



Research Paper

## The Descent of Man: A Critical Examination of Primal Instinct and Civilizational Decline in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and *The Inheritors*

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### Abstract

This paper explores William Golding's thematic concern with the innate depravity and moral degeneration of humankind, as vividly portrayed in his seminal novels *Lord of the Flies* and *The Inheritors*. By examining Golding's philosophical and allegorical approach, the study argues that Golding views evil not as a social construct but as an inherent quality within human nature. Drawing from his wartime experiences and his response to Enlightenment and Romantic ideals, Golding confronts both the fragility of civilization and the lurking savagery within man. This paper also contrasts Golding's vision with that of Rousseau and H.G. Wells, demonstrating how Golding subverts the notion of man as a noble savage. Ultimately, the study reveals Golding's pessimistic, yet morally urgent, portrayal of human nature and his warning of a cultural and existential descent.

William Golding stands as one of the most intellectually provocative and morally intense British novelists to emerge in the aftermath of the Second World War. Despite beginning his literary career relatively late—publishing *Lord of the Flies* in 1954 at the age of 43—he quickly established a formidable reputation through his bleak yet captivating vision of human nature. Golding's novels, particularly *Lord of the Flies* and *The Inheritors*, are distinguished by their probing exploration of mankind's capacity for evil and his skepticism toward the Enlightenment belief in progress and rationality.

Golding's worldview, shaped profoundly by his participation in WWII, diverges sharply from the optimistic rationalism of thinkers like Rousseau and H.G. Wells. While these writers underline that man is born good and corrupted by society, Golding inverts this claim, asserting that society is merely an extension of man's intrinsic moral failings.

At the core of Golding's fiction is the idea that evil is not a societal flaw but a fundamental component of human nature. Unlike Rousseau, who envisioned man in his natural state as pure and untainted, Golding suggests that civilization merely masks an inner savagery. He rejects simplistic social theories that propose evil can be eliminated through institutional reform.

In *Lord of the Flies*, a group of British schoolboys stranded on a deserted island descend into violence and chaos. The narrative reveals that beneath the veneer of order and civility lies a primal instinct toward cruelty and domination. The novel functions as a modern fable and moral allegory, dramatizing man's regression into barbarism when freed from the constraints of social structure.

Golding names this internal darkness through the character of Simon, who achieves near-prophetic insight into the true nature of the "Beast" the boys fear—it is not an external monster but the evil within themselves. The title of Chapter Eight, "A Gift for the Darkness," symbolically represents mankind's surrender to this inherent evil.

*Lord of the Flies* operates on multiple symbolic levels. It is at once a myth, a parable, and an apocalyptic vision. The boys' descent mirrors the fall of man, with the island becoming a microcosm of a fallen world. Golding reintroduces the archetypal figure of the Devil—here, as the Lord of the Flies—suggesting that the evil within man is both spiritual and existential.

The novel also explores the fragile nature of culture and civilization. When Ralph, representing reason and order, is overthrown by Jack, who embodies primal aggression, the narrative signals the collapse of enlightenment of ideals. Golding implies that the apocalypse is not a future event but an ever-present threat residing within humanity itself.

Golding extends his critique of human nature in *The Inheritors*, a novel set in prehistoric times that explores the confrontation between Neanderthals and Homo sapiens. Here, Golding allegorizes the fall from innocence through anthropological myth. The Neanderthals—gentle, communal, and innocent—are systematically destroyed by the violent and manipulative Homo sapiens, whom Golding calls “new men.”

Through the symbolic removal and burning of a log (the Neanderthals' only means of crossing a river), the Homo sapiens sever all potential for harmony or reconciliation. Their disconnection from nature, indulgence in violence, and objectification of others signify a moral regression rather than progress. This is Golding's poetic rendering of the origin of evil—not as an external force, but as the direct outcome of the human evolutionary trajectory.

Although Golding presents a harrowing view of human nature, his work is not devoid of hope. Both *Lord of the Flies* and *The Inheritors* suggest that the recognition of evil is the first step toward its mitigation. In *Lord of the Flies*, Simon's death may symbolize the martyrdom of insight, but his vision endures in the text as a moral imperative. In *The Inheritors*, the final glimpse from a Homo sapiens child hints at a potential future where empathy may resurface.

Thus, Golding's novels serve not merely as condemnations but as urgent calls for introspection and moral vigilance. His works urge readers to confront the “darkness of man's heart” with clarity and courage.

William Golding's fiction articulates a tragic yet necessary understanding of humanity. In *Lord of the Flies* and *The Inheritors*, he exposes the descent of man from innocence to moral corruption, not as a social accident but as an essential part of human nature. While he does not offer utopian solutions, his narratives compel us to reckon with our inner demons. In doing so, he elevates the moral stakes of literature and leaves a lasting mark on modern thought.

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