The English Literature Journal
Article
Open Access

The Main Themes in Lord of the Flies

Alaa Lateef Alnajm*

University of Kufa, Iraq.

*Corresponding author: Alaa Lateef Alnajm; e-mail: alaal.alnajm@uokufa.edu.iq

ABSTRACT
This research deals with the main themes in the novel Lord of the Flies written by the British novelist William Golding. It shows how the theme plays an important role in every literary work, it reflect the central idea of the writer or author. This research shows how Golding displays his characters to present different themes and ideas in order to show his readers the experience and performance of each characters to give more understanding about the conflict and emotion of them.

Keywords: theme, function of theme, example of theme, and main themes in Lord of the Flies

INTRODUCTION
1-1 The Meaning of Theme:
A theme is the main idea or ideas explored by a literary work. A work of literature may have more than one theme. Shakespeare's Hamlet, for example, studies the themes of death, revenge, and action. King Lear's themes include justice, reconciliation, madness, and betrayal. When an artist begins with an issue or theme in mind, themes will also develop or emerge as he/she writes. It may not be until the editing stage that one even begins to realize one's themes. Having recognized them, the themes will facilitate the writer to determine what to cut from the story or novel and what to shed light on.

In a work of literature, there are two types of themes that appear: major and minor. A major theme is an idea that a writer repeats in his work, making it the most important idea in a literary work. On the other hand, a minor theme refers to an idea that appears in a work briefly and gives way to another minor theme. For instance, Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice has a major theme of matrimony around which the whole narrative revolves. It also deals with minor themes of love, friendship, mannerism, affectation and so on. It is important to distinguish a theme of a literary work from its subject. Subject is a topic which acts as a base for a literary work while a theme is an idea expressed on the subject. For example, a writer may choose a subject of betrayal for his story and the theme of a story may be writer's personal opinion that betrayal is an execration for humanity. Usually, it is up to the readers to discover a theme of a literary work by analyzing characters, plot and other literary elements.

There are some ways by which a writer displays themes in a literary work. A writer may express a theme through the feelings of his main character about the subject he has chosen to write about. Similarly, themes are exposed through thoughts and conversations of different characters. Moreover, the experiences of the main character in the course of a literary work give us an idea about its theme. The actions and events taking place in a narrative are consequential in determining its theme.

1-2 Examples of Themes in Literature:
Here, we have some common themes used in famous literary works:

1. Love and Friendship: Love and friendship is a frequently occurring theme in literature. It generates emotional twists and turns in a narrative and can have a variety of endings: happy, sad or bitter sweet. Examples of notorious literary works utilizing this theme are:
   - Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare
   - Wuthering Heights by Emily Bronte
   - Sense and Sensibility by Jane Austen
   - Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen

2. The theme of war has been presented in literature since ancient times. The literary works using this theme may either glorify or criticize the idea of war. Most
recent literary works depict war as a curse for humanity due to the suffering it causes. Some renowned examples are:

- *Iliad and Odyssey* by Homer
- *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy
- *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell
- *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway
- *Arms and the Man* by Bernard Shaw
- *A Band of Brothers: Stories from Vietnam* by Walter McDonald

3. Crime and Mystery: are themes used in detective novels. Such narratives also contain sub-themes such as “crimes cannot be hidden”, “evil is always punished”, etc. Some well-known examples are:

- *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* by Edgar Allan Poe
- *Sherlock Holmes* by Arthur Conan Doyle
- *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens
- *Murder on the Orient Express* by Agatha Christie
- *Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown

4. Revenge is another recurrent theme traced in many popular literary works. A character comes across certain circumstances that make him aware of his need for revenge. The outcome of his or her action is often bitter but sometimes they may end up being satisfied. Examples are:

- *Hamlet and Macbeth* by William Shakespeare
- *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexander Dumas
- *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* by Stieg Larsson
- *A Time to Kill* by John Grisham

**1-3 Function of Theme:**

Theme is an aspect of a story that binds together various essential elements of narrative. It is a truth that exhibits universality and stands true for people of all cultures. Theme gives readers better understanding of the main character's conflicts, experiences, discoveries and emotions as they are derived from them. Through themes, a writer tries to give his readers an insight into how the world works or how he or she views human life.(web)

**1-4 The Main Themes of Lord of the Flies:**

*Lord of the Flies*, a direct production of the author's experience of the World War II, offers a group of themes which are the second product of the writer’s paramount concern for the future of civilization, annihilated almost by the brutality of the Second World War. The main themes of the novel may be categorized as follows: (1) the theme of evil (2) the theme of childhood (3) the theme of human civilization in the 20th century and (4) the biblical theme or the theme of sin and expiation.

**1-5 The Theme of Evil:**

Golding believes that the evil nature of man is curbed only when he is under discipline. Thus Jack's inherent evil nature is repressed by the disciplined school life and he hesitates for a moment to kill the pig that had been trapped and has managed to run away. At the beginning of the novel Jack's cruelty and his going against nature are stated. Jack's narrow mindedness, his material greed, his eagerness for power are revealed as the basic qualities that led to murder and destruction. He concentrates on hunting and breaking away from the order created by Ralph to gratify his pleasure. Golding does not intend to picture Jack as basically evil, as he states that Jack is a man of anger, violence and action and wants to be a leader.

Golding has made this exposition of cruelty in his novel to make his readers aware of the real nature of the human mind. He believes that World War II did not present us with issues such as fighting, nationalism, politics and freedom; it corrupted the nature of human beings. Golding also believes that earth is mangled by man and it can be saved only if man becomes aware of his nature and changes it. According to the view point of Golding, the most alarming quality of evil is that it can attract most of the people towards it, because most people are attracted to the joys of life and are loath rational thinking. Golding also relates evil with fear which often causes risky activities. (Kermode 201).

Another important aspect of evil shown in the novel is that it does not exist outside; only Simon can feel the truth of evil when he says that the beast might be within us. The other boys are afraid of the beast. It is displayed to Simon alone that evil in the form of beast is just an illusion. Golding feels that evil does not emerge out of some political or other systems; therefore, removal of a particular system does not ensure removal of evil. He argues against those who think that it is the political or other systems that create evil. Evil comes from the depths of man himself.

Golding is almost obsessed with the existence of evil in the nature of human being and emphasizes on the recognition of this nature on the basis of which one may take steps to exterminate it. He is not concerned with human nature in a particular time or with a particular type of people, though occasional references are taken from contemporary (mid-twentieth century) world and the boys in the novel are all British schoolboys. Golding, however, avoids making any specific quality of British boys and the boys might as well belong to any modern civilized country.

**1-6 The Theme of Childhood (Potential Savagery of Children):**

*Lord of the Flies* is a novel about the activities of some schoolboys who ranged between six and twelve and who had been dropped by an aeroplane on an uninhabited island. The subject matter of the novel shows similarities with the adventurous stories written in the 19th century. Those stories are romantic tales which stress on the discovery of the unknown land by the boys who are away from the Christian notion of original sin. But *Lord of the Flies* is a reconstruction of Ballantyne's *Coral Island* in which three schoolboys of...
Britain find out an uninhabited island which becomes a paradise for them.

Golding does not share the romantic ideas that offer children the status of innocent angels. According to him, children possess both good qualities and bad ones as do grown-ups. And in both cases only a few possess good qualities like love, fellow feeling, sympathy and pity. In this novel, Simon alone is called innocent. He is full of love, pity and sympathy for others. He brings ripe fruit for the littluns, offers his own share of meat to Piggy who was denied it and thinks that the supposed beast might be some ill man who could not even chase the boys that went so near him. But the other boys, even Ralph and Piggy who are noted for rationality and intelligence, do not possess the characteristic qualities of Simon.

The novel Lord of the Flies does not however present the views unexamined. Rather, it is the result of microscopic observation of the author of the changes in the thoughts of the boys and their ways of life. Even the skilled changes in their behavior do not decamp his eyes. The investigation by the author of the complex phenomenon called child becomes interesting because he makes this investigation fair and objective, and detects the psychological complexity through symbols. For instance, when Ralph threw his school uniform and felt comfortable in the tropical atmosphere, the gesture expressed his delight of freedom, as he was sure that there would be no strict discipline on the island. (Bernard 481).

Golding's hold on child psychology is further disclosed in the way he depicts the flickers of goodness in evil characters and vice versa. He curiously observes that Jack, the personification of evil, hesitates to kill a pig during their first discovery of the island, because he is still unwilling to meet bloodshed. Piggy who is noted for his intelligence and commonsense becomes deceptive when he explains that Simon's death is just an accident. Unlike the believers in golden childhood theory, Golding admires the role of discipline and order in developing a child's moral sense. And once the children have undergone a disciplined life, they take time to forget all about the moral codes they were taught. Thus, Roger failed to satisfy his agonized pleasure by throwing stones at Henry.

The author is a realist, and he finds that both the grown-up and the children contained evil qualities as well as good, but the evil is always prominent. As some critics have rightly observed, the island gives the children freedom to find out themselves and it is given as a testing ground for the inherent good or bad. When the children in the novel are set free from the restriction and control of the adult world, their natural impulses come out and reveal their lust for power and savagery. This revelation of brutality is found in human nature. Surely, love and sympathy are displayed — one may remember Simon's love and pity, but these are insufficient. The death of Simon alone indicates the depravity in the nature of human being as does the death of Piggy who related to rules and order almost fanatically.

The behavior of the boys as explained is natural. To say that these description are simple is not correct. The reaction of the boys would be the same anywhere, be it a romantic novel or realistic. Golding's acute observation of the children's way of life enabled him to put side by side both the spontaneous joys of life and the intolerance and hostility towards others. Thus Golding adds an extra dimension to a common, life-like incident enabling it to interpret his point of view about the power hungry nature of human being. In this way the theme of the potential savagery of children in Golding's novel reveals a clarity of sign and intention that offers it a new dimension of interest and oblige the readers to accept the psychological reality as true to life. (Golding 17,24).

1.7 The Theme of Human Civilization:

The view point of Golding about the innate evil in human beings is known; he is often regarded as a pessimist having a negative way of looking at life, though he repeatedly refuses that he is not a pessimist. His view of human civilization that appears largely in the background of the children's world on the island, apparently offers no flicker of hope. The different aspects of the adult's world as reflected in Lord of the Flies may be discussed in the following way: first, there was the atomic war that presupposed the school children dropped on an uninhabited island; secondly, occasional references to bomb, firing and so on, that point at the cruelty of the grown-up people; thirdly, the fluffy suggestions of the boy's unhappy family life and lastly, the presentation of chauvinism as the remains of colonial feelings mirrored in the naval officer's speech at the end. (Santwana 88).

To start with the atomic war that serves as the setting of the novel, it is horrifying. It is the atomic war in Europe that had not yet taken place in reality, but is apprehended to break out at any moment. Some schoolboys projected in the novel were apparently rescued in that nuclear war and they were dropped on an uninhabited island. This frightening vision at once differentiates Golding's novel from Coral Island and other books of adventure. When the world of the grown-up and the children is set aflame putting a question mark on the future of mankind, any kind of adventure or exploration is rendered absurd. The implied irony is that when the adults are engaged in warfare and destroy cities and towns, how can one expect the children to establish a paradise on the island?

The boys had already learnt about wars, machine guns, bombs and so on, from the grown-up people before they were dropped on the island. Wars and other evils such as deception related to wars smashed the old facts and values and thus innocence was already gone. Memories of these evils remained with all the children.
Ironically, the boys on the deserted island are going to be rescued by a naval officer who represents British chauvinism. The arrival of the officer denotes that Piggy’s anticipation may be wrong, that the world of grown-ups is not yet extinct despite the atomic war and several plane crashes. But it is also evident that the world is not promoted to some better place. The naval officer is till proud of the British ways of life. He is unaware that the evil is already inside the boys, that evil remains in the mind of human being irrespective of nationality, that the wars were the outward eruptions of that evil. (MacCaffrey 23).

Thus Lord of the Flies is a critique of modern civilization. Golding’s view of civilization and the innate evil in heart of human being makes him a pessimist. But the flicker of optimism is revealed through Ralph who is concerned with the fundamental values of life. Ralph sensed that things are disintegrating and sanity is breaking up, and he tried in vain to put things in order. In fact, Golding believes that the world needs to be rebuilt. And the foundation of this rebuilding has to be a blending of system and human feelings.

1-8 The Theme of Sin and Expiation:
Lord of the Flies, allegorically, depicts the eternal theme of the conflict between evil and good, a conflict in which evil is the winner in the first round and then, the table is suddenly turned and good that still remains is saved; sin is also expiated. The children in the novel symbolize good or bad qualities, though they are at the same time capable of growth. From the beginning good and evil are demarcated. Simon is still full of human qualities in addition to intellectual and spiritual qualities. He brought good fruits for the littluns, supported Piggy and undertook difficult job for other’s benefit; again, he used logic to prove that Piggy had also contributed to making the fire by lending his glasses. His intuition told him that Ralph would survive and his spiritual quality is evident in his understanding that there is no beast outside and that evil lies in the mind of human beings. Simon is contrasted with Jack, Roger and Maurice who symbolize jealousy, eagerness for power and cruelty.

The wailing of Ralph for the end of innocence shows the theme of sin and expiation. He had earlier accepted the liability of being a party to Simon’s killing. He told Piggy that the figure that was killed might not be the beast they had witnessed on the mountain top, for the figure was much smaller. He also heard something uttered by the dying figure that seemed to tell something about a dead body on the mountain top but his voice was lost under the war cry of the hunters. The voice of goodness and of spiritual reality had been drowned by the mad cry of tumult, harshness and superstition when Lord Jesus was crucified. Later on the people had to expiate for their sin inherent in them in order to be saved.

Simon is the Christ figure in the novel. It is he who obtained the real knowledge — he found out that the supposed beast on the mountain top was nothing but the dead body of an airman tied to a parachute, and he also released the body, yet he did not get opportunity to communicate the knowledge to others. He was mercilessly killed by the hunters who were in frenzy and who were freed from logic and understanding. Critics almost accept the point that Simon’s death is sacrifice and he is the Christ figure. (Boyd 17).

In addition to Simon's sacrifice and the expiation of Ralph for his sin, there are other Christian elements in the novel, the most important of which are the image of the Garden of Eden and the fantasy of the Lord of the Flies’ scene. The island has all the features of the Garden of Eden. Golding in his novel implies that when a human being is surrounding by various kinds of comfort and luxury and without government and parental rules, it will lead to destruction and corruption. For that reason the boys on the island have begun to fool everything, they have even killed their friends. Not only this, they have chased the pig and cut its head and put it on a spear. The sow’s head on the stick, which is called lord of the flies, directly refers to Beelzebub who was also called Lord of the Flies.

The head of the pig was actually offered to the supposed beast (in fact, a dead air-man tied to a parachute) by Jack and the dripping head magnetized lots of flies around it and became literally a lord of flies. The fictitious conversation between Simon, the Christ figure, and the lord of the flies referring to Beelzebub allegorically presents the struggle between good and evil. First of all, Lord of the Flies entices Simon asking him to join the party of Jack and have fun. When Simon was not tempted, the Lord of the Flies intimidated him telling him that he would be killed by Jack and his party. Temptation and threatening are the two traditional ways used by forces of evil to defect good towards them; Satan inveigled Eve and her husband in the Garden of Eden and brought the downfall of human beings. Christ also met the devil in the desert. The scene that describes Simon’s meeting with the Lord of the Flies is like the scene in the Bible where Christ meets the devil in the desert. The saintly persons cannot be deceived; they are, therefore, threatened and even eventually murdered by the evil forces. Though all these references states the Christian theme, Golding’s approach to the problems of his age is clearly distinct from other Christian works. (Kinkead 25).

The religious dimension of the works of Golding— his preoccupation with the Biblical theme of the collapse of human being — has been noted by almost all the critics. For instance, John S. Whitley says that “Lord of the Flies is governed by the idea that the man is a fallen creature”. (Whitley 7) It cannot be rejected that Golding’s major preoccupation was the fall of man, and at the same time, he expresses his concern for the possible way out of this fallen condition through the development of human feelings. That is why he did not like to be described as a pessimist. He would rather like to be called a realist.
CONCLUSION
The novel *Lord of the Flies* is an allegorical novel which talks about the conflict between the impulse toward civilization and impulse toward savagery that rages within each human beings. It also concerns the breakdown of civilization as resulting from nothing more complex than the inherent evil of man.

*Lord of the Flies* is a novel to embody the meaning of rationalism and intellect, for example, Piggy in spite of his weak attitude and his weak eyes always try to convince his friend that he can achieve something for them by following their minds. Sometimes, we can see William Golding as a religious novelist in his writing as for example, in *Lord of the Flies*, Simon represents goodness and saintliness. This displays that Golding writes his first novel *Lord of the Flies* to deals with several prominent and important side of our life and the religious dimension.

REFERENCES

© 2015; AIZEON Publishers; All Rights Reserved
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.