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Nature, Violence, and the Fragile Earth: Ecocritical Perspectives in *The Lord of the Flies*

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Abstract

This paper examines William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* through an ecocritical lens, arguing that the novel functions as both psychological allegory and ecological parable. Moving beyond traditional interpretations focused on civilization's collapse, this analysis positions the island as an active participant in the narrative—initially pristine, then degraded, and ultimately destroyed by human violence and anthropocentric thinking. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from deep ecology, environmental ethics, and ecofeminism, the paper demonstrates how Golding's microcosmic island serves as a prescient commentary on humanity's relationship with the natural world. The analysis explores five key dimensions: the island's initial presentation as an Edenic ecosystem; the boys' destructive environmental interventions that prefigure Anthropocene concerns; their anthropocentric domination of non-human life; the island's apparent agency and responsiveness to human actions; and the projection of human fears onto the natural world. Through engagement with scholars including Lawrence Buell, Arne Naess, Rob Nixon, and Donna Haraway, the paper reveals how environmental degradation parallels moral collapse in Golding's narrative. The study argues that *The Lord of the Flies* critiques the Western tendency to view nature as exploitable resource rather than living community, demonstrating how disconnection from ecological ethics leads to both environmental destruction and social breakdown. The novel's compressed timeframe makes visible the "slow violence" of environmental damage, while its all-male cast illuminates connections between patriarchal domination and ecological destruction. Ultimately, the paper positions Golding's work as an urgent warning about the inseparable relationship between moral order and environmental health, particularly relevant to contemporary climate crisis and biodiversity loss.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Anthropocentrism, Environmental degradation, Deep ecology, Anthropocene.

William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* has traditionally been analyzed through political, psychological, and moral lenses, focusing on the breakdown of civilization and the emergence of savagery among a group of stranded boys. However, an ecocritical reading opens a new dimension in interpreting the novel, one that centres on the relationship between human beings and the natural world. As Cheryll Glotfelty argues in her foundational work *The Ecocriticism Reader*, ecocriticism "takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" and examines "the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). Through its portrayal of an initially pristine island transformed by human conflict and destruction, Golding's novel offers a powerful reflection on ecological degradation and anthropocentric thinking.

Nature in *The Lord of the Flies* is not merely a backdrop for the boys' descent into barbarism; it is an active presence – first accommodating, then responding to, and finally suffering under the weight of human aggression. This reading aligns with what Lawrence Buell identifies as the "environmental unconscious" in literature, where "the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history" (Buell 2). From this perspective, the island becomes a microcosm of the Earth, demonstrating how quickly human activity, driven by fear, dominance, and disorder, can corrupt an ecosystem.

The story critiques the human tendency to exploit and control nature, often with catastrophic consequences. Golding's use of vivid natural imagery, the boys' destructive interactions with their environment, and the symbolic weight of natural elements such as fire and the "beast" reveal a broader ecological

message: that the collapse of civilization is inherently tied to the collapse of our relationship with nature. This paper examines *The Lord of the Flies* through an ecocritical lens to explore how nature is both witness to and victim of human moral failure, drawing on theoretical frameworks from deep ecology, environmental ethics, and postcolonial ecocriticism.

At the novel's outset, the island is described in Edenic terms – lush, untouched, and bountiful. This portrayal reflects a harmonious natural world, functioning independently of human interference: "The shore was fledged with palm trees. These stood or leaned or reclined against the light and their green feathers were a hundred feet up in the air" (10).

The boys' initial wonder at the island mirrors humanity's awe before nature. The abundance of fruit, the clear water, and the silence of the forest all suggest a self-sustaining ecosystem, alive but fragile. However, the moment the boys begin to interact with their environment, their presence quickly disrupts this balance.

This initial presentation of the island draws heavily on the pastoral tradition, which Leo Marx identifies as a fundamental tension in American literature between the "machine and the garden" (3). Golding's island represents what William Cronon calls "pristine nature" – a landscape imagined as untouched by human activity, though Cronon warns that such conceptions often obscure the complex relationships between humans and environments (69-90). The boys' arrival on this seemingly pristine island sets up what Val Plumwood describes as the "master subject" encountering the "othered" natural world,

initiating a process of domination rather than reciprocal relationship (41-68).

The island's initial description also evokes what Aldo Leopold calls the "land ethic" – a harmonious relationship where humans are "plain members and citizens" of the biotic community rather than its conquerors (204). The boys' failure to recognize this membership becomes central to their ecological and moral downfall.

The first major act of environmental destruction occurs when the boys attempt to create a signal fire, which quickly burns out of control: "A tree exploded in the fire like a bomb. Tall swathes of creepers rose for a moment into view, agonized, and went down again. The flames, as though they were a kind of wildlife, crept as a jaguar creeps on its belly" (44).

The fire, initially intended as a tool of civilization and rescue, becomes a destructive force due to the boys' carelessness. The anthropomorphic description of the flames as a "jaguar" reinforces the idea that fire has taken on a life of its own – no longer under human control, but unleashed upon nature. This moment marks a turning point where human technology begins to threaten the ecological equilibrium of the island.

This scene prefigures what Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer term the "Anthropocene" – the geological epoch characterized by human impact on Earth's systems (17-18). The boys' uncontrolled fire represents human technology's potential for environmental destruction, echoing contemporary concerns about climate change and habitat loss. Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" – the gradual, invisible environmental damage that particularly affects marginalized communities – finds its rapid-fire equivalent in the boys' immediate destruction of their island home (2-3).

The destructive fire also leads to the death of one of the littluns, though the boys avoid

acknowledging it. This denial parallels what Kari Norgaard identifies as "socially organized denial" in her study of climate change – the collective psychological mechanisms that allow societies to avoid confronting environmental destruction (8-15). The boys' refusal to acknowledge the consequences of their actions mirrors broader patterns of environmental irresponsibility.

Throughout the novel, the boys approach nature not with respect, but with domination. Their hunting of pigs escalates from survival to sport, reflecting a shift from necessity to power: "Kill the pig. Cut her throat. Spill her blood." (69, 114, 125) The chant, repeated ritualistically, reveals a descent into bloodlust and domination over non-human life. The natural world is no longer viewed as a shared space but as something to be conquered. This progression reflects what Arne Naess calls the "shallow ecology" movement versus "deep ecology" – the difference between anthropocentric environmentalism (focused on human welfare) and biocentric environmentalism (recognizing the intrinsic value of all living beings) (95-100).

The boys' treatment of the pigs embodies what Carol J. Adams describes as the "sexual politics of meat" – the way violence against animals parallels and reinforces other forms of domination (Adams 40-62). The increasingly ritualistic nature of their hunting suggests a degradation of ethical consideration for non-human life, moving from practical necessity to symbolic violence.

Peter Singer's concept of "speciesism" – discrimination based on species membership – provides another lens for understanding the boys' treatment of the island's animal life (6-9). Their assumption that pigs exist solely for human use reflects broader anthropocentric assumptions about the natural world's purpose and value.

There are moments in the novel where the island seems to respond to the boys' actions, almost as if it possesses a form of agency or

sentience. The weather, for instance, appears to mirror the psychological and moral state of the boys. During Simon's death, the atmosphere becomes violent and chaotic, yet afterward: "Softly, surrounded by a fringe of inquisitive bright creatures, itself a silver shape beneath the steadfast constellation, Simon's body rested on the sand. The line of his cheek silvered and the turn of his shoulder became sculptured marble" (Golding 154).

Nature here both mourns and sanctifies Simon, the character most attuned to its rhythms. His death is met not with chaos, but with a strange peace, as if the island acknowledges his purity. In contrast, the storm that immediately follows symbolizes nature's rage or mourning, a kind of elemental reaction to human cruelty.

This portrayal aligns with James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, which suggests that Earth functions as a self-regulating system (10-15). The island's apparent responsiveness to the boys' actions suggests what Jane Bennett calls "thing-power" – the agency of non-human entities and assemblages (1-19). Simon's communion with nature represents what Timothy Morton describes as "ecological thought" – thinking that is "about coexistence" rather than domination (4-7).

Later, when the boys set the island ablaze in an attempt to kill Ralph, it becomes clear that they are no longer merely disrupting the island – they are destroying it entirely: "The forest near him burst into uproar. Demoniac figures with faces of white and red and green rushed out howling... The sky was black" (200). The destruction of the island by fire symbolizes irreversible environmental damage, echoing global concerns about deforestation, war, and climate collapse. The boys' actions demonstrate how quickly human society, once it loses moral grounding, can bring about environmental catastrophe. This scene evokes what Clive Hamilton calls "the Anthropocene as rupture" –

the recognition that humans have fundamentally altered Earth's systems (35-58).

Another ecocritical theme is the projection of human fear onto nature – embodied in the myth of the "beast." The boys' terror of an unseen creature leads them to treat the forest as malevolent, despite its initial neutrality: "Maybe there is a beast... maybe it's only us" (89). Simon's insight – that the real beast is within the boys themselves – exposes the human tendency to externalize internal darkness. Nature becomes a scapegoat, blamed for fears that originate in human behaviour. This mirrors the way modern societies sometimes attribute ecological crises to "natural disasters" without recognizing the human activities that often exacerbate them.

This dynamic reflects what Carolyn Merchant calls "the death of nature" – the historical process by which Western thought transformed nature from a living, sacred entity into dead matter to be exploited (1-41). The boys' projection of evil onto the natural world exemplifies what David Abram identifies as the "spell of the sensuous" – the way alphabetic literacy has separated humans from direct, embodied relationship with the natural world (93-135).

The racialized dimensions of this projection cannot be ignored. The boys' fear of the "beast" carries colonial overtones, reflecting what Priscilla Solis Ybarra calls "environmental racism" – the way environmental degradation disproportionately affects communities of colour and how ecological thinking can be shaped by racial hierarchies (45-67). The island, coded as an exotic, primitive space, becomes the repository for the boys' civilizational anxieties.

The novel's treatment of nature and violence can be further illuminated through ecofeminist theory. Vandana Shiva's concept of "maldevelopment" describes how patriarchal systems simultaneously exploit women and nature (1-13). The boys' society, entirely male and increasingly violent, exemplifies the

connections between masculine domination and environmental destruction.

Piggy's death – alongside the destruction of the conch – marks not only the end of democratic order but also the silencing of care-based ethics. Nel Noddings' ethics of care, which emphasizes relationship and responsibility, offers an alternative to the boys' domination-based approach to their environment (1-27). Simon's character embodies this care ethic, showing genuine concern for both the younger boys and the natural world.

The Lord of the Flies is not only a psychological and social allegory but also a profound ecological parable. Through the lense of ecocriticism, the novel reveals how quickly human beings can destroy the natural world when driven by fear, power, and disconnection from ecological ethics. Golding's island, initially a paradise, becomes a ruined landscape – a reflection of both individual moral failure and collective environmental irresponsibility.

The novel's ecological dimensions become even more urgent when read in the context of contemporary environmental crises. As Rob Nixon argues, environmental destruction often occurs gradually and invisibly, but Golding's compressed timeframe makes these processes visible and immediate (2-3). The boys' treatment of their island home serves as a microcosm of humanity's relationship with Earth itself.

In portraying nature as both witness to and victim of human descent, Golding critiques the anthropocentric worldview that places humanity above the ecosystems it inhabits. The novel demonstrates what Donna Haraway calls "staying with the trouble" – the difficulty of maintaining ethical relationships with other species and ecological systems (1-57). Ultimately, the novel warns that the collapse of moral order and the collapse of the natural world are not separate events but parallel processes, bound by the same failure to respect the fragile balance of life.

The ecocritical reading of *The Lord of the Flies* thus reveals dimensions of the text that remain urgently relevant to contemporary environmental challenges. As we face global climate change, mass extinction, and environmental injustice, Golding's island serves as both warning and invitation – a reminder that our moral and ecological relationships are inextricably linked, and that true civilization depends on learning to live respectfully within, rather than above, the natural world.

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