

English B

Category 3- Literature

Title: The Role of Environmental Descriptions in William Golding's Lord of the Flies

Research Question: In what ways do William Golding's descriptions of natural elements in Lord of the Flies reflect and shape the boys' identities and behavior?

Word Count: 3882

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I. Introduction

In the novel *Lord of the Flies*, William Golding does not simply tell a story about a group of boys, he exposes what remains of human nature in the absence of civilization. The novel begins with a plane crash that leaves a group of boys isolated on a tropical island, away from adult authority. Initially, they attempt to establish the order they used to live in. Nevertheless, attempting to rebuild the rules of the society that they are familiar with results in violence and savagery.

Three boys stand out as key figures among the boys, Ralph, Jack, and Simon. Each characters' behavior corresponds to different features of human nature. Ralph, who was chosen as their leader, struggles to maintain order and cooperation although, he never loses hope that they will be rescued eventually. Jack, who used to be choir leader, gets obsessed with power. He, therefore, causes the inevitable savagery that the boys will fall into. Unlike the rest of the boys, Simon appears as a character that forms an almost instinctive bond with the nature. He generally wanders off in the forest where he seeks solitude.

To get a better understanding of the relationship between these characters, it is not enough to examine their actions separately. The author's language when describing the island must also be considered. The landscapes described in the novel carry symbolic meanings. Through the natural elements such as the forest and the lagoon, Golding suggests that the boys' surroundings do more than structure their experiences. These elements affect the choices they make and the way they act. Therefore, this analysis will focus on how Golding uses natural elements to show how the boys change throughout the novel.

Natural imagery has symbolic meanings outside of settings in literature (Barnhill, 2010). Early in the novel, the line "A kind of glamour was spread over them and the scene, and they were conscious of the glamour and made happy by it" highlights the boys' awakening to their

natural surroundings (Hanafy, 2008). The island here appears as almost enchanted, and the boys are excited to be there instead of being frightened. Yet this harmony will come to an end. The process until the boys lose that connection is actively formed by the descriptions of the island's landscapes. The island becomes a source of fear, instead of being welcoming, as the boys' characters alter. Singh (2021) denotes this change, by arguing how the island reflects the boys' collapse into savagery. Although, the island does not change physically, it shifts as the boys themselves start changing.

The values embodied by the three characters are tied to the environments in which they appear in. Ralph constantly appears in open areas such as the beach or the lagoon which are all places that emphasize visibility and hope. Jack, on the other hand, moves towards places with shadows and the wild parts of the forest, particularly at Castle Rock. Simon's space in the forest that he goes to whenever he feels the need to get away from the boys reveals a relationship where nature can offer comfort. Hence, Golding subtly associates Simon with spiritual awareness, Jack with savagery, and Ralph with civilization (Li & Wu, 2016).

Golding illustrates how environment influences and reflects the characters of Ralph, Jack and Simon by showing how they react differently to the island. Therefore, this essay investigates the following research question: **In what ways do William Golding's descriptions of natural elements in *Lord of the Flies* reflect and shape the boys' identities and behavior?** To carry out this research, the novel *Lord of the Flies* will be approached through a close textual analysis, focusing on natural imagery, descriptions and metaphors. The analysis is also supported by literary interpretations of specific natural elements to enrich the evaluation. Passages where descriptions of the sea, atmosphere, forest and lagoon intersect with the boys' behavior will be analyzed to show how nature shapes the boys' behavior. The analysis focuses on Simon, Ralph and Jack and how their interactions with nature reveal their identities and

shape their decisions throughout the book. Finally, a comparison will be done as it reveals how Golding uses the same environment to produce different psychological and moral responses.

II. Nature as a Reflection of Character

It would be inconsistent to treat the island as a neutral setting that the novel takes place at. Hence, Simon, Ralph, and Jack should be related alongside the descriptions of natural elements. Each boy forms a unique relationship with specific natural elements that mirror their behavior. Simon is associated with the glade and spiritual imagery, Ralph is associated with the lagoon and open spaces, Jack is associated with the wilderness of the island and Castle Rock. This repetition is intentional. Golding consistently aligns each character with a specific part of the island so that the setting correctly defines their identities. The island, then, acts as a factor that forms character.

a. Simon and the Glade

Simon's connection to the island is conveyed differently from the others. He appears as a spiritual character with moral clarity (Li & Wu, 2016) since Golding uses his character to reveal how human nature is linked to the environment, both influencing and being shaped by it (Singh, 2021). To do so, Golding constantly surrounds him with images of fragile life and light.

The glade, which is a hidden place in the forest that is surrounded by trees, appears as somewhere Simon wanders off to. This makes it ideal to relate it to his personality. The description of it begins with delicate imagery with "pale flowers all the way up to the dark canopy" (Golding, 1996, p. 71). The adjective "pale" suggests innocence, but it also means something that can easily be bruised, showing Simon's fragile nature. These flowers stretch upward toward light, visually separating this space from the darkness of the forest below. This contrast mirrors Simon's own distance from the chaos of the boys at the darker parts of the forest. However, this place is not fully peaceful. The creepers are compared to the "rigging of foundered ships," shivering at his touch (Golding, 1996, p. 71). The shipwreck simile introduces collapse and decay (Bridgeman, 2003), which unsettles the serenity created in the glade. Even

in Simon's space, there is a suggestion that the harmony with the nature is fragile. Similarly, "nothing moved but a pair of gaudy butterflies" (Golding, 1996, p. 72). On an island dominated by violence, Simon's space is almost unnaturally quiet. The butterflies' delicate movement contrast with the boys' brutality, as Simon adopts a different morality. The spiritual imagery continues with the candle buds that "opened their wide white flowers glimmering under the light" (Golding, 1996, p. 72). Their glow frames Simon in a soft light, just like a sacred figure (Hanafy, 2008).

Simon's tragic death, caused by the other boys on the island, begins with the description, "The air was cool, moist, and clear, and presently even the sound of the water was still." (Golding, 1996, p. 189). The calmness conveyed here is almost unsettling. As the rest of the world pause, his death is separated from the violence that caused it. This implies that this moment was more than just a catastrophe for the boys. When "the edge of the lagoon became a streak of phosphorescence" (Golding, 1996, p. 189), the luminous imagery that has been attached to him throughout the novel returns one last time, for his death. The glow does not take out the brutal meaning of his death but resembles the inevitability of death (Abrams & Harpham, 2015). This reinforces the idea that nature cannot stay in harmony for long when there is a chaotic environment surrounding it. The "moonbeam-bodied creatures with fiery eyes" helps ocean itself receive Simon's body, further separating him from the boys' violence (Li & Wu, 2016). The tide that smooths "everything with a layer of silver" introduces a feeling of purification to the scene. Silver, linked to the moon and ritual purity in ancient symbolism, enhances the scene's sanctified tone (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018).

Golding often presents the natural world as a "silent yet authoritative presence" (Singh, 2021) and here, it is used to show how nature welcomes Simon. However, the fact that this harmony does not protect him from death shows that moral awareness alone cannot survive in an environment dominated by chaos and violence.

b. Ralph and the Beach

Ralph's stands for order and rationality (Li & Wu, 2009). In the places associated with Ralph, horizon is visible, the air is clear, and the light is abundant which is a narrative choice that reveals his role as a figure of guidance. As Hanafy (2008) states, Ralph "achieves intimacy with nature" by observing its patterns. This intimacy is practical rather than spiritual since he measures his surroundings based on their safety.

When he dreams of the "coral island...Protected from the sun" (Golding, 1996, p. 20) Golding alludes to R.M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1857), a novel where the boys coexist peacefully with the environment. Ralph's longing for such well-organized society shows his commitment to preserve order within the boys. He wants the island to cooperate with his order. The phrase "protected from the sun" evokes enclosure and safety (Armstrong, 2025). Protection, thus, becomes the center of Ralph's leadership. This relationship with nature continues when Ralph's "nerve was relaxed for the return to the shelter" at the "still, friendly waters of the lagoon," (Golding, 1996, p.148). The lagoon being anthropomorphized as "friendly" presents the element as comforting. It becomes the reassurance that the boys themselves fail to offer. Even his language towards nature reveals his responsibility. "How could you be safe by the little stream or on the open beach?" (Golding, 1996, p. 225). His interrogative attitude shows that his concerns are about safety rather than the beauty of the beach. His perception of nature is inseparable from his feeling of responsibility for the boys' which shapes his leadership to be one that values the boys' safety.

Thus, Golding's descriptions of beach and the lagoon reveal Ralph's is inseparable from the island's protective parts. Nature becomes a stabilizing force that sustains his rationality and provides him with the reassurance he needs. However, as violence spreads, these protective spaces become vulnerable along with the destruction of Ralph's authority.

c. Jack and the Castle Rock

Jack's transformation on the island supports that humans are born innocent but are later corrupted by their environment and it aligns with J.J. Rousseau's philosophy (Singh, 2021). Golding shows this shift by the natural elements that surround him. He is frequently shown through images of darkness and shadows (Li & Wu, 2016). As his authority strengthens, so does his attachment to spaces that emphasize control. These associations become more evident at Castle Rock, which is the part of the island where Jack claims as his territory in the novel.

Jack specifically names his side of the island as Castle Rock, which turns that part of the forest into a literal place to rule the boys. Castles historically serve as the residence of rulers and the center of feudal authority (Wheatley, 2001), which is what Jack's position is to the boys. When he transforms a natural element to stand for his authority, it becomes evident that the boys are now led under an authority. "The log that was his throne" (Golding, 1996, p.185), supports this transformation. The log itself remains unchanged, yet the meaning given to it elevates a basic element of nature into something that shows his power.

His impact is not only seen in Castle Rock, but he also shapes the atmosphere around him. Evening comes "not with calm beauty but with the threat of violence" (Golding, 1996, p. 185). Instead of a slow and peaceful transition from day to night, the addition of "threat of violence" shows that this is not in fact calm. Similarly, the shape of his side of the island is described as a "bowstave" (Golding, 1996, p. 207), a weapon designed for hunting. This shows Jack's ability to turn everything to a weapon to support his violence. The "mass of twisted stems" (Golding, 1996, p. 214) at the inner parts of the forest supports his distortion. Stems traditionally support growth and vitality (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2025) but in this novel, they do not. Them being described as tangled, mirrors the internal conflicts Jack is facing. He is

leaning towards savagery more and more, which changes his moral to a point where it becomes entangled between violence and power.

Through these descriptions, the island no longer appears as a neutral setting once Jack takes control of it. The wilderness does not create his brutality; it becomes the place he expresses what was already within him. Golding uses Castle Rock and the surroundings as reflections of Jack's authority. As his obsession with power intensifies, the landscape is described with a harsher tone. Therefore, it is emphasized how character and environment are inseparable.

III. Contrasting Characters Through Natural Elements

While examining each character individually reveals how nature mirrors their identities, analyzing them through contrasts make Golding's choices of natural elements more meaningful. Golding keeps the landscape constant as the island. What changes is the meaning each boy brings out from the elements. By placing Ralph, Jack, and Simon within distinct sides of the same landscape, Golding allows their instincts to be exposed on the settings. Each character that are compared can be reduced down to an opposition of two values. Jack and Ralph are connected through different parts of the island and represent order versus savagery. Simon and Ralph are related through the same light but they have different meaning attached to it. Finally, Simon and Jack are both presented in the same place in the forest and shows how that space transforms under two different influences.

a. Jack versus Ralph

The comparison of Ralph and Jack reveals how Golding uses natural imagery to create the novel's central conflict. He compares their different leadership and the values they represent through distinct parts of the island. Ralph stays associated to open environments such as the sea and lagoon. However, Jack is linked to the wilderness and harsh sea.

Jack's side of the island is dominated by a harsh ocean, with a "hard, clipped blue horizon" and the "ceaseless, bulging passage of the deep sea waves," (Golding, 1996, p. 136). The adjectives "hard" and "clipped" being used with horizon, an endless and free line, shows how Jack asserts his dominance over the boys. The unstable imagery of the sea reinforces a sense of pressure, as if the environment itself refuses to stay still under his impact. Like the waves that "roar" over cliffs, his leadership relies on intimidation. Sea on his side appear with disorderly waves, just like the chaotic environment he thrives in. In contrast to this violent ocean, Ralph inhabits the side that is "defended by the shield of the quiet lagoon," (Golding, 1996, p.137). The word choice "shield" suggests that he requires protection from the chaos of the other boys and Jack. Moreover, the lagoon is described as calm and still instead of having harsh waves. This tone difference between "ceaseless" and "quiet" emphasizes the different leadership ideologies between Jack and Ralph.

This opposition becomes clear in how each boy interspersed the same sea. Ralph thinks that "one might dream of rescue" (Golding, 1996, p.137) and views the sea as a reminder of duty. He insists that "we've got to start the fire again". It reminds him the priority in his leadership, which is protecting the boys and focusing on their rescue. However, "Jack led them along by the suck and heave of the blinding sea," (Golding, 1996, p. 143). The verbs "suck" and "heave" indicate that there is a force trying to pull him away from the violence he is focused on. He views the sea as a distraction instead of a source of hope. Whenever Ralph enters Jack's side of the island, his feelings about the same natural elements shift drastically. At his side, Ralph feels "clamped down...helpless...condemned," (Golding, 1996, p.137). These adjectives create a repressive atmosphere. Jack dominates his own side of the island, not allowing the slightest representation of the values that Ralph stands for. This does not only happen for Ralph, though, since it is caused by Jack's dominant leadership style.

Through this comparison, Golding shows that the same natural elements can depict two entirely different views of authority. At Ralph's side, the sea appears calm and quiet. He seeks protection within the nature. Meanwhile for Jack, the sea is untamed with wild waves. His dominant authority is also embodied in the atmosphere of his side. Therefore, Golding illustrates how the boys' interactions with nature may either transform the people they lead into savagery or a civilization.

b. Simon versus Ralph

Although Golding regularly associates Simon and Ralph with natural light, he uses it to reveal their distinct personalities. When Simon is in contact with natural light, it appears as almost transcendent. In contrast, Ralph uses natural light as a guide.

When "the rays of sun that were fanning upward from below the horizon, swung downwards to eye level... and seemed to make speech possible." (Golding, 1996, p. 124), Ralph seeks for reassurance from the rays of sun. When he feels the sunlight, he is actually able to speak up and behave like a true leader. It gives him the confidence that he seeks but cannot get from the boys. Similarly, he notices the "sunlight in every patch blinking at him" (Golding, 1996, p. 243). Even though he is a realistic person, he needs encouragement to support his opinions as a leader. For him, that confidence is derived from the nature around him. However, there is a feeling of fragility hidden in this light. Just like his authority over the boys, it is flickering. The light feels comforting for a moment, but it is never permanent. His sensitivity to this detail also reflects his pragmatic side, where he pays attention to his surroundings.

Simon sustains a relationship with the same light on a different level than Ralph. In the glade, the "strange daylight" and the sensation that "what was real seemed illusive" (Golding, 1996, p. 170-171) puts him between the real and the imaginary. Instead of providing a feeling of clarity

and encouraging that Simon is doing the right thing just like it did with Ralph, light here behaves different. It creates a feeling that Simon is separated from reality, which makes him experience a dilemma between physical and spiritual world. This dilemma continues during the description of his death, "the sky was scattered once more with the incredible lamp of stars" (Golding, 1996, p. 189). The stars illuminate his fully detachment from the physical world.

Since Golding uses the same element to convey different reactions, the contrast between Ralph and Simon is subtle. Ralph uses light as an encouragement source. Simon represents a connection to the opposite, a vague place. Golding uses nature to show how the same element can affect the characters in different ways and how it can influence their actions.

c. Simon versus Jack

Simon and Jack enter the same place in the same forest, but how they are described are strikingly different. For Simon, the forest is a place where he goes to, to get away from the chaos. However, Jack brings that chaos right into the forest. Golding demonstrates how the environment can either be a moral clarity or moral collapse.

The glade is always described through natural elements such as "no shadows under the trees but everywhere a pearly stillness" (Golding, 1996, p.171) when Simon is present. The forest welcomes him, and the stillness adds a sense of tranquility. The tone of the natural imagery shifts when Jack enters the forest. The ferns are "thumped and beaten" (Golding, 1996, p. 236) with the hunters' movements. The verbs used for the plants become more violent to show that they lost their delicacy. Jack's behavior physically corrupts the space that Simon once considered sacred. The disturbance escalated with "a deep grumbling noise, as though the forest itself were angry," (Golding, 1996, p. 241). This implies that while Simon was accepted, the surroundings are opposing Jack's dominance. The chaos intensifies when "the roar of the forest rose to thunder and a tall bush directly in his path burst into a great fan-shaped flame" (Golding,

1996, p.245). The roar of the forest further converts nature into threat by aligning with Jack's actions. Fire ceases to be a signal for rescue and becomes weaponized for destruction. By starting the fire, Jack demolishes Simon's once solitary space showing how nature is turned into an extension of savagery.

Comparing the same environment in the presence of two different characters suggests that human nature can either be in harmony with the natural world or corrupt it. Only component that varies within the forest is the intention it is being approached to. The space frames Simon as an understanding and sacred character, meanwhile Jack is related to violence and destruction. Through this opposition, Golding suggests that nature only reflects the impulses that only lie within the characters.

IV. Conclusion

This essay has investigated how William Golding's descriptions of natural elements in *Lord of the Flies* reflect and shape the boys' development. Instead of functioning as a passive setting, the island gradually becomes a space that exposes how the boys change when they are isolated from civilization. It does not transform physically, yet the meaning gained from it shifts as the boys themselves change.

This becomes visible when their relationships with the island are considered comparatively. Simon, Jack, and Ralph's perceptions vary when they appear at the same settings. By comparing Ralph and Jack in separate sides of the island that are associated to them, different values in their leadership are revealed. Simon and Ralph are both associated with natural light. Simon uses this light as a spiritual connection although Ralph uses it as a form of guidance. Lastly, Simon and Jack are represented in the same area to show how different behaviors can either bring peace or corrupt the nature around them.

Viewed individually, each character's behavior can be associated with particular natural elements. Simon's connection to the glade in the forest suggests his ability to connect with nature on a level that the other boys cannot. However, his death shows that this kind of connection is fragile and cannot survive among the boys who are dominated by violence. Jack's relationship with nature develops in the opposite way. It gradually becomes more aggressive, as he uses the elements around him, especially in the Castle Rock, to assert his dominance. Ralph is associated with the lagoon and open spaces, which provide him with the guidance he requires to pursue his attempts to preserve order and cooperation. As the boys descend into savagery, these values gradually weaken.

Ultimately, *Lord of the Flies* presents nature not as a guiding force, but as a revealing one. The island is neutral, but it also reflects the behavior and actions of individuals. Even

though the island itself remains physically same, the boys' responses change which also changes the nature alongside. To respond to the research question, it becomes clear that Golding's descriptions of natural elements both reflect and shape identity.

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