



Table 2

Clearly good	Unclear	Clearly evil
Ralph builds shelters to help all of the boys	Ralph tells the boys Piggy's nickname	Roger kills Piggy
Jack gives all of the boys a share of the first pig he catches	Jack plays the hunting game with a real boy	Jack orders the death of Ralph

There are forces acting on the boys that bring about changes in their characters. If there were a ready source of meat on the island then Jack would not become the savage hunter that he turns into. If the dead airman had not landed on the island then many of the fears about the beast would not have surfaced. The novel traces the effects of such forces on different boys. There are real tests of character on the island. Some boys behave well under this pressure; others become cruel and primitive. The way that different boys respond to pressure is a key feature of the novel.

The heart of darkness

The phrase 'heart of darkness' comes from a novel of this name by Joseph Conrad (published 1902). Conrad's novel is about a civilised man's descent into savagery. The central character, Kurtz, has been strongly affected by living in a remote part of Africa and has become a savage himself. This was a concern at the time, when European countries ruled over large areas of the world and saw themselves as 'civilised' and many of the countries they governed as 'primitive'. The fear that a person could find the native way of life attractive and begin to adopt it was real. (The word 'native' in this context did not necessarily mean primitive; 'going native' usually meant adopting the style of dress of the locals, eating local food and following local customs, although even this was considered eccentric. Even in hot countries, in Africa or Asia, you would have seen the British dressed as they would have been at home.)

In *Lord of the Flies* Golding explores the same idea as Conrad but focuses entirely on the European side of the equation. There are no savages to 'corrupt' the English, as there are in Conrad's story. Ralph and Piggy try to remain civilised whereas Jack and Roger become like primitive savages. Keeping up appearances and trying to be very 'British' about everything is part of what drives Ralph. After initially insisting that his choristers retain their uniform, Jack gives up on this and lets the climate of the island dictate how he dresses and behaves. You should consider how the forces on the island affect the boys differently.



You will find the phrase ‘the darkness of man’s heart’ on the last page of the novel. This is part of Ralph’s thoughts on what has happened, and the wording Golding uses is not accidental.

Jack does not set out to become the wild savage that he eventually turns into. Rather, this happens in a series of small changes. Some of his behaviour might have been learned at school. For instance he would have known that tribal people often painted themselves before a hunt or a battle. What he discovers on the island is that hunting is much more satisfactory if there is some ceremony attached to it. There is no need to dance or to develop rituals around the killing of a pig. This is something that comes from Jack himself (and to some extent Roger).

The dark side of human nature is strong in both Jack and Roger and they are not able to control where this takes them. They revert to a much more primitive form of behaviour than that of modern Western society. Golding is putting forward the idea that some people are more likely than others to let their primitive instincts rule them. Jack and the hunters really do become uncivilised in the wildest sense.

Key point

The novel explores the idea that there are circumstances in which each one of us could become a primitive human being who is driven by instinct.



Rules and society

Like any teacher, Golding had seen first-hand that boys could be cruel to one another with the slightest provocation. In the novel he reveals what he thinks might happen to any typical group of boys once the normal rules of society are removed.

At the start of the book the boys cling closely to things associated with their former life. They still wear their uniforms in spite of the heat. Jack still addresses the choir. Gradually these old ties to the adult world disappear. The boys’ clothes fall apart and the hunters discard most of theirs and paint themselves instead.

Ralph tries to run the island in the way that a British adult would have done. The conch, the shelters, rules about where to take water from and where to go to the toilet are all aspects of this. It is true that Ralph’s and Piggy’s ideas would probably have resulted in the best life for the whole group. It is also likely that if the fire had been kept going as Ralph wanted, then the boys would have been rescued by the first ship.

Because there are no adults to enforce the rules, the society on the island gradually falls apart. The reason and interest in the common good that Ralph shows is overpowered by the primitive side of human nature that emerges in Jack and the hunters.



The novel explores the idea that children only behave in a civilised way because adults make them. Think about a typical bullying incident in a school. There are many times when such a situation would be much worse if there were no teachers and parents around to intervene.

The end of the novel is significant with regard to this idea. It is an adult who comes to the rescue — and not just any adult but one in authority. In the end the old world of rules and ‘proper’ behaviour returns to the lives of the boys. It is also significant that Golding does not tell us what happens to the boys once they are off the island. Would Jack have been punished? Would Roger have been made accountable? These questions are left unanswered. The novel is concerned with the closed world of the island and does not try to explain what society would have made of the boys’ behaviour. The naval officer thinks that the boys have been playing a game. It never crosses his mind how dangerous a game it has been. The adult world of rules cannot understand what the boys have been through.

Text focus

Read the passage in Chapter 11 from ‘Piggy held up the shell’ to ‘you got to!’ (p. 182).

Here Piggy makes a moving and almost heroic plea for social justice. He accepts the indignity of having to be ‘led like a dog’ because of his poor eyesight. He sticks to his personal values, in which common sense and order rank above irrationality and savagery; and he demands rhetorically ‘What’s grown-ups goin’ to think?’ The fact that he is doomed, because the situation has moved beyond reason and order, is suggested by the line ‘The shape of the old assembly, trodden in the grass, listened to him’. It is as if only ghosts from the past hear his words.

Read Piggy’s final speech in the passage aloud. Notice the strong, simple words and rhythms he uses to present his heart-felt belief in what is right. What is your response to Piggy at this point?

Nature versus nurture

This debate is about whether a person is born good or evil (nature) or learns to be good or evil (nurture). It is an old question, which we find, for example, in Shakespeare. It was of great interest to the Victorians, and writers such as Dickens explored it in depth. Take the character of Nancy in *Oliver Twist* who has been brought up on the streets and sold into prostitution while still a child. Even with this awful upbringing she sacrifices herself to save young Oliver.

Some philosophers believe that a person’s nature cannot be changed. If someone is naturally evil, then all that person needs is an opportunity for this side



of their nature to come out. Jack and Roger clearly have a greater tendency to be evil than many of the other boys. Roger in particular represents the type of person who is naturally evil and just needs a chance to let this evil run free.

Ralph, Piggy, Simon, Sam and Eric tend to be good. The situation is not that simple, however. The murder of Simon shows that even the boys who are naturally good can be influenced to be evil. The key thing with Ralph and Piggy is that they feel remorse for their part in the killing. Piggy tries to pretend it did not happen, but he is still sorry for Simon; Ralph talks about the incident and realises he has been part of something terrible.

Survival of the fittest

Charles Darwin introduced this idea as part of his work on the way species develop through evolution. According to Darwin's theory, species of creatures adapt to their surroundings over a period of time, leading to the huge variety we see in life on earth. The creatures that are best suited to their environment (the fittest) have a greater chance of survival than weaker creatures or those less well adapted to their surroundings.

Examples from nature would be:

- * in a nest, the strongest chicks attract the parents' attention the most effectively and so get the most food
- * pups, kittens or cubs in a litter have to fight for food — the strongest ones get the most food while the weaker ones may die

Darwin gave many examples, including species of birds that had lost the ability to fly because they had become adapted to a place where there were no predators. He put forward the theory that creatures naturally choose the strongest and most successful mates and that the characteristics that make them successful are passed on down the generations.

Golding uses the notion of survival of the fittest in the novel. Ralph is clearly the best leader in terms of running things in a 'civilised' British way. In reality, this counts for nothing in the face of Jack's brutality, which makes Jack appear to be well suited to survival on the island (for one thing, he is a good hunter). While Jack is suited to his surroundings, Ralph tries to change the surroundings themselves.

However, although Jack comes close to killing Ralph and almost shows brutality to be more successful here than reason, he finally sets the island on fire.

Key point

Golding does not allow Jack to win. This is part of the message of the book: that brute force will not triumph over intelligence.





Jack and the other boys might well have starved after the fire, as they would have burnt down all the fruit trees. In the end Jack turns out to be no more of a true survivor than Ralph. Jack's instincts make him the stronger of the two leaders in the circumstances, but his need to destroy would probably have led to disaster for all the boys.

Fear of the beast


One of the forces driving the actions of the boys is the fear they have of the beast. This begins with some of the small boys being frightened by the jungle creepers that hang from the trees. It quickly develops into a fear of a beast that lives in the sea and comes out at night. At the very point when the older boys are about to persuade the others that there is no beast, the dead airman confuses matters. Sam and Eric see the body on the mountain but do not investigate. Simon does find out what 'the beast' really is and cuts the cords from the rocks so that the wind can take the body away. Tragically, he is killed in the circle before he can get his explanation out.

The beast in the novel is always referred to in naturalistic terms: it is a snake, it comes from the sea, it is a great ape. From the earliest records of mankind, cultures have taken images from the natural world in this way and created spirits, monsters, demons and gods. From the Egyptian animal gods to the Minotaur and the Christian devil, human societies tend to give their fears a solid form and a name.

Throughout human history religions have developed that help people to feel more secure in the world and less fearful. They have their own explanations of the mysterious things found in nature (such as birth, death, the seasons) and usually have elaborate rituals associated with them. Although a fully developed religion does not appear on the island, there are signs that the early stages of this are present:

- the rituals around the killing of the pigs
- the ceremonial dancing
- the acting out of the hunt
- painting faces

Key point



You might consider why the author lets the reader know that there is not a real beast on the island. Think what kind of novel *Lord of the Flies* would be if the reader were constantly wondering what the beast is and whether it is going to attack. The reader is always ahead of the boys on this. It is important that we know more than the characters so that the novel does not become a mystery tale or a horror story.



Humans and nature

The boys are provided with the perfect environment in which to survive. All they have to do is to make full use of the surroundings. At first they take delight in the fruit trees and nature really does seem to have given them all they need. The fact that there are pigs on the island causes conflict to arise. It is difficult to imagine Jack developing the same intense feelings about fruit picking.

Apart from one storm, on the night of Simon's death, even the weather is kind to the boys. They find it hot, but at least they do not have to worry about being cold at night. The natural surroundings could be said to be benign (meaning kind or forgiving). The boys only need to treat nature with some respect and they will never go short of food.

The first fire destroys part of the island. This should be a warning to the boys but they do not all listen to it. Even with the knowledge that fire can devastate the island, Jack still chooses to burn Ralph out.

Golding is reflecting the world of the 1950s (see Context). The idea that mankind would destroy its own environment was one that people faced at this time. The bloodlust that rises in Jack is uncontrollable. In the hunt for Ralph, Jack effectively destroys the things that nature has given the boys. This is an important idea in the book, and you should be able to draw parallels with the world at the time the novel was written. You might even extend this to ways in which the book is still relevant today.

Pause for thought



The behaviour of the boys towards their environment is typical of the way that humans have often treated the planet. Golding is aware that mankind is stupid enough to destroy the very land that gives us food and life. This fact has become all the more relevant since the book was written. Do you think that Golding intended to convey an environmental message in this novel?

Review your learning

(Answers are given on page 81.)

- 1 What do you think are the main themes of the novel?
- 2 What wider issues is the author exploring through his use of these themes?
- 3 Why do you think Golding has chosen these particular themes?
- 4 How are the major themes explored through the characters?
- 5 What relevance do you think the themes of the novel have in today's world?