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The social construction of childhood: explored with reference to Lord of the Flies by William Golding (1954)

Arguably throughout history, there have been several changes to children's treatment, education and the way they are viewed in society based on their social class, appearance, innocence, and maturity. The earliest view saw children as workers and it is stated 'children of 9-13 years' were to work 'no more than nine hours a day' (The National Archives, 2019). Sociological perspectives of children resemble this as children were viewed 'as 'a future adult' and not a 'young human being' (Uprichard, 2008, p.304). This perspective believes that institutions and social contexts such as families and schools are fundamental in shaping children's experiences.

James and Prout explored Aries (1962) research of childhood where he documented how young children in medieval society were viewed through a utilitarian lens and therefore, they 'did not exist' in the terms of a child and instead acted 'just as adults did' from as soon as they could walk (Ariès, 1996, p.128).

In modern society, it is socially unacceptable for a 9-year-old to work and so children have evolved into innocent beings in need of nurturing and educating. This was largely due to the insufficient understanding of 'children's needs' in the past understood in modern society as 'Personal, social and emotional development' (Department for Education, 2021). Modern day institutions also recognise children for their specific needs that allow them to thrive and it is mandatory according to the EYFS, that adults understand 'every child is a unique child' (DfE, 2025).

Lord of the Flies published in 1954, is written on Golding's perception of WW2 using his experiences as a veteran. This was done through the eyes of a group of British boys stranded on a deserted island, who become animalistic and 'murderous' to survive. Golding looks at 'humanity's inherent capacity for evil' (Kuiper, 2023) seen through Jack. The romantic discourses of childhood are mostly criticised by Golding who believes children go through puritanical discourses and are born evil however, this statement is contradicted by the character Piggy and his innocence.

During this essay, the socially constructed nature of childhood will be explored with references to William Goldings Lord of the Flies (1954). The romantic and puritanical discourses of childhood will be understood using ideas from Philippe Aries, Lord Shaftsbury, and Mary Carpenter. It will then understand how Goldings's book reflects his ideas of children and explore his interpretation of war and 'humanity's capacity for good and evil' (Ireland, 2017, p.27).

Children in the 17th century were seen as evil beings full of sin, this idea relates to the puritanical discourse of childhood where 'Puritans held a negative view of the child' (Ringlee and Whitaker, 1996. p.6). This caused radical Puritans to believe children 'required re-forming' mentally and physically in order to become 'fully human' evident with the belief a 'crawling baby was a reminder of sinful man's bestial origins' (Ringlee and Whitaker, 1996, p.8). According to Puritans children needed to be able to stand up to prove they were humans and not sinful beasts. This view of children being evil was also held by St Augustine who in his theodicy state due to Adam and Eve's disobedience people are punished with original sin and therefore 'we are all born sinful beings' that 'deserve this punishment' (Livingstone, 2022).

This puritanical view of children began to shift more towards utilitarian views when children began to be looked at as 'miniature adults' (James and Prout, 2015, p.16) and were made to work 'to supplement family incomes' (UK Parliament, 2019). This is evident by the fact 'young children worked extremely long hours and could be severely punished for any mistakes' (The National Archives, 2019).

This change began during the mid 18th century and lasted until the 19th century. During this time children were only seen for their potential as adults who successfully 'participated in society' rather than seen as children who need adult support (James, 2017, p.12) as people held high importance for what 'the child will be rather than that which the child is' (Uprichard, 2008, p.304). During this there was no care for children's safety or hygiene as if a child fell asleep at machinery it 'could result in the accidental loss of a limb' (The National Archives, 2019) and there was no means to prevent this.

However, 'during the middle of the nineteenth century' (Power, 2021, p.1) there was another significant shift of the view of children as they were now seen under a romantic lens of childhood and were recognised as children and not small adults. The introduction of the 'Elementary Education Act of 1870' (Power, 2021, p.1) was the first legislation to recognise the importance of children in education and this significantly shifted their lives. Children's work hours were reduced, and schooling was changed with the introduction of 'the expansion of the availability of schooling, compulsion, and the age range of pupils and leaving times' as stated by (Yeandle, 2016, p.VIII).

Two most predominate figures in changing schooling for children are Lord Shaftsbury and Mary Carpenter who transformed the view on childhood from the introduction of reformatory and ragged schools.

Lord Shaftsbury, a humanitarian 'enabled about '300,000 destitute children to be educated' (Britannica, 2019) and created a Legislation that placed children out of work allowing more time for education, however only the rich were able to afford this formal schooling. Shaftsbury believed 'faith should shape and transform society' for the good of people and through this he saw children labour as 'Satanic' (Turnbull, 2022). Shaftsbury was able to define childhood as a period in need of protection from the law and through this the state began to recognise children were 'more than miniature units of economic production' (Hislop, 2010).

Mary Carpenter was a 'founder of free schools for poor children' (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2025). Creating 'ragged schooling' to solve the problem of expensive formal schooling she also created legislations such as the 1854 Youthful Offenders Act (Napier, 2016) which protected children from being sent to prison and instead they were sent to a 'Reformatory School' (Gillard, 1854, p.320). Most of the pupils that joined the school would have belonged to gangs and often ran riots, these can be seen in children's books of the time and a fundamental example of this is the artful dodgers in Oliver twist who committed crimes, like pickpocketing, to survive. The schools were run by volunteers who would aid the children in their maths and English. The girls were taught 'sewing' and boys learnt 'shoemaking and tailoring' (Carpenter, 2023, p.166).

Children in this school were not treated like prisoners and instead were shown love inside a 'healthy moral atmosphere.' It was made certain 'no corporal punishment, or holding up to public shame or ridicule, was to be made use of' (Carpenter, 2023, p.160-161). This reduced the number of hours children worked and diminished children being viewed through a puritanical lens, this view aligns with the romantic discourse of childhood most commonly seen in the present day. During the 19s school attitudes had transformed completely with more care for children's needs as children would have 'routine eye and hearing tests' (Castelow, 2015).

Children in the present day must be nurtured, safe and it is mandatory they are in education as the 1870 Education Act made 'school attendance compulsory' (UK Parliament, 1870) for children ages 5 to 10 years old. Children must be taught Maths, Science and English as stated in the EYFS 'All children deserve high-quality early education and care' (Department for Education, 2025, p.12). As this allows children to gain skills fundamental for them to live in society such as fine and gross motor skills, for walking and writing.

This modern-day view of children is Romantic and sees them as people who need adult care, nurturing and education evident in the fact education was made compulsory 'in order to stop child labour' (UK Parliament, 1870) However, during the Victorian era, the romantic discourse was understood as children 'Embodying innocence' and having qualities such as 'an unmitigated capacity for wonder and joy' (Rovee, 2005).

Philippe Aries argued "that with the concept of childhood came a theory of the innocence of the child" (Smidt, 2013), this idea is links to the romantic discourse of

childhood where children according to Jacques Rousseau are 'weak and easily tempted' (Lang, 2020). Rousseau's view contrasts St. Augustine as he does not believe children are born evil and instead, they are 'born pure until one's interactions with the environment caused negative effects' (Lang, 2020).

Aries view of children came from his research of 'journals, letters and literature' (Shulamith Shahar, 1992, p.4) however, he is criticised by Shulamith Shahar (1992) for his lack of evidence and the limited recourses he used, such as children's journals, as it is said that 'the journals of children are an important but problematic source' due to the fact 'they were written with the knowledge that parents would read them' (Shulamith Shahar, 1992, p.5) therefore the ideas Aries held about children are not fully factual and the full understanding of children's lives may not be understood, due to the setting that altered the truth.

Lord of the flies has strong references to the puritanical discourses of childhood, where children are seen as evil because of original sin, as 'the soul was stained by sin even at birth' (Spencer, 2018). This understanding of sin and evil caused people to see 'that the child was close to an animal' stated by Darren Howard cited in (Spencer, 2018) and they were not viewed as innocent.

William Golding questioned 'if evil was within?' (Ireland, 2017) or if it was gained due to personal experiences and this is shown through Jacks bloodlust and need to cook a pig which he and his 'hunters' (Golding, 1954, p.72) succeed in doing. This murder shifts the dynamic of the book from the romantic discourses primarily seen in children to puritanical as the boys successfully become savages and remain

violent throughout the book. It can be argued jack is no longer seen as innocent after the murder despite initially being seen this way.

This statement juxtaposes the innocence seen on the island with Piggy and Ralph, this relates to the romantic discourses of childhood as they are both 'amused' by the 'farting noise' that came out of the conch shell causing them to have 'bouts of laughter' (Golding, 1954, p.12). This shows their innocence and childlike nature as they have not yet been changed by Jacks demanding mannerisms and enjoy each other's company.

Piggy is an innocent character holding characteristics seen in the romantic discourse of childhood, this discourse ensures children are brought up in society avoiding cruelty and harm. Jacques Rousseau states it also includes children being 'inherently innocent' (Lang, 2020a), this inherent innocent is seen in Piggy as he mistakes Ralphs 'smile and misinterpreted it as friendliness' (Golding, 1954, p.68). Piggy nurtures the 'littluns' when they are scared about the beast as he says 'I know there isn't no beast – not with claws' (Golding, 1954, p.90) and this gives them a sense of reassurance. This show that the children are not fully comfortable without adult reassurance despite being initially excited about the idea 'there aren't any grown-ups' (Golding, 1954, p.31). Through this Golding supports the idea of the romantic discourses as he sees children needing adults to thrive, to an extent, as this need for adults is not explicitly seen in Jack as he states his demanding authority 'I'm going to be chief' (Golding, 1954, p.146) showing that he is comfortable.

Piggy has the affective presence to make the group feel comfortable because when 'Piggy once more was the centre of social derision' 'everyone felt cheerful and

normal' (Golding, 1954, p.165). However, Piggy's character juxtaposes Jacks who displays the key theme of loss of innocence as he shouts unsympathetic remarks to the 'littluns' when they state they are frightened of the beast 'serve you right if something did get you, you useless lot of cry-babies' (Golding, 1954, p.88).

The book was heavily influenced by William Goldings experience of World War 2 (Presley, 2024) due to the fact it is an allegorical novel (Kuiper, 2023). Golding witnessed the 'violence and cruelty' of war, and this made him 'ponder the origins of violence' (Ireland, 2017, p.27) he believed people could be capable of evil things and this made him 'question the roles of good and evil in the world' (Ireland, 2017, p.31) and this can be seen through the reflection of influential people during the war.

The most predominated example is Jacks egotistical similarities to Hitler who was responsible for the Jews being subject 'to the most cruel and brutal persecution' and ensured they were 'mistreated' (Fay, 1933, p.295) through his 'systematic mass murder of Europe's Jews' (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2024). Hitler did this because he heavily was influenced by Karl Lueger who followed antisemitism (Smilde, 2018). Hitler saw him as having 'the true stamp of administrative genius' (Adolf Hitler, 1925, p.70).

Hitler was responsible for 'fomenting the murder of tens of millions of his fellows' (FANN, 1998) and like Hitler, Jack is responsible for murder. Simons brutal death is a result of jack chanting "Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood! Do him in!," this is the same chant he chants after killing the pig which he 'proudly' boasts to Ralph about saying, 'I cut the pig's throat' then emphasises the death saying, 'There was lashings of blood' (Golding, 1954, p.73). This demonstrates how he no longer views

Simon as a human but more like an animal who is weak, which is similar to how they view Piggy. However, the hunters also display animalistic behaviours shown through the way they kill Simon as they "leapt on to the beast, screamed, struck, bit, tore' into his body which is then 'moved on towards the open sea' (Golding, 1954, p.170) showcasing their violent nature and it can be argued this is the zenith of the boys decent into savagery.

Jack and Hitler both took advantage of the power they had as Jack creates an authoritarian system and 'was loud and active. He gave orders, sang, whistled, threw remarks at the silent' (Golding, 1954, p.77). Hitler's manipulative public speaking led him to leadership and through this he was able to increase his crowd and raise fears of a communist uprising this meant during WW2 'thousands of law-abiding and innocent Jews' were deprived 'of their rights' due to Hitlers attitudes towards Jews.

It can be argued Piggy has been treated the same way as the Jews as they are both targeted for being different. Hitler stated that when he saw Jews 'they stood out as a different people from the other citizens' (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2024). Piggy is said to be 'an outsider' because of his 'fat, and ass-mar and specs and a certain disinclination for manual labour.' He was also living with his auntie which places Piggy in a lower social status than the others seen in his mannerisms and his posh-sounding pronunciation of asthma as 'ass-mar' (Golding, 1954, p.3)

This can be linked back to the ideas Golding held as he believed 'that only "certain social sanctions" or "social prohibitions" separated the Allies from the Nazis (Gindin

4-5; Reiff 29 cited in Ireland, 2017, p.31-32). These ideas relate back to Piggy as he is separated from the group for his 'fat', this fat appearance makes him subject to heavy bullying 'his real name is piggy' (Golding, 1954, p.17) and 'Shut up fatty' (Golding, 1954, p.17) are both comments directed towards his appearance that make him inferior to the rest of the group.

This inferiority goes further as he is portrayed as weak and vulnerable due to his asthma which makes it difficult for him to run like the other boys, this also make him subject to bullying as in page 8 the boy's shout 'Sucks to your ass-mar!'. However, he is the smartest boy in the group as he was able to find the conch shell which becomes an important symbol of legitimate authority and power (Gülden Ertuğrul, 2024, p.55) shown when Jack spoke without holding the 'conch and thus spoke against the rules' (Golding, 1954, p.94). Piggy uses his reasoning to help Ralph seen when he attempts to pull Ralph away from the crowd when Jack announces the idea of a tribe "come away. Theres going to be trouble" (Golding, 1954, p.167) and this shows his change from childness to maturity and shows how Golding sees children as both innocent and sinful.

In conclusion, this essay has reflected the major changes of the socially constructed nature of childhood looking at significant points in history that support these changes. It then reflected William Goldings Lord of the flies while understanding the romantic and puritanical discourses of childhood.

During the middle ages it is evident that children were viewed as evil and animalistic, which is puritanical view of children, this belief was held due to the lack of empirical evidence needed to understand children and their attitudes, which are nested in modern understandings of childhood as children were not viewed innocent

and therefore were neglected. According to Heywood children needed special treatment, 'a sort of quarantine', before they could join the world of adults (Heywood, 2017, p.11). This is the dominate discourse of childhood in ‘Lord of the flies’ (Golding, 1954) and is an example of how adults during the 19th century viewed children.

This puritanical view shifted towards utilitarian when children acted as 'miniature adults’ (James and Prout, 2015, p.16) and were forced to work long hours. This once again reflects the lack of care for children's needs as they worked to benefit the lives of others. It can be argued children still work during school times however, this solely benefits the child and not the community.

Lastly, children began to be viewed through a romantic lens of childhood where they were labelled as ‘Embodying innocence’ (Rovee, 2005) and needed the upmost care. This outlook significantly shifted children's lives and it changed the way wider societies viewed children, this is evident with the several legislations put in place to protect children including the EYFS statutory framework which states its mandatory ‘children learn and develop well and are kept healthy and safe’ (Department for Education, 2025, p.7) and The Children Act 1989 which states ‘children deserve the best experiences in life’ (Gov.uk, 2021, p.8). These laws place children firmly into the romantic discourse of childhood where they are protected in all settings.

In Lord of the flies the children are seen as animals and not innocent when they kill the pig and Simon. This juxtaposes the romantic view of children reflected in Piggy. This was intentional as the book reflects Goldings experiences during the war, where he began to see ‘humanity’s inherent capacity for evil’ (Kuiper, 2023). This shows

how the view of children continues to change as Golding captures both the innocent and sinful nature of childhood.

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