

CHARACTER AND THE STRUGGLE FOR CIVILIZATION IN WILLIAM GOLDING'S *LORD OF THE FLIES*

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Abstract

William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) presents a profound exploration of human nature under duress, centering on the collapse of social order and the descent into primal savagery. This study employs a descriptive qualitative method to conduct a character analysis of the novel's protagonist, Ralph, focusing on the intrinsic qualities that define his struggle for survival and the preservation of civilization. Through a close reading of the text, this paper identifies and examines four cardinal traits—leadership, charisma, organizational prowess, and civility—that constitute Ralph's character. The analysis demonstrates that these traits are not merely descriptive but are the fundamental engines of his resistance against the antagonistic force, represented by Jack, which embodies chaos and violence. The findings reveal that Ralph's struggle is multifaceted: it is a physical battle for survival, a psychological fight against despair, and an ideological conflict for the soul of the community. Ultimately, this paper argues that Ralph's characterization serves as Golding's central argument for the fragility of civilization, which must be consciously and courageously upheld through rational principles, democratic leadership, and moral fortitude, even in the face of overwhelming barbarism. His survival is a testament to the resilience of these values.

Keywords: *Character analysis; civilization vs. savagery; leadership; Lord of the Flies; protagonist; survival; William Golding*

1. Introduction

Literature has perennially served as a medium for examining the human condition, particularly the capacity for both creation and destruction inherent within society. The modern literary canon often grapples with the tension between the civilizing impulse and the primal instincts that lie beneath the surface of social order. William Golding's seminal novel, *Lord of the Flies* (1954), stands as a paramount work in this tradition. Set against the backdrop of an unspecified war, the narrative strips away the layers of modern civilization by stranding a group of British schoolboys on an uninhabited island. Devoid of adult supervision and the structures of society, the boys' initial attempts to establish a functional microcosm rapidly erode, revealing the precarious nature of order and the potent allure of savagery.

Within this allegorical framework, the character of Ralph emerges as the protagonist and the primary representative of order, reason, and democratic values. His journey is the narrative's moral core, depicting a relentless struggle to maintain the

tenets of civilization against the escalating tyranny of Jack Merridew, who embodies the destructive forces of authoritarianism and primal violence. Ralph's fight is not merely for physical survival but for the survival of an idea—the belief that rules, cooperation, and the hope of rescue are worth preserving.

The central problem this study addresses is twofold: first, to delineate the specific characteristics that define Ralph as the protagonist; and second, to analyze how these specific traits inform and shape his struggle for a better, more civilized existence on the island. By dissecting Ralph's character through established literary theories, this paper aims to illuminate the mechanics of his resilience. The significance of this analysis lies in its contribution to the understanding of how Golding uses character as a vehicle for thematic exploration. Ralph is not a static symbol but a dynamic character whose internal and external conflicts provide a nuanced commentary on the active, continuous effort required to uphold civilization. This study posits that his ultimate survival is directly attributable to the consistent application of his core characteristics, making him a compelling case study in leadership and moral courage under extreme duress.

2. Literature Review

This analysis is grounded in the intersection of literary theory, specifically character studies, and psychological concepts of motivation and adjustment.

2.1 Character and Characterization in Narrative

In narrative fiction, characters are the agents through which plot is advanced and theme is realized. E.M. Forster (1947), in his seminal work *Aspects of the Novel*, establishes a crucial distinction between "flat" and "round" characters. A round character, such as Ralph, is dynamic, complex, and capable of growth and change in response to narrative events, thereby embodying the story's central conflicts (Forster, 1947, pp. 46-51). Furthermore, Minderop (2005) emphasizes that character is the most crucial element of a story, as it drives the plot and functions as a representation of a human being, complete with mental and moral attributes that elicit reader engagement (p. 2).

The process of revealing these attributes is known as characterization. Jauhari (2013) defines characterization as the method by which an author constructs and reveals the personalities of the actors in a story (p. 161). Minderop (2005) elaborates on two primary techniques:

- a. Direct Characterization (Telling): The narrator explicitly comments on or describes the traits of a character.
- b. Indirect Characterization (Showing): The character's personality is revealed through their own speech, thoughts, actions, and appearance, or through the opinions of other characters (p. 6-22).

Furthermore, contemporary scholarly analysis continues to explore the complexity of Golding's characters. For instance, Tigchelaar (2018) argues that the characters in *Lord of the Flies* serve as archetypes in a modern moral allegory, with Ralph's characterization being central to the novel's critique of societal structures (p. 42).

2.2 Motivation and the Psychological Drive for Survival

Character action is fueled by motivation. Worchel and Shebilske (1989) define motivation as the internal arousal or energy that directs behavior (p. 417). It is the underlying drive that propels goal-directed action. In the context of survival literature, motivation is the critical force that determines a character's response to adversity. Bernard (1980) suggests that individuals consciously implement strategies to cope with extreme stress and problems, a process that involves protecting one's ego and striving for a desired outcome (p. 64). Ralph's motivation is his unwavering desire for rescue, order, and a return to civilization, which directs all his strategic decisions on the island.

This motivation is particularly tested in leadership roles during crises. Research into group dynamics suggests that a leader's primary motivation for maintaining order, much like Ralph's, is often a fundamental belief in the collective good and a fear of the chaos that follows its abandonment (Jaffe, 2020).

2.3 The Concept of Struggle and Adjustment

The struggle for life is an inherent human experience. Braun and Linder (1979) frame this struggle through the concept of adjustment—the process by which people cope with the stresses and problems of their environment (pp. 478-480). This process involves three key aspects: active problem-solving, the acceptance of uncontrollable situations, and the use of defense mechanisms to manage anxiety. Ralph's journey is a textbook case of adjustment. He actively solves problems (building shelters, managing the fire), is forced to accept the grim reality of the island's descent into savagery, and must constantly combat fear and despair. His struggle, therefore, is a continuous process of psychological and practical adjustment to maintain his goal of survival and rescue.

The ideological dimension of this struggle is paramount. The conflict on the island is not a passive descent but an active battle between two competing worldviews. Olsen (2017) frames this as a necessary ideological war, arguing that "the fight for civilization is active, not passive" and requires constant assertion of its values against the allure of a simpler, more brutal existence (p. 115).

2.4 Leadership and the Fragility of Order

The novel's exploration of leadership styles provides a critical lens for understanding Ralph's struggle. His democratic and pragmatic approach stands in direct opposition to Jack's authoritarianism. Sipione (2019) analyzes this dichotomy, concluding that Ralph's leadership, while morally righteous, is inherently fragile because it depends on the group's conscious participation and belief in abstract rules, which erode under fear and scarcity (p. 73). This fragility is further examined by Baker (2021), who notes that the symbols of order, such as the conch, lose their power as the boys' connection to the civilized world weakens, making Ralph's task increasingly impossible (p. 29).

3. Research Method

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative research design. As defined by Creswell (2009), this approach is a plan for inquiry that involves exploring a central phenomenon within its natural setting and relying on the "voices and interpretations of informants"—in this case, the textual evidence from the primary source (p. 3). The phenomenon under investigation is the construction of the protagonist's character and the manifestation of his struggle within the narrative world of *Lord of the Flies*.

The primary source of data was William Golding's novel itself. Data collection was conducted through a methodical and repeated close reading of the text. The objective was to identify, extract, and catalogue all relevant passages, dialogues, and narrative descriptions that explicitly or implicitly illustrate:

- a. The characteristics of Ralph (e.g., descriptions of his appearance, his speeches, his thoughts, other characters' perceptions of him).
- b. The actions and decisions Ralph takes in response to challenges, which constitute his "struggle."

The data analysis was iterative and systematic, following these stages:

- a. Data Reduction: The collected textual evidence was organized into categories based on the research questions (e.g., "quotes showing leadership," "actions showing civility").
- b. Data Display: The categorized data was then analyzed using the theoretical frameworks of character (Forster, 1947; Minderop, 2005) and struggle (Braun & Linder, 1979; Bernard, 1980).
- c. Conclusion Drawing and Verification: The analyzed data was interpreted to draw meaningful conclusions about the relationship between Ralph's character and his struggle. These conclusions were constantly verified against the text to ensure validity and avoid misinterpretation.

This method ensures that the analysis is deeply embedded in the text, providing a robust and evidence-based interpretation of the protagonist's role.

4. Discussion

The analysis of the text reveals that Ralph's character is meticulously constructed through a blend of direct and indirect characterization, forming a cohesive portrait of a nascent leader engaged in a tragic struggle.

4.1 The Constituent Characteristics of the Protagonist

Ralph is established as a classic "round" character whose complexity unfolds throughout the novel. His defining traits are revealed through his actions, his words, and the narrator's insights.

4.1.1 Leadership: The Burden of Authority

Ralph's leadership is not innate arrogance but a reluctant acceptance of responsibility. Elected chief for his initial calm demeanor and possession of the conch—a powerful symbol of order—his leadership is characterized by a commitment to fairness and democratic process. However, Golding also shows his vulnerability. His command,

"I'm chief. I'll go. Don't argue (Golding, 1954, p. 145)."

The quotation above reveals his decisiveness, but the subsequent note that "He found his voice tended either to disappear or to come out too loud. He looked at Jack" exposes his insecurity and need for validation. This complexity makes his leadership realistic; it is a quality he must constantly assert and refine against mounting opposition, embodying the difficult and often lonely burden of rational leadership.

4.1.2 Charisma: The Magnetism of Order

Ralph's physicality is a key component of his charisma. His initial description paints him as the ideal of British boyhood: athletic, handsome, and possessing a "*mildness about his mouth and eyes that proclaimed no devil*" (Golding, 1954, p. 26). This charisma is his initial social capital. It attracts the loyalty of the "littluns" and the respect of others like Simon. It is the surface manifestation of an inner stability that the other boys gravitate towards, especially in contrast to Piggy's intellect without presence or Jack's malevolent intensity.

4.1.3 Organizational Prowess

The Architecture of Civilization. Ralph understands intuitively that survival and rescue depend on systems and organization. He immediately prioritizes the signal fire and the construction of shelters—practical, forward-looking goals that represent a commitment to a collective future. His meticulous nature is evident in his preparation for assemblies:

"he went carefully over the points of his speech. There must be no mistake about this assembly, no chasing imaginary..." (Golding, 1954, p. 109).

This desire to structure thought and meeting reflects a civilized mind attempting to impose order on the growing chaos. His organizational efforts are the practical application of his leadership and his most tangible contribution to the group's welfare.

4.1.4 Civility: The Moral Compass

Above all, Ralph represents civility. This trait is his defining feature and the source of his deepest conflict. It is revealed most poignantly not in his actions, but in his memories and longings. His nostalgic daydream of his home in England—a world with clear boundaries, warmth, education, and parental care (Golding, 1954, pp. 154-155)—serves as his moral anchor. This memory is a constant reminder of what he is fighting for: a world governed by rules, protection for the weak, and the comfort of community. His insistence on the conch's authority, his defense of Piggy, and his grief for the loss of "the truth" are all manifestations of this deep-seated civility. It is this core value that Jack's tribe seeks to destroy.

4.2 The Protagonist's Struggle: A Multi-Dimensional Conflict

Ralph's struggle is the central conflict of the novel and operates on three interconnected levels, each reflecting a different facet of the human condition under duress.

- a. **The Physical Struggle:** This is the fight for basic survival against hunger, the elements, and the very real threat of violence from Jack's tribe. His leadership and organizational skills are his primary tools in this arena, as he tries to manage resources and provide safety. This struggle aligns with the fundamental drive for survival, which Bernard (1980) identifies as a core human motivation that compels individuals to consciously implement strategies to cope with extreme stress and problems (p. 64). Ralph's focus on building shelters and maintaining the signal fire are direct applications of this survival-driven adjustment.
- b. **The Psychological Struggle:** This is an internal battle against fear, despair, and the creeping sense of futility. As the group abandons his ideals, Ralph faces immense

loneliness and doubt. His civility is both his burden and his shield in this struggle, preventing him from succumbing to the easy savagery that surrounds him. This internal conflict exemplifies the process of adjustment described by Braun and Linder (1979), where an individual must not only solve external problems but also manage internal anxiety and accept uncontrollable situations (p. 478-480). Ralph's moments of despair and his poignant longing for the civilized world of home (Golding, 1954, p. 154-155) are testament to this profound psychological toll.

- c. **The Ideological Struggle:** This is the core of the novel's theme: the battle for the soul of the community. Ralph, championing democracy, rules, and the common good, is pitted against Jack, who offers the brutal simplicity of might-makes-right, hunting, and visceral fear. Every assembly, every argument over the fire, is a skirmish in this war of ideologies. This dimension of his struggle is not a passive decline but an active war, a point emphasized by Olsen (2017), who argues that "the fight for civilization is active, not passive" and requires the constant assertion of its values (p. 115). Furthermore, Sipione (2019) highlights the fragility of Ralph's democratic leadership in the face of Jack's authoritarian appeal, underscoring the immense difficulty of his ideological position (p. 73).

Ralph's four characteristics are the weapons in this multi-front struggle. His charisma gathers supporters, his organizational prowess creates a platform for his ideology, his leadership directs the fight, and his civility defines the very cause for which he is fighting. His eventual physical survival, ensured by the *deus ex machina* arrival of the naval officer, is secondary to his moral and ideological survival. He never capitulates. He is rescued not as a victor, but as a survivor who has held onto his humanity against all odds, making him a tragic but heroic figure. The tears he sheds at the end are for "the end of innocence," a testament to the profound cost of his struggle.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the protagonist's struggle in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* is a direct and intricate function of his characterization. Ralph is not a passive symbol of civilization but its active, struggling defender. His defining traits—leadership, charisma, organizational prowess, and civility—are interwoven to create a complex individual whose every action is a conscious or unconscious effort to uphold the values of the world he has lost.

The novel, through Ralph's painful journey, argues that civilization is not a passive state but a fragile construct that requires constant vigilance, rational effort, and moral courage to maintain. It is not automatically inherited but must be consciously chosen and defended every day, even when it is inefficient or difficult. Ralph's struggle is ultimately successful because he never makes the choice to abandon his principles. While the island society collapses around him, his personal integrity remains intact. Therefore, this analysis concludes that Golding uses Ralph's character to propose that the struggle for a "better life" is, in its essence, the struggle to preserve one's own humanity through adherence to order, reason, and empathy, even in the face of a world reverting to darkness. Ralph's story remains a powerful and enduring lesson on the precarious nature of the social contract and the individual's role in its preservation.

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