

Literature Unit 1: *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding

Skills targeted:

AO1 Respond to texts critically and imaginatively; select and evaluate relevant textual detail to illustrate and support interpretations.

AO2 Explain how language, structure and form contribute to writers' presentation of ideas, themes and settings.

Why study this text?

Lord of the Flies by William Golding is, at its heart, a simple tale of a group of boys stranded on a desert island. It follows the style of the popular 19th-century novel *The Coral Island* by R. M. Ballantyne. However, it is also much more than this: a study of the darker side of human nature; Golding explores the human urge to destroy and man's capacity for evil. *Lord of the Flies* features an island somewhere in the middle of the Pacific that serves as a battleground in the fight between good and evil. A group of boys evacuated during a nuclear war explore the tensions that are as much in evidence in the school playground as they were in post-war Europe.

This is a modern fable to be enjoyed on many levels: on the one hand, it is simple in structure, has a limited setting and a recognisable set of characters. On the other hand, it produces a set of events that are both shocking and unpredictable, and acts as a cautionary tale for us all. *Lord of the Flies* is straightforward because it features a range of characters on a desert island. However, the isolated setting also allows scope for convincing psychological analysis and sociological study, as the characters react and engage with their environment in a way that produces a complicated mix of theme and allegory. It is therefore accessible for lower tier students and intriguing enough to capture the imagination of the very brightest students.

Background and context

William Golding was a teacher of English at Bishop Wordsworth's School in Salisbury until the onset of the Second World War when he joined the Royal Navy. He left the Royal Navy at the end of the war, profoundly moved by his experiences. He was shocked by the horror of war and this led him to question the very nature of humanity. Also, his understanding of the dynamics of the school playground led him to believe that children can be incredibly cruel by nature and that human beings are capable of extremely sadistic behaviour. All of this is reflected in the behaviour of the boys in the novel.

The setting for *Lord of the Flies* is a microcosm of the mounting tensions of post-war Europe, and there is considerable irony in the fact that the boys are 'rescued' from the anarchy and degenerating violence of the island by a naval officer who will then transport them back to a world engaged in a nuclear war of its own. The aftermath of Hiroshima, the possibility of an atomic war and the legacy of the Holocaust all had their impact on Golding and the issues raised are expressed in the themes of this book.

Golding also describes the island as a perfect tropical paradise, complete with serpent, as a symbolic setting for the battle between good and evil. The religious allegory is then carried further by the presentation of a mystic or prophet in the character of Simon, who learns the 'truth' about the nature of the beast on top of a mountain, only moments before he is brutally murdered by the tribe. Golding clearly intended his novel to be interpreted on a range of different levels, which will reward the brightest and most able students with further investigative and analytical study.

Discussion points

Battle between good and evil

The boys quickly take sides in a battle for control of the island. The conch symbolises law and order, but is with further powerful symbolism is smashed in a struggle for authority as the plot takes a sinister turn. The boys divide into two camps led by Jack and Ralph. At Castle Rock, Jack's hunters descend into violence and pursue their primitive urges to the logical conclusion. Ralph struggles to hang on to his sense of morality, but is rapidly caught up in the bloodlust. Golding asks readers to question their own consciences: is Ralph, acting as a force for good, paralysed by his own indecision? Is Jack's charismatic style of leadership a manifestation of the evil that is inherent in us all? This novel gets to the very heart of what it means to be human, without the constraints of adult social norms.

Law and order

Ralph tries to create a democracy on the island to establish law and order, but he is threatened by Jack's charismatic leadership style. Jack has a more immediate focus on the group's needs and, as the narrative progresses, Ralph finds himself an increasingly lone voice. The boys defect to Jack's camp because they want excitement and food. Was Ralph's style of leadership fundamentally flawed? Should he have taken into account the boys' more immediate wants and balanced them against the bigger picture? Ralph's attempt to establish a democracy on the island is a key theme in this novel, but since democracy is completely overthrown by Jack, do students accept that there can only be a violent and bloody outcome for the group? Can societies exist without an established system for governing law and order?

Crowd mentality

The most dramatic moment in the novel is when Ralph is being pursued through the undergrowth by the mob. At this point, it is clear that Jack's tribe has won. Jack sanctions murder and, in an act of collective violence, Simon is brutally killed. On the morning after Simon's death, Piggy claims that it was 'an accident' and Ralph's insistence that it was 'murder' goes entirely unheard. Golding warns us that in the absence of personal responsibility, a crowd can perpetrate acts of extreme violence. Under certain circumstances, this can become socially acceptable. Do students agree with this? How do events from history reflect the warning given to us by this book?

Example task

Desert island survival

Imagine yourself as a plane crash survivor on an island in the middle of the Pacific. There are no adults and you are elected leader of the group. You must take responsibility for the welfare of the group members, who are either the same age as you or considerably younger, and you must ensure their survival.

You need to rank order the following list of priorities and justify your reasoning:

- clothing
- fresh water
- medical care
- toilet facilities
- morale-boosting fun and activities
- dry foods such as nuts and berries
- fresh meat
- rescue plan
- shelter
- fire
- protection from a possible wild creature or 'beast'
- care for young and vulnerable members.

Now compare your rank order with Ralph's ground rules for the island, which are laid down in Chapter 5. What do you think of your list compared to Ralph's? Are there any items missing from Ralph's rules? Does his lack of a correct set of priorities inevitably leave the way open for Jack?

Students will respond and interpret the material to form their own set of judgments (AO1), and then refer back to the text to discover how the central themes of the text are presented in Chapter 5 (AO2).

Analytical/creative approaches

- Research on the internet – create a British 1950s newspaper front page for the day the plane crashed on the island – focus research on the Cold War, nuclear weapons or the Korean War, and a leading story about an aircraft missing over the Pacific containing a group of evacuated school boys (AO4).
- Vote for a leader – pupils focus on a single character from the novel and present their manifesto for leadership on the island. Suitable characters could include: Ralph, Jack, Simon, Piggy and Roger. Political manifestos should be inkeeping with knowledge and understanding of character from the text (AO2).
- Social experiment – sort pupils by hair colour to establish majority/minority groups. Ask groups to elect a spokesperson or leader to argue for overall dominance of group, and to give reasons for dominance and possible roles within the group for other 'hair colours'. Activity will explore social segregation, group dominance and collective will (AO3).
- Create a 3D map of the island – using quotes from the text, either draw and label a diagram or create a 3D visual picture of the island showing the location of the beach, the lagoon, the mountain and Ralph and Jack's camp (AO1).
- Draw a tension graph – students should plot moments of tension in the novel and chart the build up to a climax. This helps students to focus on structure and to establish the moment of climax (AO2).
- Find examples of personification or pathetic fallacy – draw the island as if it were a human being or mythological creature. What sort of personality would it have? What is the character of the island? Label the illustration with quotes from the text (AO1).
- Analyse a passage of speech – This is an opportunity for close textual analysis with potential grade A/A* students. Introduce them to appropriate linguistic terms and ask them to infer personality from dialogue. Consider economy of word use, collect evidence and attribute to character. Encourage wider research and look at use of slang and dialect amongst 1950s schoolboys. Comic books such as *Roy of the Rovers* and *Billy Bunter* might provide inspiration. Experiment with accents to dramatise and create character. Justify your choices with evidence from the text (AO1, AO4).
- On a sheet of A3 paper create a collage of key symbols from the novel. Use these symbols to represent key characters and themes (AO2).
- Play Articulate. On a series of index cards write the names of key characters, places or symbols from the novel and ask a student to describe the key word to the rest of the class without actually using the word. For a bonus point, higher tier students should be encouraged to explore the significance of a character, symbol or theme (AO1, AO2).

Key issues for improving grades

The specification states that answers should:

- be relevant – you don't need to write everything you know about the text, only the things that relate to the question
- be sufficiently detailed – it is better to give a lot of detail about a small part of the text than trying to cover lots of different points
- be well structured – with a clear introduction which addresses the question and a clear conclusion that returns to the question

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- use effective vocabulary – including literary terms where relevant
 - use well-chosen evidence/quotations to support points.

To gain a top grade, candidates should show an enthusiastic and critical personal response. The best candidates write about the author's methods and achievements, and will concentrate on comment, not content.

Nelson Thornes resources to support this unit

Interactive resources to support a selection of the set texts, including *Lord of the Flies*, will be available via Nelson Thornes' online learning space, *kerboodle!*. The resources will support text comprehension, exam practice and revision. The texts covered are:

Mister Pip

Romeo and Juliet

Martyn Pig

Of Mice and Men

An Inspector Calls

Lord of the Flies

Author: Dione Bamford
