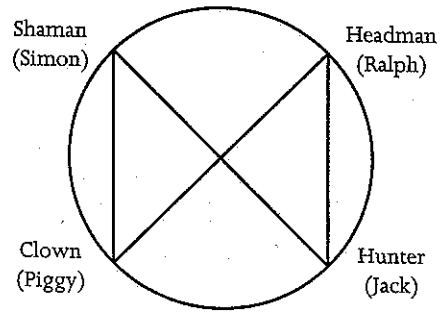
The Case for Strict Law and Order

Kathleen Woodward

Kathleen Woodward argues that *Lord of the Flies* presents a convincing case for democracy's strict enforcement of laws against violent behavior. Woodward uses *The Hunters*, a film about a primitive society, to clarify her argument. She shows that though Golding's primitive social group comprises essentially the same characters as the hunter society, it lacks conditions that bind individual members into a unified group capable of maintaining civil behavior. When Golding's schoolboys turn on one another with words and weapons, no authority or institutions stop them. Kathleen Woodward has researched myths, aging, and memory. She is the author of *At Last, The Real Distinguished Thing: The Late Poems of Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Williams.*

Aptly described as an anthropological passion play [by Bernard F. Dick], *Lord of the Flies* is an inquiry into the politics of cohesion and conflict which attempts to show how the social bond disintegrates and eventually explodes into war. Golding's acute differentiation of the social roles of the four major characters invites comparison with the four-member hunting team of a primitive tribe as it is portrayed in John Marshall's classic ethnographic[1] film *The Hunters* and analyzed by the cultural historian William Irwin Thompson. According to this research, a successful hunting team in a tribal community requires four men, each of whom play different roles but all of whom work closely together. . . .

In Thompson we find a form of nostalgia for the harmonious interdependence and structural stability of the primitive community symbolized by the hunting team. He implies that politically it is superior because it encourages (indeed, demands) the development of individual talent in an atmosphere of cooperation, not competition. Extreme division of labor is not institutionalized, information is shared equally, and the members of the team respect each other's skills. The four perform in a sophisticated and highly coordinated way as a set of complementary opposites, as mapped below with the corresponding characters from *Lord of the Flies*:



Left Side: Ideational[2] Right Side: Operational

- Ralph is the *Headman*, the leader who is the person best suited for the position but also the equal of the others. Once given the authority, he shows genuine leadership, learning to assess his limitations and to seek good counsel. As the plot progresses, his sense of responsibility and reality—that is, disillusionment—grows.
- Piggy is the *Clown*, the most intelligent of the four and the voice of common sense.
- Simon is the *Shaman*, whose religious sensibility and insight into the dark interior of man's nature are essential to the community. It is Simon who grasps both the literal and metaphorical meaning of the beast—the Beast from the Sea is a dead man who is feared, as we must fear our own potential for violence—and who tries to impart this to the others.
- Jack is the *Hunter*, intent, obsessive, skillful, and possessed of stamina.

Whereas Thompson views his model of the primitive community as utopian, Golding's fiction of the anthropological primal scene is pessimistic. The origins of human society, he implies, are rooted in conflict, because human nature

1. pertaining to the branch of anthropology that deals with the scientific development of specific human cultures

2. pertaining to the imagination

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is basically evil. The important point for us here is that while the spectrum of Golding's characterization corresponds to that portrayed in *The Hunters*, the *structuring* of their activity does not. What goes wrong? Must things break up? The problem is not that the psychological make-up of the four boys is deficient, that they each lack something essential. Rather, Golding's theory of the "essential illness" in human nature which existed from the beginning and which inevitably erupts in violence can be submitted to a structuralist critique. The point is that in *Lord of the Flies* the social bond did not exist from the start (nor is there any real reason for it to exist) and that Golding presents us with a completely unrealistic model of the origins of human politics. Furthermore, Golding does not so much show us how a state of peace under a rational form of government breaks down, as he shows us how the conceivably pleasant condition of anarchy disintegrates under the pressure of aggression.

Golding's Characters Fail According to Thompson's Model

Thompson's model is completely inverted. On Golding's coral island, none of the four central characters is allowed to play his role properly. Unlike the situation in *The Hunters*, the four members of the elite in *Lord of the Flies* basically do not respect each other, do not share information appropriately, and do not divide labor in a beneficial way. Under these conditions, we should not be surprised that tension grows increasingly corrosive. While Piggy's essential role as the Clown is to make fun of the others, thus deflating their arrogance, they ridicule him instead, feeling superior to his ludicrously fat body and his school-marmish, no-nonsense attitude. Even Ralph, who comes to value Piggy's intelligence, feels that "Piggy was a bore; his fat, his ass-mar and his matter-of-fact ideas were dull, but," he admits to himself, "there was always a little pleasure to be got out of pulling his leg, even if one did it by accident." This is more destructive than simple dislike; on the part of the older boys, it is pure prejudice, for it is Piggy's physical nature—his debilitating asthma, his near blindness without his thick glasses, his pale fat body—which they despise. If Piggy is detested as an outsider, somebody who is "different," Simon is not esteemed for his mystical gifts. The role of the Shaman is to work magic when necessary, but Simon's vision into the

meaning of things, which is quite accurate, is ignored. Worse, he is killed in the process of trying to reveal just what he does understand, and it is precisely his knowledge which would have delivered them from an unreasoning fear. He is misperceived as the Beast itself. Jack, the Hunter, hunts alone or only with his hunters (whom he completely dominates in a political hierarchy which he establishes) rather than with an interdisciplinary team, and thus inverts the process of hunting for the sake of survival to that of hunting to murder one of his own kind. And the Headman, Ralph, finds his leadership challenged from the very beginning. In addition, he makes several critical errors in judgment. He is wrong to delegate the responsibility for maintaining the fire to Jack and his hunters, and he is wrong to leave Piggy behind in the very beginning after the three of them decide to go off and explore the island. . . .

Golding's Society Lacks Key Ingredients

If Golding's fable is brilliant in what it includes—his characterization is remarkably discerning—it is also ruthless in what it excludes. As a microcosm of the world at large, it self-consciously eliminates crucial aspects of society which create tension but, more importantly, provide purpose and generate binding social structures in the process.

First, Golding dismisses the basic problem of scarcity, which necessitates the organization of work. Fruit and fresh water are abundant, and the climate is tropical. The island is a leisure world where habits of discipline are superfluous. While the younger children play at the sea's edge, the older children play at being grown up. Voting and the right to free speech, the paraphernalia of democracy, are toys to them. The kids have only one urgent task—to keep the rescue fire going—and even this they are incapable of doing, for with few exceptions, their sense of the future gives way to instant gratification. Essentially they are playing a waiting game, and they invent dangerous games to pass the time.

Perhaps even more significant than Golding's bracketing of the problem of scarcity is his choice of a homogeneous group of middle-class white children, all of whom are boys, as a representative cross-section of society. There is no racial tension, no sexual tension, no tension of cultural difference. By populating his story with young boys only, all twelve and under, Golding removes the fundamental adhe-

sive of society—the family. There are no kinship structures whatsoever, no bonds of love or even close friendship among these boys. It is tragically ironic that none of the boys are related by blood—and are eventually polarized by the desire to shed it. Thus the "society" which Golding portrays is *not* a society, but rather a collection of people. It has no objective (other than to prepare its own rescue, and not everyone agrees to that). It cannot even reproduce itself. It is small wonder that it turns pathological.[3]

But this was not Golding's purpose. He intended to show that violence in society arises out of man's very nature, his instincts. Firmly believing that violence is congenital,[4] "the terrible disease of being human" and not the result of faulty social organization, Golding makes no apologies for the parameters of his fiction. . . .

A World in Miniature

In this excerpt, Bernard F. Dick argues that Golding's exclusive use of children as characters in his novel limits exploration into the problem of evil.

Isolating the moral dichotomy in a group of boys invariably robs the work of any tragic stature it might possess. When children revert to bestiality, one can only say, "the horror, the horror." There is no catharsis because there is no poetry or tragic flaw; children are incapable of either. There is no real understanding of the evil that has erupted because children are too immature to associate cause with effect; Ralph may experience an undefined glimpse into "the darkness of man's heart" (and here again Golding is looking at Ralph as if he were an adult, giving him the tragic awareness of a hero); but, as a twelve-year-old, he cannot raise this new-found knowledge into a cosmic vision. Golding himself is not at fault here; given such a theme, one cannot imagine a better treatment. The island setting further simplifies the action, reducing it to a microcosm, or perhaps even a geocosm. The work is small-scaled in both setting and character, but it reproduces man and his world in miniature.

But what does Golding mean when he says violence arises "simply and solely out of the nature of the brute"? In

3. departure or deviation from a normal condition; sick 4. existing at or before birth; inherent

part, Golding has misread the moral of his own fiction. The moral of the story, he has said, is that "the shape of society must depend on the ethical nature of the individual and not on any political system." First, on the contrary, *Lord of the Flies* dramatizes, with power, how a society—like our own, not like a tribal community—can degenerate into lawlessness when there seems to be no apparent need to work with each other, no kinship ties binding people together, and no long-range social purpose but instead an emphasis on immediate satisfaction. Affluence, as we have seen, brings its own dangers. And secondly, it is more accurate, I think, to read *Lord of the Flies* as an argument for strict law and order within the democratic system rather than as a resigned plea that the shape of society depends on the upstanding ethical nature of a few individuals. . . .

The boys bring with them the knowledge of a democratic form of government, as they do a taste for violence. The conflict, which Golding so superbly articulates, is between the order of democratically arrived at rules and the expression of aggressive instincts. There is no question that to Golding's mind democracy is the preferred form of government. He presents it as humane and wise, as infinitely preferable to the insanities of an authoritarian regime. Piggy, the spectacle-wearing intellectual, puts it neatly, and there must be no hesitation on our part about the answer: "'Which is better—to have rules and agree, or to hunt and kill? . . . Which is better, law and rescue, or hunting and breaking things up?'" In Golding's fable, furthermore, the electorate, uninformed as it is, makes the best choice after all.

But what if Roger had been elected chief? Or Jack?

Lord of the Flies Argues for Stricter Rules

Golding's view of a democratic form of government is itself naive and innocent. It is clear to us that, unjust as it is, democracy in its "pure" form is not hardy enough to contain aggression. The moral to be drawn from the story is that the sweet persuasions of democracy must be sharpened by force. When Ralph asks Piggy midway through the narrative, "'What makes things break up like they do?'" Piggy's response is deadly accurate. "'I expect it's him,'" he answers, "'Jack.'" Although Golding suggests that everyone has the potential for letting blood—all of the children participate in the killing of Simon—Jack has a greater lust for it than the

others. His regime is built on repression and violence. It cannot be combatted with the peaceful measures of democracy. Reason, indignation, and self-assertion, all of which Ralph try, will not work. Near the end of the story when Ralph goes up the mountain to demand Piggy's spectacles and to urge Jack and his band to help maintain the rescue fire, we know Ralph is being naive. He goes unarmed, underestimating the pathology of power.

Nor will the politics of isolation work. Piggy, Ralph, and the twins Sam and Eric try to hold down "civilization" and look after the little ones on the beach, but they are raided by Jack and his hunters, who have established a fort above them. The analogy to this is civil conflict or international war. One must fight back. Aggression requires aggression. But this Ralph never quite realizes. His form of government is constantly on the defensive, and thus he allows the situation to skid out of control. Ralph experiences a growth in moral consciousness—and this makes him sympathetic to us—but not a honing of his sense of *realpolitik*.[5] A curtain flaps sporadically in his brain, as his hold on reality goes dumb and he loses the power of speech.

The only way that the *force* of reason can prevail is to smash Jack's political machine, which involves us in an unpleasant contradiction that Golding does not face (England was forced to go to war against Hitler, and Golding would certainly agree that such action was required). Thus, on Golding's coral island, it is not that the shape of society must depend on the ethical nature of the individual but that the ethics of the democratic system must be bent in order to perpetuate that system. Institutions of discipline and punishment must be erected. In the course of the narrative Jack turns into a Charles Manson or an Idi Amin who should be hunted down as a public enemy, assassinated by a CIA, or incarcerated in a penal colony. At one point, during a meeting, Ralph shouts in exasperation to Jack, "'You're breaking the rules!'" Jack responds, "'Who cares?'" And Ralph can only answer, "'Because the rules are the only thing we've got!'" He's right, but the problem is that there are not *enough* rules: a system of rules is necessary for when the rules are broken.

Those rules come from the adult world, which is absent. Without them and the power to enforce them, incipient

5. practical politics having advancement of the national interest as its sole principle

democracy breaks down. Jack, the leader of the hunters, is the first to draw a knife to slice into animal flesh, but initially something holds him back—"the unbearable blood." This inhibition, this taboo, this remnant of custom, quickly fades. The second time around, Jack kills the pig with ease, with, in fact, triumphant abandon. "'You should have seen the blood!'" he exclaims. . . .

Ralph and Piggy, the two characters who steadfastly support democracy and refer to their upbringing in England positively, believe that the adult world provides appropriate models of behavior, and though they are partly naive about this too, they are basically right. Ralph's standard is "the memory of his sometime clean self." He invents a kind of fairy tale about adults *for* children, daydreaming of the cottage on the moor where he lived with his parents before he was sent away to school: there were wild ponies, cornflakes with cream and sugar, and good books to read. What sustained this "utopian" middle-class environment was discipline and English tradition, as well as love. "'Grownups know things,'" Piggy remarks elsewhere. "'They ain't afraid of the dark. They'd meet and have tea and discuss. Then things would be alright.'" It's possible. Realism and maturity might help one to see clearly, diplomacy might work. And we add, if they don't, institutions of punishment exist to repress undesirable behavior. It is in this sense that the political implications of *Lord of the Flies* are conservative, as they always are when someone believes that human nature is basically evil. Given the story, we are forced to conclude that law and order are the prime political issues and that it is better to impose and accept tradition than ever allow the rules to go slack.