Lord of the Flies: Crash Course Literature 305

Crash Course: Literature
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Hi, I'm John Green. This is Crash Course Literature, and today we're going to discuss *Lord of the Flies*.

"Mr. Green, Mr. Green! I hate that book."

You know, me from the past, I've been thinking a lot about self-hood lately, like how is it that I am still the same technical person I was when I was sixteen? Because like my tastes have changed, my passions have change, almost all of my cells have even changed. What is it, aside from some tiny strain of memory, that makes the me I was when I was sixteen the same me I am today at thirty-eight. And then, I remember, we both dislike *Lord of the Flies*.

(Intro)

Right, but personal taste aside, *Lord of the Flies* is taught in many literature classes. So, here we are. We're going to kill the pig. We're going to cut her throat, spill her blood. Huh, I don't know what just came over me. Eh, probably the capacity for evil William Golding believes lurks in the heart of every man, and also presumably every other person.

But, more on that in a moment. *Lord of the Flies* is a 1954 novel of ideas, by which I mean it is primarily about its ideas. Other novels of ideas include like Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eight-Four*. and in my opinion. and it's just my opinion, a novel of ideas is only as good or as bad as its ideas. *Lord of the Flies* is about the murderous shenanigans of young boys marooned on a desert island who descend into what Golding thought of as a state of nature after like twelve hours alone.

But, before we get there, let's talk about William Golding. So, Golding was born in England in 1911. He went to Oxford, published a book of poems that he later disowned, and settled down to teach high school, and then World War 2 happened. He spent five years in the navy, eventually captaining a ship filled with explosives and participated in the D-Day invasion, and the war affected him deeply. He later said, "Before the second World War, I believed in the perfectibility of social man... but after the war, I did not. I had discovered what one man could do to another... anyone who moved through those years without understanding that man produces evil as a bee produces honey, must have been blind or wrong in the head."

After the war, Golding returned to teaching, which he didn't like very much. In fact, he often spent class periods working on his own novels. He wrote a couple of books during that time that were never published, and then one day, said to his wife, "Wouldn't it be a good idea if I wrote a book about children on an island, children who behave in the way children really would behave?" That book became *Lord of the Flies*, which does make you wonder about the kind of students he was teaching.

In the novel, a group of English school boys are being evacuated in the middle of a nuclear war, probably. There was stuff about the nuclear war that his publishers made him cut. So yeah, the plane carrying them was shot down and they're stranded on an desert island, and at first it's fun. Like, there's plenty of fruit and fish and fresh water and they elect a leader, Ralph, and they build some shelters and light a signal fire in the hopes that they'll be seen and rescued. But, then things start to go, you know, really, really wrong. Like a group of boys from the school choir, led by a kid named Jack, become overwhelmed with blood lust, and they dismember one boy, Simon, when they mistake him for a mythic beast. And then, they kill Ralph's sidekick, Piggy, for basically no reason. And then they try to kill Ralph and they probably would have succeeded, but a military ship arrives and he's saved and they're all rescued. And, I guess it's kind of a happy ending, but everyone's too busy sobbing to enjoy it.

So, we don't read too deeply into his biography, but *Lord of the Flies* definitely grew partly out of Golding's experiences in World War 2. However, it also took cues from literature. Let's look at some of those influences in the thought bubble. *Lord of the Flies* is sometime called a robinsonade, a literary title named after Robertson Caruso which explores how people behave when they're stranded in some isolated place. The most obvious models for *Lord of the Flies* is *Coral Island*, the hugely popular Victorian children's book that Golding refers to a couple times. In Coral Island, a trio of British boys are stranded on an island and they use their bravery and their good Christian values to defeat pirates and savages. Those boys, by the way, are named Ralph, Jack, and Peter - essentially the same names Golding uses for his main characters - but the similarities pretty much end there. Like, in Lord of the Flies, the dangers aren't external, they're internal. There aren't any savages to fight, just the savagery that apparently dwells within each of us - or at least, according to Golding, within all pre-pubescent British boys.

Basically, the difference is philosophical. Most earlier desert island stories follow the beliefs of the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who believed that humanity was at its best and most innocent in the state of nature and that the social order was a corrupting influence. Rousseau argued that if we were free from social constraints, we would behave really well. But Golding is closer in spirit to an old Crash Course regular, Thomas Hobbes, who described life in a state of nature as "nasty, brutish, and short." Hobbes thought that without social constraints, we would immediately fall into violence and aggression, which is why we needed society and good government to keep people in order. There's also a bunch of stuff in *Lord of the Flies* from Shakespeare's desert island story *The Tempest* and from a Greek tragedy called the *Bacchae*, which is about the foolishness of trying to impose order onto chaos and the fun of dismemberment. And you can also hear echoes of Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* in addition to Golding's experiences in World War II, some of his experiences as a school teacher, and his increasingly pessimistic views about humanity's inherent evil. Thanks Thought Bubble!

So Golding later told an interviewer he thought that the atrocities of World War II could just as easily have happened in England. He said, "Nazi Germany was a particular kind of boil which burst in 1939. That was only the same kind of inflamed spot we all of us suffer from, and so I took English boys and said, 'Look. This could be you.'" He makes this point explicitly in the novel. At first, Jack says, "We've got to have rules and obey them. After all, we're not savages. We're English, and the Eng list are the best at everything." Ah, English exceptionalism. They're the best at everything, including killing. I mean, a couple of chapters later, Jack is running around mostly naked with his face painted, throwing spears and trying to kill other boys. And this points at something really problematic about Lord of the Flies to me.

When Golding is describing the boys' descent into so called savagery, he used a lot of images of what he thought of as primitive or uncivilized people. You know, like, spears and face paint and that way of imagining civilization is flatly wrong. But Golding gives us lots of scenes exploring his ideas about the state of nature. Like, there's a scene early in the book when another boy, Roger, is throwing rocks at some younger boys, but he's deliberately aiming to miss."Here, invisible yet strong, was the taboo of the old life," Golding writes. "Round the squatting child was the protection of parents and school and policemen and the law." But those taboos break down pretty quickly and soon Roger is torturing other boys, a job he really enjoys. So much for your mom telling you that bullies are just insecure. What Golding is saying is that we're all bullies.

We'll act viciously as long as we think we can get away with it.

Before he's killed, Piggy, the fat asthmatic intellectual, asks "what are we: humans or animals or savages?" And Golding's answer is D. All of the above. In Golding's world, you, the authority of social structures of what he calls civilizations bind us together, and without those the boys on the island never really have a chance. I mean, they give democracy a try, there's all that nice fruit, but the island's never really paradise because as we know, going back to the bible, paradises contain snakes. And, on the island, even when the boys first arrive, the wreck of the plane is referred to as "the scar," and it's something the boys won't look at. And pretty soon the younger boys start complaining about a "beastie," some monster that's terrorizing them, but of course "the scar" is the arrival of human beings on the island in the first place and it's clear that the "beastie" is the evil loitering inside their six-year-old hearts. Like I said, Golding was a pretty dark guy.

Golding hammers this home, it must be said he is not an author afraid of hammering home his themes, in a scene where Simon has a conversation with the rotting head of a dead pig. I know, I know, it makes Wilson the Volleyball seem so innocent. Poor Wilson, you're just a bloody hand print. Simon thinks the pig's head it the lord of the flies and it seems to speak to him. "Fancy thinking the beast was something you could hunt and kill!" The pig head says. "You knew didn't you? I'm part of you. Close, close, close! I'm the reason why it's no go."

Yes, so that rotting pig head is the depravity within us all. There's just the one problem, which is that's not true. I mean that's not even really true in the novel. If everyone is inherently evil and attracted to violence and the abuse of power, then why so Ralph and Piggy resist becoming members of Jack's gang? Why does Ralph risk his life rather than succumb to what he sees as wrong?

To me, Golding is wrong about both what he calls civilization, which he imagines as inherently ennobling, and what he calls savagery, which he imagines as inherently evil. We actually know quite a lot about egalitarian hunting and gathering communities, and one of the things that we know is that they don't closely resemble *Lord of the Flies*. The problem of evil is real, and I think we delude ourselves if any of use somehow believes we're exempt from it, but I think it's a lot more complicated than *Lord of the Flies* would have us believe.

And then there is the complete lack of female characters in the novel. Golding said that he made the boys pre-teens and kept women out of it to avoid complicating the novel with the, quote, "relative triviality" of sex, but in actual state of nature, half of people are women and that shapes the community. So, I'd argue the novel really isn't trying to avoid a quote-unquote "relative triviality" so much as it's playing out fears and fantasies of masculinity. And one question that arises from this line of though, would girls be too much of a civilizing factor in the novel, or would discovering that girls are also just as evil as boys be too disturbing?

Of course, there is one female in the story. A female pig who is murdered in a weird and highly sexualized scene in the novel. All of which has lead lots of critics to call *Lord of the Flies* a sexist novel, and I have to say I don't disagree. All of that noted, as W.H. Auden once wrote, "some books are undeservedly forgotten. None are undeservedly remembered."

And, despite its flaws, *Lord of the Flies* is a compulsively readable, multi-layered novel that can be read in a variety of ways. Like, on the surface it's a dark adventure story that tells serious truths that books like *Coral Island* disguised. You can also see it as a kind of unusually violent coming of age novel, in which Ralph has to learn how to stand up and be a man, resisting peer pressure and pig killing. And, it can be read as a political allegory about that democratic societies give way to totalitarian ones. Or, along religious lines, where the island is a stand in for the garden of Eden, and the book is a working out of how everyone is tainted by original sin. Or, without bringing religion into it, you can read it as a moral allegory about how goodness almost always fails to withstand evil. And, there is something deeply true in that, because we all know that it is harder to be good than most novels would have us believe.

And, lastly, I just want to touch on the novels strange and somewhat happy ending. Like, out of nowhere a ship arrives, which is a lot like this thing that happens in Greek tragedy call deus ex machina, where suddenly, just when everything seems like it's a total and complete mess, a god suddenly descends and saves the day. The naval officer who comes on shore probably looks like a god with his bright white uniform and his medals, but he's carrying a revolver and there's a guy with a machine gun just behind him. So, we get the sense that this is just a grownup socially approved version of the violence and blood lust that the boys on the island have discovered. And, indeed, Golding later wrote that the officer that saves Ralph from the manhunt, quote, "will presently be hunting his enemy in the same implacable way. And who will rescue the adult and his cruiser?" But wars do end, even if the war never ended for Golding.

Thanks for watching. We'll see you next week.

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