

Context

- What does the term 'context' mean?
- What does the context of the novel tell the reader about its purpose?
- How does Golding relate the events on the island to those in the wider world?
- What use does he make of the fears of people in the 1950s?
- How has Golding used his own experiences in the novel?

It is useful to know about the context of the text, as it explains many of the author's ideas, but if you are studying the AQA, OCR and CCEA specifications, you will not be assessed on context in the examination. Context is assessed by WJEC only.

The context of a novel means the circumstances at the time it was written — the social, historical and literary factors that influenced what the author wrote. *Lord of the Flies* was written in the early 1950s and published in 1954. The world in which it was written is different from the one in which we live today. In order to understand the book you need some knowledge of the context in which it was created. In addition, you should show a grasp of the context and setting when writing about the book as part of an English literature course.

This is not meant to be a history lesson, but some understanding of the time at which it was written will give you a deeper insight into the book. Here are some points to consider:

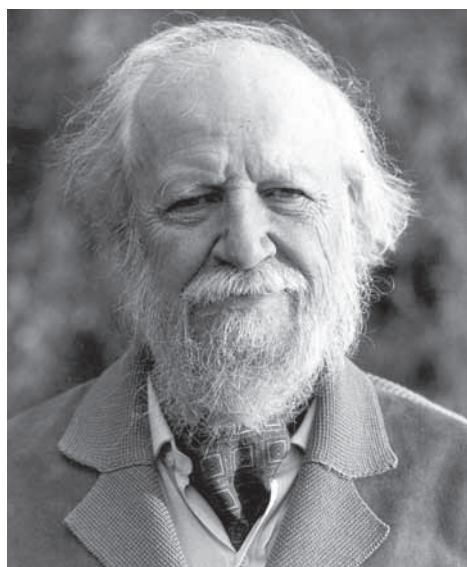
- The people of Britain had just been through the Second World War.
- Food was still being rationed in Britain.
- It was thought that there might be a nuclear war between Western countries and the Soviet Union.
- Golding worked as a teacher in a boys' school.
- Britain was having to come to terms with the loss of the British Empire.
- Public schools still produced most of Britain's leaders and top professionals.
- Nazi Germany had adopted a system of rewarding the strong and attacking the weak.

Grade **booster**

To achieve a grade A* you have to identify and comment on the impact of social, cultural and historical contexts.



William Golding later in life in 1983



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- The adults the boys wish could help them are the same ones who are fighting the war that has led to the boys being stranded.
- The boys are rescued by a naval officer who is part of the war, yet he asks if they have been 'Having a war or something' (p. 223).

The Second World War

Britain declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939 and the war in Europe lasted for almost six years. In the novel Golding explores some of the ideas that lay behind the Nazi government of Germany.

- The German leader Adolf Hitler adapted ideas from science and philosophy for his own ends. Compare Hitler's ideas of racial purity and the supremacy of the Aryan race with Darwin's theory of natural selection and survival of the fittest (see the *Themes* section of this guide for more detail). On the island, the boys have varying degrees of physical and mental strength. You need to think about which characteristics Golding portrays as gaining supremacy.
- One of the most feared of the Nazi organisations was the SS (*Schutzstaffel*: defence corps). The SS was fiercely loyal to Hitler and was renowned for never showing human weakness. The often brutal way in which the SS treated its enemies is similar to the way Jack uses Roger to terrify the other boys into submission.

The Hitler Youth
in Nazi Germany



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- Millions of ordinary Germans were involved in the war and some carried out terrible atrocities without question. You can find parallels for this in the novel.

Golding's war experience

During the Second World War, Golding served in the British Navy, on several different ships, and was in charge of specially adapted landing craft for the D-day landings in Normandy, so he witnessed at first hand the horrors of war. He came to the conclusion that human beings are not naturally kind and that even children are capable of incredible cruelty if the circumstances demand or even simply allow it.

Golding was interested in the way that violence can develop from innocent beginnings. Here is an extract from one of his autobiographical works, *Scenes from a Life*, in which he discusses such a childhood accident:

I swung the bat in a semicircle, missed the ball but hit José with the wooden bat across the side of the head. Instantly he turned and ran for home, one hand holding the side of his head. I was the one who made a noise, anguished to think of the awful thing I had done. But he made not a sound. He always was the silent one. I trundled after him, whimpering and wondering what I should tell mam and dad, or what he would.

I trundled back across the Common and down the road to the Green, my fears growing deeper. I can just remember them. I ended at the house, terrified and now as silent as my brother. I remember no more. But years later my parents told me that José had described the whole scene to them. He wasn't really hurt they said. But I crept in to the house with my terror and hid from everyone else under the dining room table.

The violence in *Lord of the Flies* starts as a game. The game goes too far and the potential for the extreme savagery that follows can be seen in all the boys except Piggy and perhaps Simon.

You can probably think of examples from your own childhood of situations that got out of hand. A typical 'play fight' can easily end up becoming more serious, and young children don't always see the boundaries between play and reality. For many of the younger boys in the novel, this is exactly what happens: children's games get out of hand.

The Cold War

Following the Second World War, Britain's former ally, the Soviet Union, became the potential enemy of the West. The major nuclear powers were the USA and the Soviet Union, with the USA's NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) allies such as Britain and France following closely behind. Throughout the 1950s, people in Britain feared the threat of Soviet nuclear



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At the time the novel was written nuclear war was a real threat

attack. The Allied nuclear attacks on Nagasaki and Hiroshima at the end of the Second World War brought home to people what nuclear war meant. The Soviet and NATO forces were separated by the flimsiest of borders, and nuclear weapons situated in Ukraine could have reached the UK in such a short time that few people would have survived even if British missiles had been fired as soon as the attack was detected. The nuclear stand-off became known as Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), as it would have led to the destruction of both attacker and attacked — no one could win.

The novel is obviously set against the backdrop of a nuclear war. However, it also subtly explores the idea of Mutually Assured Destruction within its own plot. The final fire destroys the world of the island. If the naval officer had not arrived, how would Jack's tribe have survived its 'victory'?

Life in 1950s Britain

Rationing

Food rationing had been a part of people's lives in Britain since the start of the Second World War. School children in the early 1950s had grown up without knowing what it was like to have a wide range of food readily available.

The lack of food in Britain throughout the war and even into the early post-war years was a major influence on people's lives. Although people had enough food to survive, meat in any quantity and imported fruit such as oranges and bananas became luxuries. Food plays a major part in *Lord of the Flies* — look at the availability of food on the island. It is the desire to hunt for meat that causes many of the problems between the boys. When they first land on the island, they collect food whenever they are hungry. Later, hunting becomes a major driving force behind Jack's actions, although this is about far deeper urges than just hunger for food.

Hardship

Large areas of British cities had suffered severe damage from German bombing. By the 1950s, rebuilding work was under way but there were still many devastated areas. There was a shortage of many everyday items and 'making do and mending' was still common practice in most homes. Clothes were difficult to obtain and so repairing them was essential. We

Key quotation

He tried to convey the compulsion to track down and kill that was swallowing him up.

(p. 51)

may see hardships in today's society, but for very different reasons and of a very different kind.

Keeping up appearances was a very British way of dealing with hardship. Look at the importance that clothes play in representing civilised society in the novel. When Ralph, Piggy, Sam and Eric go to Castle Rock at the end of the book they attempt to dress themselves as English schoolboys, as though this will make their requests more acceptable to Jack.

Attitudes

The Second World War cost Britain its empire. At its height, the British Empire was the greatest the world had known. It spread across the whole globe and the saying 'The sun never sets on the British Empire' had been literally true: somewhere in the empire it was daytime no matter what the time was in Britain. In Britain, the upper and middle classes had grown up with the idea that it was natural for them to be in charge and to organise others. This idea is expressed several times in the novel: that simply being English means that certain things are expected. See the section on *The Coral Island* for further examples of typical British grit.

Knowing your place was still an accepted idea in Britain. It was difficult for people born into poor, working-class backgrounds to rise in society. At the start of the novel, the boys have a clear sense of their own relative importance.

Class

In the 1950s the class system in Britain was still rigid. It is still in place today but has changed in some ways over the last 50 years.

The upper class

The upper class consisted mainly of aristocratic families with inherited money that came mostly from huge estates of land. It is worth reflecting that in the early part of the twentieth century, 1% of the population owned 99% of the wealth. The aristocracy had been in decline since the late 1930s but still held great power. The wealthiest man in Britain is still the Duke of Westminster, the country's largest landowner. Upper-class boys were educated at prestigious public schools such as Eton, Harrow and Marlborough (see the section on schools on p. 8).

Text focus

Look at the passage in Chapter 1 from 'I could swim when I was five. Daddy taught me.' to 'About the atom bomb? They're all dead' (pp. 8–9).

What does what Piggy and Ralph say show us about the importance of grown-ups to them?

What negative impact have grown-ups had on their lives?



The middle class

This was a much wider group than the upper class. The middle classes made their money through business or the professions. Such people would want their children to have a good start in life, and would often imitate the upper-class practice of sending their children, particularly boys, to public schools — probably ‘minor’ public schools that did not have the status of Eton or Harrow.

The boys in *Lord of the Flies* are typical examples of middle-class children of the 1950s. There is no evidence that their families are particularly wealthy: Ralph’s father is in the Navy and Piggy’s aunt does not seem to be wealthy.

The working class

As the name says, working-class people worked for a living. Many worked in the factories, shops and businesses owned by the middle classes. Working-class education had usually been poor in Britain. Until the Butler Education Act of 1944, many children left school at the age of 14 with only a basic schooling.

Before the Second World War it had been virtually impossible for working-class people to mix on equal terms with their ‘betters’. In the 1950s the situation gradually began to change, with new opportunities in the Britain that was emerging from the wreckage of the war. This has continued to develop up to the present day.

1950s schoolboys



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Public schools and grammar schools

The class system and the education system were closely linked. Public schools were, and still are, fee-paying schools. By contrast the 1944 Education Act introduced free grammar schools across the country. These were often single-sex schools and required pupils to pass an exam at the age of 11 — the 11-plus. Grammar schools kept the uniform and traditions of the public schools and were seen as providing an academic education for bright children who could otherwise not afford it. Children who failed the 11-plus went to secondary modern schools to learn more practical subjects. In practice, many more middle-class than working-class children went to grammar schools, while most working-class children went to the secondary moderns.

The boys in *Lord of the Flies* appear to be typical of the kinds of boys who would go to public schools at age 13 or grammar schools at 11. Their behaviour and dialogue are masterfully portrayed by Golding.

When you discuss this aspect of the novel, you should remember that Golding was a qualified teacher who worked at a boys' grammar school for many years, both before and after the war.

Key quotation

'We'll have to have "Hands up" like at school.'

(p. 31)

Pause for thought



How has education changed since the 1950s? Think about:

- how teaching has changed
- how the behaviour of children has changed
- how the class system has changed — is this still connected to education in the same way?

Boys' adventure books

Lord of the Flies follows a tradition of adventure books aimed mainly at boys — girls were not encouraged to seek adventure before the 1950s. In Chapter 2 the boys liken their situation to *Treasure Island*, *Swallows and Amazons* and *The Coral Island*. Such books were very popular, particularly with young boys such as those in the novel.

Golding's interest in the existence of evil

The novel reflects in several ways Golding's interest in the existence of evil, including the idea of the beast, the boys' degeneration into savagery and the background of the war. The title of the book is meant to be a reference to the Devil or Beelzebub (the Hebrew word for the Devil), which is the God of the Fly (translated as Lord of the Flies), which is most clearly evident when the pig's head appears to speak to Simon.

A modern reader's interpretation

Since the novel was written, society has changed and our view of the novel will be very different from that of readers when it was originally published in 1954.

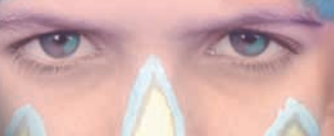
Text focus

Look at the end of Chapter 8 from "You are a silly little boy," said the Lord of the Flies...' (pp. 157–59).

What does the Lord of the Flies say in this section about evil?

Why is it significant that it is Simon and no one else who hears/imagines this?

The notion that there is evil in all of us is explored throughout the novel. Pick out three other sections of the novel where the theme of evil is explored. Make notes on what happens, pick out some relevant and useful quotations and explore what Golding is trying to say in the novel about evil.



Pause for thought



Using all the material from this section, draw up a chart of what life was like in the 1950s and compare that to life today.

Life in 1950s	Life today	Differences
Still a big division in class, with lower, middle and upper class clearly defined	Class differences not so clearly defined	While there is still a class system today, it is less clearly defined than it was in the 1950s

Grade **focus**



Only in the WJEC exam is context assessed directly.

The exam consists of three questions on *Lord of the Flies* of which you have to answer two. Question A is a compulsory passage from the text that does not assess AO4, but does assess AO1 and AO2.

You then have to answer one of questions B and C, which assess AO4 as well as AO1.

You will be asked a question on the text and will be expected to show awareness of context in your answer.

For example:

What do you think of Jack and the way he is presented in the novel?

To achieve a C grade you would normally be expected to write about the context of the book, make some comments on your own views and how the novel relates to your own experiences. You might say something about how the book has influenced other people and what they have written since it was published.

For an A* you will need to be clear when you write about the social/cultural and historical context of the book and write clearly about the time the novel was written and set and how this has influenced others by writing either in a similar style or about similar themes. Your answer will be more exploratory than for a C grade and your ideas will be more detailed and original.

Review your learning

(Answers are given on p. 89.)

- 1 What is meant by the context of a novel?
- 2 What do the events on a paradise island show us about human behaviour in the wider world?
- 3 How do 1950s' fears of atomic war influence your reading of the novel?
- 4 How are order and class represented in the novel?



More interactive questions and answers online.