

Resonance of Veneer Theory in Lord of the Flies

Tara Prasad Adhikari¹

Abstract

This article “Resonance of Veneer Theory in Lord of the Flies” explores how William Golding's Lord of the Flies depicts the tension between natural human instincts and the civilizational forces. The novel presents a case on human nature, aligning with the veneer theory. The idea is that beneath the thin facade of societal order lies the potential for savagery. Drawing on the philosophical insights of Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Friedrich Nietzsche, the article examines how the novel excavates human beings descent into savagery. Hobbes's notion of the "war of all against all," Rousseau's critique of societal degeneration, and Nietzsche's "will to power" provide a theoretical framework for this study. The article argues that the novel critiques the illusion of innate human goodness. By drawing parallels with religious mythology and contemporary power dynamics, the article highlights the relevance of Lord of the Flies in understanding the delicate balance between order and chaos in human societies.

Keywords: veneer theory, human nature, civilization vs. savagery, symbolism, inherent evil

Introduction

Human beings are often said to be created in God's image, which suggests we carry within us the potential for goodness—qualities like kindness, compassion, and a sense of justice. But this goodness isn't perfect or limitless. Many of us struggle with darker impulses, and it's common to wonder why we harbor evil. Philosophers and religious thinkers alike argue that while we have the capacity for great virtue, we also carry within us the seeds of corruption, driven by desires for power, greed, or fear. Evil often seems to arise from deep within us, emerging when we're in situations of stress, competition, or moral confusion.

Mark reads, “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil

¹ Dr. Adhikari is Assistant Professor of English at Tribhuvan University.

eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness; all these evil things come from within and defile the man” (7:21-23). The Book of Mark profoundly illustrates the concept of inherent human corruption. In the above words by Jesus, we are suggested that evil actions are not external impositions but emanate from the innermost nature of the individual.

Three influential philosophers—Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Friedrich Nietzsche—provide a compelling framework for examining the veneer theory, which suggests that beneath the surface of civilization lies a potential for darker, primal instincts that can emerge when societal restraints are lifted. Hobbes’s view of humans as inherently predisposed to conflict, Rousseau’s belief in natural human goodness corrupted by society, and Nietzsche’s critique of morality as rooted in the will to power contribute to an understanding of the boys’ descent into savagery on their deserted island.

Hobbes, in *Leviathan*, depicts a state of nature where humans, left unchecked, exist in perpetual conflict and competition, driven by self-interest and power. He describes three causes of human strife: competition, diffidence, and glory. These factors propel individuals to gain dominance, defend themselves, and seek a reputation, leading to a "war of all against all" (Abrams 53). In *Lord of the Flies*, this Veneer perspective is echoed in the boys’ (Mis)transformation. Their initial attempts at order quickly dissolve, revealing a Hobbesian descent into brutality. They succumb to primal instincts once societal constraints are removed.

Rousseau writes in *Émile*: “Everything is good when it leaves the hands of the Creator; everything degenerates in the hands of man” (161). The boys had some enthusiasm in the early days. They had the memories of their school and their families. In the early days, they tried to establish rules and play by them fairly. They had some sense of what it meant to be civilized but soon afterward they lost that innate goodness. These boys started to follow degenerated practices, succumbing to cruelty and violence. Rousseau’s insights help contextualize how hierarchical structures and power struggles contribute to the boys’ moral decay, illuminating the corruptive effects of unbridled power (45-67).

Nietzsche's *The Genealogy of Morals* further sheds light on this scenario as he comments on conventional morality as futile and slavish. His idea of "will to power" suggests that moral values are illusions upheld by the "faith of the herd" (41). The boys devolve from orderly to savage, and it aligns with Nietzsche's vision of the primal human drive for dominance. What these boys do on the island aligns with the Nietzschean idea of the will to dominate. They seek control over each other rather than help each other. It illustrates the thin line between chaotic principles and an orderly society.

Golding's portrayal of the boys' descent from civilized kids to barbarians reinforces the ideas that veneer theory proclaims and it serves as a commentary on the so-called decency innate to humans. Golding's narrative brings forth the idea that humanity carries dark emotions within and that society's mission to erase it can't be truly materialized. The boys' experiences in the island contribute to the debate that Veneer's theory proposes. Golding uses different symbols in the novel such as conch shell, fire, and face paint. Even the setting of the novel indicates the theme of the novel, i.e., humanity's degeneration. The conch symbolizes the rule of law. As it gets destroyed in the novel, it signals the collapse of structured civility. The face paint that the boys use shows the outer and the inner worlds that we all carry. Their civilized identities are deconstructed and they embrace their darker instincts. The title *Lord of the Flies* itself symbolizes the untamable "beast" within.

There is the mention of Beelzebub in the novel that symbolizes the evil forces. The title *Lord of the Flies* serves as a modern fable, suggesting that humanity's darker inclinations. Power is a corruptible force. Golding's work suggests that all forms of power can corrupt. The darkness is a persistent, lurking force as felt in the context of the novel. Golding encourages us to confront uncomfortable truths about the human psyche. *Lord of the Flies* questions the veneer of civilization that fools us with its outward polishing. There is a delicate balance between chaotic impulses and orderliness that can be crossed at any moment if given the right environment. Civilization tries to suppress our evil instincts through social and stately laws.

Discussions

Lord of the Flies, written by William Golding, is an exploration of the complexities of human nature. The novel exposes our instinctual tendencies hidden beneath the fabric of goodness. The darker facets of human nature find an outlet through this novel with unflinching honesty. When the boys were out of social order, they soon exhibited cruelty, selfishness, and a hunger for power. The novelist's message is loud and clear, i.e., evil is ever-present, while goodness is just a fine elusive outer layer.

Golding scrutinizes civilization to reveal a precarious veneer—seemingly good and strong but ultimately fragile. This so-called goodness is all the time ready to be shattered at the slightest provocation. Under the lens that Golding provides us, the boundaries between good and evil are very brittle. The boundary often crumbles under the weight of innate instincts and desires. Even the most well-intentioned individuals when stripped of the comforts of civilization, can fall to a primitive state. It is a microcosm that depicts the larger picture of humanity.

The novel begins in a tense setting. A nuclear war has just erupted in Europe. There have been massive evacuations all around. A group of children and some attendants were trying to escape the war by airplane. The plane's tumultuous journey ends on an island as it is ambushed. The crew dies and the children are left alone. In the survivors, only a handful of boys—Ralph, Jack, Roger, Simon, Piggy, and others—manage to escape. It was an unnamed island and the boys had to leave their abandoned, for an unspecified time.

Slowly the boys start attempting to adjust to the new environment. Boys' adaptation to their new environment was a daunting task but they had no other options left. Initially, they organize assemblies and try to maintain the order of civilized life. They had a hope that they would be rescued soon. But slowly the hope lessened. There was no one to listen to, no authority to follow. Without parental or other sort of authority, the boys soon develop their deities. They start worshipping totems. They develop taboos, giving the story various interpretations. In the group, some of them advocated for decency, whereas many were in favor of coarse pleasures and fulfilments.

Just like the story of Adam and Eve where much like Adam's transgression was brought about by the curse of death for all humanity, the boys' also fell from grace

to chaos. The saying "in Adam's fall, we sinned all" suggests that the boys had to degenerate and it was predestined as per the Bible. As the story unfolds, primarily through the perspective of Ralph, a twelve-year-old boy, the boys try to understand the environment that they are in. In this world of children, Ralph and his friend Piggy use the conch to call assemblies. They needed rules and obedience in the absence of adults. Initially, they affirm their commitment. But soon all these goods start disappearing.

As the story unfolds, the boy's descent from a cultured kid to a savage beast becomes clearer and clearer. Red-haired Jack Merridew, with his tall and thin physique, emerges as a symbol of twentieth-century dictators. He is driven by a lust for power. Initially, wearing a golden badge on his cap, he leads the choir. He and his choir boys symbolize the students from any cathedral school—organized, civilized, and disciplined. But the tragedy looms large just ahead. They fall from the heights of civilization into a state of savagery. The novel masterfully traces the boys' transformation. The incidents in the novel suggest human's innate capacity for malevolence.

The novel's title *Lord of the Flies* itself is a symbol. It resonates with the idea rooted in religious mythology. In Jewish mythology, there is a fly named Beelzebub, also known as the "Lord of the Flies. Beelzebub also stands for false gods. This title enigmatically suggests how bad forces drive out the good forces. It exposes the unsettling truth. The world is not as rational or orderly as we might wish to believe. Thus, Golding's *Lord of the Flies* contends that all forms of power can corrupt. It urges us to confront the darkness within us.

In *Lord of the Flies*, we travel through the treacherous terrain of human nature. There seems a delicate balance between order and chaos. A central theme in the novel is the idea that humans carry evil thoughts all the time and as they see the chance, they exhibit that without any delay. The novel masterfully shows this idea, excavating into the darkness. External circumstances can bolster and magnify this darkness. The events that unfold in this story indicate the profound impact of the malevolence.

There is a beast at the heart of the novel, serving as a binding and blinding terror. Initially, it was perceived as a tangible and an external threat on the island. It gradually becomes clear in the novel that the true beast lives within the boys themselves. It manifests their primal instincts. This internal beast symbolizes the inherent capacity

for evil within the human psyche. When civilizational order gets loosened, humanity's darker nature can emerge. This darkness often leads to destructive consequences. Thus, the goodness remains just a facade.

There is a conch shell in the novel that serves as a symbol of authority and order. It is an order that refers to the adult world. There are rules and regulations. There is punishment for not obeying. The shattering of the conch by Jack marks the abandonment of the established values. It illustrates how external order disintegrates when the order of civilization disintegrates.

The face paint used by the boys for camouflage and as a disguise during their hunting expeditions serves as a metaphor for the mask they wear to hide their civilized selves. This painting enables them to engage in ruthless and savage behavior. It shows how the allure of power and chaos can lead individuals to abandon their inherent goodness and embrace their darker instincts. It symbolizes the transformative and dehumanizing effects of unchecked malevolence.

Fire and smoke also play a significant role in the novel's symbolism. The signal fire initially represents hope and a connection to civilization. But it gradually turns into a symbol of lost hope, just the way smoke may disappear as the fire fades. As the fire goes out, the boys' connection to their former civilized lives is also extinguished. With the fire dying out, the boys' crude and cold side also appears.

Ralph and Jack are the central characters in the novel who embody the dichotomy between the veneer of civilization and the underlying instincts. Their descent into savagery offers a microcosm. The narrative powerfully conveys how the absence of authority can strip away the veneer. There are scenes like the frenzied mob's cries for violence and the encounter with the grotesque pig's head on a stick in the novel. These are the vivid examples of the veneer disintegrating. When societal constraints are absent, humans are capable of being anything, even a brute!

There are symbolic elements within the novel. They include the conch shell, face painting, and the Beelzebub. These symbols indicate how fragile our civilization's veneer is. They are the contrasting forces at play. There has to be a balance between the veneer of order and the underlying chaos and anarchy. The complex interplay between the surface veneer and the concealed reality makes the *Lord of the Flies* an enduring novel.

Lord of the Flies raises some serious philosophical and social questions by forcing readers to imagine a situation where all that we taught at schools and churches soon disappeared. These existential questions highlight the tension between the rational and instinctual self and the dominating role of instincts in the long run. The shadowy presence of evil is found everywhere. We are carrying it all the time, just like a snake hiding poison in its throat.

Conclusion

To conclude, *Lord of the Flies* stands as a classic for those who believe that the Veneer theory works. Golding's novel reminds us of the evil that lies in the hearts of human beings. It subtly tells us that the veneer of civilization is very brittle. There is an underlying darkness that surrounds us. The goodness is only the top of the ice cream. If we fail to tame human beings; if we fail to train kids; it manifests into chaos and anarchy, many of us are capable of unthought crimes. *Lord of the Flies* brings forth this facet of the human psyche that demands forceful or uncoerced rearrangement of human desires through education and laws.

Works Cited

Bowman, John. *Mark Chapters 7-9*: 50.

Golding, William. *Lord of the Flies*. Faber and Faber, 1954.

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Edited by Richard Tuck, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Genealogy of Morals*. Translated by Douglas Smith, Oxford University Press, 1996.

---. *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Translated by Carol Diethe, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Émile, or, on Education: Includes Emile and Sophie, or, the Solitaries*. Vol. 13, UPNE, 2010.

---. *Émile, or Treatise on Education*. Translated by Allan Bloom, Basic Books, 1979.

The Bible. *The Gospel of Mark*, 7:21-23.

The Gospel of Mark, Brill, 1965, pp. 160-207.