23. Significantly, even in what should be a moment of final recognition, Ralph weeps the loss of Piggy, but not that of Simon. It means that no lesson has been learned, that the causes of the descent into evil remain unaddressed – namely the inability to deal with fear other than

23.1. by denial

23.2. by coopting the fear as a means for the will to power

23.3. by naïve reliance on a reason severed from the aspect of humanity represented by Simon, which can be described as religious, mystical, revelatory, intuitive.

24. *Is Golding's novel making the point that human beings are inherently and inevitably evil?*

25. Rather, the novel seems to presuppose that, for whatever reason, we find ourselves in a world, a reality, an existential condition that expose us to fear and trigger survival mechanisms (which include the selection of the fittest and the will to power - and lead to violence).

26. It might be that the survival mechanism is inevitable – and yet it is also possible that

26.1. It is not be an inevitable outcome

26.2. and that there are other ways of dealing with this existential fear.

27. If there is an 'original sin' in Golding, this seems to be the result of human beings' existential condition.

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“Golding suggests that the Fall of [humanity] is not the result of a sudden rebellious act, but the inevitable concomitant of [human condition on earth]. The Genesis story has been modified to include modern knowledge of [humanity’s] evolutionary development.”¹³

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¹³ Anderson, *quoted above*, 14f.