

# An Analysis of the Main Character in Desert Island Literature under the Trauma Theory: Taking *Lord of the Flies* as an Example

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## Abstract:

Under the lens of Trauma Theory, this thesis dissects the traumatic experiences and coping mechanism of the main character-Ralph in William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies* under hostile desert island environments, revealing the alienation of human nature and its disruptive impact on social order caused by extreme environment. Notably, character's trauma mirrors collective moral collapse in extreme environments, exposing the fragility and vulnerability of civilization. Such traumatic experiences without social support will ultimately exacerbate the disorder between individuals and collectives, threatening the stability of social structures. The traumatic narrative of desert island literature provided the literary revelation for understanding the balance between humanity and civilization, advocating for constructing inclusive social environments to facilitate trauma healing and sustain civilized continuity.

## Keywords:

*Lord of the Flies*, Trauma Theory, Desert Island Literature

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. William Golding and *Lord of the Flies*

William Golding (1911-1993) was a famous British novelist playwright and poet with extraordinary energy and beauty. His naval service during World War II profoundly shaped his literary perspective, intensifying his attention on darkness and violence in human nature. *Lord of the Flies* explores themes of existence, mortality, human depravity, and individual redemption. The clear violence and atrocity of human beings are exposed in this novel.

This thesis adopted the trauma theory to dissect the psychological and behavioral progress of Ralph, revealing the diverse coping mechanisms of this character. Therefore, this study aims to uncover the psychological impact of the desert island environment, analyze the character's trauma responses, coping and recovery

mechanisms, and what's more important is to discuss the vulnerability of humanity in border perspective, emphasizing the importance of societal care for traumatic experiences.

## 2. Literature Review

William Golding occupies important status in the literary history of humanity. He establishes his reputation shortly after his novels are published. Critics start to comment on his works since the publishing of *Lord of the Flies*.

### 2.1. Studies Abroad

Since the publication of *Lord of the Flies*, it has been embraced by critics for its innovative writing techniques and variety of themes.

The first impression of this novel is the theme of evil. E. C. Bufkin [1] insisted that the novel is about evil; and it recounts a quest for order amongst the disorder that evil triggers. Meanwhile, the environment of desert island is a vital element that arouses evil. The discussion of the connection between the *Lord of the Flies* and the perspective of environment is one unique focal point of this novel. Dell Brand and Mark Smith [2] believed the novel to be a cautionary tale for environmental education, emphasizing how isolation disrupts human-nature harmony and exposes ecological fragility.

Negative education environment breeds the cruelty of the struggle. R. Henry and L. Disney [3] emphasized the intensity and brutality of the power struggle descent boys into savagery, ultimately leading to social chaos and collapse. Naylor Amanda [4] dug out this to critique the erosion of social contracts and moral frameworks under stress.

The power struggle and the changes of social structure unavoidably would shift to the analysis of the characters. From the perspective of Freudian psychoanalysis, Muna A. S. Gash out [5] employed Freudian psychoanalysis to connect characters' behavioral deviation with modern societal anxieties, using the island as a microcosm of psychological trauma.

Mahmoud A. Al. Sobh [6] used symbolism to conclude that writers aim to construct different symbols through complex personal relationships. The tension between the two groups constitutes the main conflict of the story, reflecting the tug of war between rules and freedom in the heart. It reflects the irrational fear and rejection tendency in group psychology.

These studies collectively underscore the novel's multidimensional exploration of human darkness, societal fragility, and psychological complexity, laying groundwork for further trauma-centric analyses. Traumatic events are also the vital factors that pulling the strings towards the characteristics shift. The moral themes in this text sparked this exploration of ethical components and the dynamics between individuals.

### 2.2. Studies at Home

Critics in China have mostly analyzed William Golding and *Lord of the Flies* from different perspectives; Domestic research focuses more on the analysis of the novel from the perspective of psychology, character, Freudian personality theory, symbolism and evil in humanity.

In terms of Freud's psychoanalysis, Huang Yu and Han Qianlan [7] made an in-depth analysis of *Lord of the Flies*, revealing the disintegration of civilized societies and the formation of criminal societies by analyzing the four conflicts between Ralph and Jack.

In addition to the analysis of the thematic perspective in the novel *Lord of the Flies*, Li Yang's thesis [8] mainly analyzed the structure of the human's repressed emotions and natural instincts: The dark side of human nature and conflict between evil and good of human. Tong Liling and Zhang Juan [9] further applied Freud's theory to analyze the loss of civilized order, revealing the vulnerability of human civilization in the face of barbarism. She argued that repressed instincts ultimately overpower rationality. Zhang Qianyu's thesis [10] interpreted the power struggle between Ralph and Jack as a microcosm of Hobbes' political philosophy, as well as the conflict between human nature, political system and civilization, criticizing the totalitarianism and advocating for peaceful coexistence. Liu Chang [11] analyzed the battle between civilization and humanity in *Lord of the Flies* to explore the significance of the theme, reflecting humanity's moral degradation.

*Lord of the Flies* was written in the context of the post WWII, so most dissertations analyze the existence of humans in the novel. Zhang Guifang [12] focuses on the topic of existence of humans, especially the meaning of existence of humans after WWII.

Both domestic and foreign studies have noticed the core theme of *Lord of the Flies*—evil. However, a small number of researchers have thoroughly dig out the one specific cause, which is trauma faced by the characters, which trigger the internal evil of humanity. Therefore, this thesis will provide the analysis of the characters through the lens of trauma theory, better coping with the trauma in daily experience and providing a new perspective of analyzing the desert literature.

### 3. Trauma Theory and Trauma Recovery

Trauma is composed of physical wounds and psychological injuries, with modern definition emphasizing lasting psychological impacts from traumatic events. In Freud's opinion [13], these traumatic events can be effectively influencing our capacity of the mind. Cathy Caruth [14] introduced the concept of "trauma theory" in the early 1990s, defining trauma as an individual's profound encounter with a sudden or catastrophic incident.

The Key components include:

(1) Traumatic event (Traumatic Event): Life-threatening incidents (e.g., war, violence).

(2) Post-traumatic reaction (Trauma Response): a series of psychological and physiological reactions (e.g., fear, avoidance).

(3) Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): Common posttraumatic psychological disorder, including flashbacks, avoidance, negative emotions, and emotional disorders.

(4) Coping strategies (Coping Strategies): various psychological and behavioral coping methods adopted by individuals in the face of traumatic events.

(5) Stress adaptation model (Stress Adaptation Model): Individuals gradually adapt and recover after experiencing a traumatic event, including factors such as crisis intervention, psychotherapy and social support.

Trauma recovery occupies an important status in trauma theory. Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* [15] highlighted the recovery as a phased process: being shocked, establishing safety, confronting trauma, and reintegrating into society. Her theory underscores the trauma's societal impact and need for support systems. Overall, trauma theory has developed to encompass a broad range of psychological and societal effects, influencing fields beyond psychology, including literature and cultural studies.

Trauma theory examines psychological impacts of extreme events, while desert island literature uses isolation to expose human vulnerability. Both explore how survival pressures trigger primal instincts and societal collapse. By integrating trauma theory and desert island literature, revelation is achieved in understanding the balance between humanity and civilization.

#### **4. Trauma in Lord of the Flies**

Trauma is one key factor in *Lord of the Flies* stringing the plots. Underscoring the overall trauma in the novel is crucial to analyzing individual character's trauma. Lord of the Flies, the perspective of children as the protagonists once again reproduces the cruelty and absurdity of real life. Overall trauma in the novel can be concluded in the following aspect:

##### **4.1. Desert Island Environment to Psychology**

Isolation is a major factor that causes psychological trauma to these juveniles. Loneliness and helplessness: Isolated on a desert island, boys lose their way of contact with the outside world and become the only social resources between each other. However, this loneliness does not bring comfort but increases their sense of loneliness and helplessness. They realize that they have no one else to rely on, no outside support and comfort, and this loneliness deeply affects their psychological state.

“‘There aren't any grown-ups. We shall have to look after ourselves’.

“The meeting hummed and was silent” ... (Golding, 1954:18)

“The undoubted littluns, those aged about six, led a quite distinct, and at the same time intense, life of their own. They ate most of the day, picking fruit where they could reach it and not particular about ripeness and quality. They were used now to stomach-aches and a sort of chronic diarrhea. They suffered untold terrors in the dark and huddled together for comfort. Apart from food and sleep, they found time for play, aimless and trivial, among the white sand by the bright water. They cried for their mother as expected... (Golding, 1954:33)

“Here, invisible yet strong, was the taboo of the old life. Round the squatting child was the protection of parents and school and policemen and the law. Roger's arm was conditioned by a civilization that knew nothing of him and was in ruins.” (Golding, 1954:35)[16]

##### **4.2. Power Struggles and Violence**

A vicious circle of power struggles: In the beginning, the boys try to build an orderly and democratic society, but over time, the power struggles begin to spread. The leadership struggle between Ralph and Jack becomes the central conflict of the story, causing the group to split into two rival factions. This power struggle exacerbated tensions between the boys, leading to the collapse and chaos of social order. The power struggle has triggered an escalation of violence that has evolved from initial conflict and quarrels to physical assault and violence. Violence is used to control and intimidate other characters for establishing authority and domination

within the group. Ongoing power struggles and acts of violence have left boys deeply traumatized, causing their mental health to be severely affected. They experience strong emotional responses such as fear, anxiety, anger, and despair, which continue to intensify, resulting in long-term psychological trauma. Their hearts are damaged, they lose faith in civilization and humanity, and they fall into moral confusion and self-doubt. All these traumas eventually led to the tragic deaths of Simon and Piggy.

#### 4.3. Culture Clash and Identity Crisis

Cultural conflict is embodied in children originally belonging to different social classes and cultural backgrounds, but when they are forced to establish their own society without adult guidance, the original social structures and norms begin to collapse. Children's behavior gradually deviated from the rules of the civilized world and began to show the evil of human nature. With the final destruction of the conch, which means that barbarism finally defeats civilization, this cultural conflict is not only a challenge to individual identity, but also a crisis of group identity.

The identity crisis is reflected in the sharp contrast between the way the children live on the desert island and the way they live in the civilized world. As they adapt to life on the island, the children begin to forget their past, even their own names.

“‘Percival Wemys Madison, The Vicarage, Harcourt St. Anthony, Hants, telephone, telephone, tele-’” (Golding, 1954:49)

...

“‘I’m, I’m—’” “But there was no more to come. Percival Wemys Madison sought in his head for an incantation that had faded clean away.” (Golding, 1954:122).

This forgetting is not only physical, but also psychological, and the children begin to accept the lifestyle of the island and refuse to return to the civilized world. This shift reflects the psychological changes in the face of extreme environments and how individuals seek self-identity in new environments when they lose the support of their original social structure. In addition, *The Lord of the Flies* also shows the human psychological reactions and moral choices in the face of disasters through the children's actions and choices. For example, the opposition between the democratic rule of law leaders represented by Ralph and the autocratic dictator represented by Jack reflects the different views and handling methods of power and leadership in different cultural backgrounds. This antagonism is not only a personal conflict, but also a cultural collision.

### 5. Trauma Experience and Coping Mechanisms of the Ralph

Trauma experiences are the vital hints running throughout the novel. In addition, the final ending of the novel also demonstrated the variety of coping mechanisms of each character. Traumas and trauma recoveries of Ralph, in this part, are analyzed in detail. Ralph, as the protagonist in the novel, is the representative and symbol of civilization and sanity. He is rational and courageous, charismatic and has leadership skills. Ralph's trauma mainly stems from the collapse of his inner world and the emotional pressure he is under. As the eldest boy on the island, Ralph is the one who is the first to realize the reality of being trapped for a long time on the island and the survival crisis. This is reflected in the conversation between him and Piggy. This conversation reveals Ralph's inner fears and anxieties, as well as the desperate situation they find themselves in. The following are the excerpts from the original text describing this traumatic moment for Ralph:

*"Piggy persisted. 'This an island, isn't it?' 'I climbed a rock,' said Ralph slowly, 'and I think this is an island.' 'They're all dead,' said Piggy, 'an' this is an island. Nobody don't know we're here. Your dad don't know, nobody don't know—"With that word the heat seemed to increase till it became a threatening weight, and the lagoon attacked them with a blinding effulgence. 'Get my clothes,' muttered Ralph. 'Along there.' 'How does he know we're here?' Ralph lolled in the water. Sleep enveloped him like the swathing mirages that were wrestling with the brilliance of the lagoon. 'How does he know we're here?' Because, thought Ralph, because, because. The roar from the reef became very distant." (Golding, 1954:6)*

To improve his chances of rescue, Ralph decided to set a fire on the island to attract the attention of nearby boats. He arranged for each shift to ensure that the fire was not extinguished and assigned someone to see if any ships were passing by. However, the fire went out due to dereliction of the shift for Jack assembled the hunter crew to prey on the boar. The opportunity of being rescued had vanished by the passing by boat for the loss of the survival signal, and Ralph experienced a trauma of despair at losing fire and missing rescue opportunities.

*"Ralph turned to the sea. The horizon stretched, impersonal once more, barren of all but the faintest trace of smoke. Ralph ran stumbling along the rocks, saved himself on the edge of the pink cliff, and screamed at the ship. 'Come back! Come back!'" (Golding, 1954:38)*

In order to maintain stability and order on the island, Ralph established a rule of speech with the conch as the supreme authority. However, due to Jack's ability to be the leader of the hunters' group and his strong military power, and Jack's obsession with hunting and his quest for personal power, eventually led to the betrayal of the two. This became a source of trauma for Ralph.

*"'Jack! Jack! You haven't got the conch! Let him speak.'"*

*"Jack's face swam near him."*

*"And you shut up! Who are you, anyway? Sitting there telling people what to do. You can't hunt, you can't sing—"*

*"'I'm chief. I was chosen.'"*

*"'Why should choosing make any difference? Just giving orders that don't make any sense—"*

*"Piggy's got the conch."*

*"'That's right—favor Piggy as you always do—'"*

*"'Jack!'"*

*"Jack's voice sounded in bitter mimicry."*

*"'Jack! Jack!'"*

*"'The rules!' shouted Ralph. 'You're breaking the rules!'"*

*"'Who cares?'" (Golding, 1954:52)*

The ultimate trauma of Ralph was being hunted by the crew of the hunter—led by Jack. Ralph's fear, despair and confusion at being hunted as he undergoes an extreme transition from leading the order of the island's children to becoming prey, an experience that is undoubtedly profound and traumatic.

*"Ralph knelt on the plowed-up soil and waited for the earth to come back. Presently the white, broken stumps, the split sticks and the tangle of the thicket refocused. There was a kind of heavy feeling in his body where he had watched his own pulse." (Golding, 1954:117)*

*"Smoke was seeping through the branches in white and yellow wisps, the patch of blue sky overhead turned to the color of a storm cloud, and then the smoke billowed round him. Ralph*

*launched himself like a cat; stabbed, snarling, with the spear, and the savage doubled up. There was a shout from beyond the thicket and then Ralph was running with the swiftness of fear through the undergrowth." (Golding, 1954:118)*

Through these descriptions, the psychological pressure and physical danger of Ralph that is under can be felt, as well as his struggle to survive in the desperate situation.

Ralph as the main character in the novel, his psychological changes and ways of coping with trauma are one of the centerpieces of the novel's exploration. The following is an analysis of Ralph's trauma coping style and recovery based on trauma theory and trauma recovery theory:

#### (1) Trauma Coping Styles:

**Leadership and Order:** Ralph tried to deal with chaos on the island by establishing leadership and maintaining order. He used the conch as a symbol of rallies and speeches, striving to maintain the norms of civilized society.

**Rationality and Planning:** Ralph tended to use rational thinking and planning to solve problems, such as keeping a fire as a distress signal, as well as organizing hunts and building shelters.

#### (2) Recovery Process:

Ralph at first began to realize that the reality on the island is far more brutal than he expected, and his cognition began to adapt to this new environment, even though it is a painful process. Although Ralph lost some social support, especially when the hunter group led by Jack went against him during the survival period on the island, he still had the support of friends like Piggy and Simon. Despite being the symbol of order on the island, Ralph struggled between escaping and confronting the problem. At some times, he chose to face difficulties head-on, such as chasing the ship after the fire was extinguished, while at other times, he chose to escape, such as despair after Simon and Piggy's death.

#### (3) Hindrances to recovery:

Jack's betrayal and violence on the island are a major psychological blow to Ralph, hindering his recovery process. Besides, with the shattering of the conch and the death of Piggy, Ralph lost the symbol of the island's civilized order, which further exacerbated his psychological trauma.

#### (4) Final Recovery:

At the end of the novel, Ralph is found and rescued from the island by a naval officer, which provides him with a sense of relief. Still, his road to recovery may still be long, as he has experienced deep emotional trauma and disappointment with humanity.

#### (5) Emotional Expression:

Ralph allowed himself to cry in the final part of the novel after being rescued, which is a way for him to release his emotions and the first step for him to begin to face and deal with his inner trauma.

Ralph's trauma coping and recovery process is complex and challenging. Ralph's trauma possesses multiple and progressive roots. It's not the result of singular events but extends from the accumulation of confronting both mortal danger and the

devastating impact of humanity's darkness-the survival crisis, the collapse of order, the shattering of hope and being hunted as prey.

His coping mechanism in response is to utilize “civilization” and maintain rationality as defenses against such darkness, attempting to initiate his trauma recovery. However, on the desert island, the collapse of the civilized structures and the loss of societal support reflect the severity and impact of his trauma indelible. Therefore, his recovery process is inevitably faced with obstacles and unlikely achieve the true completion. At the end of the novel, Ralph weeps for the “end of the innocence and the darkness of the heart”. This behavior of allowing himself to weep represents the first step in his psychological healing journey.

Ralph's experiences in *Lord of the Flies* profoundly illustrate the multiple, progressive traumas endured by a civilized individual under extreme conditions. He attempts to employ reason, order, and leadership as coping mechanisms, yet these are utterly dismantled by the primal violence of human nature (embodied by Jack). Although his eventual rescue provides an escape from physical peril and opens a channel for emotional catharsis, his deeper psychological wounds – including a crisis of trust in humanity and the enduring shadow of societal collapse – remain far from resolved. His trauma recovery path has only just commenced at the novel's end, characterized by profound uncertainty and long-term complexity.

Ralph's ordeal transcends personal tragedy; it serves as William Golding's profound allegory and critique of the fragility of civilization and the inherent darkness within human nature.

## 6. The Research Significance of this Thesis

This study offers a novel contribution to current research by applying trauma theory to analyze the psychological and behavioral progress of the main character in *Lord of the Flies*. While prior studies on *Lord of the Flies* have dominantly concentrated on themes of human evil, power struggles, or Freudian psychoanalysis, this research pioneers employing trauma theory to dissect the characters' traumatic experiences and coping mechanisms, revealing how extreme isolation and survival pressures amplify human vulnerabilities, thereby bridging a critical gap in trauma studies and desert island literature.

From the traumas and recovery of Ralph, we reveal that once people are exposed to the life-threatening environment, such traumatic events could trigger primal impulses and instinctive reactions within an individual, exposing aspects of human nature such as violence, fear, and selfishness. These reactions can lead to the destruction of social order by the individual. If instinctive these reactions are put under the bigger picture, they may promote the change of social structure, values and cultural forms, and even the destruction of the social order and civilization. Therefore, it is essential to build a supportive, inclusive and healthy social environment to address the challenges posed by individual trauma and to promote the continued development of society and civilization.

Another significance of this thesis is to dig out the significance and value of desert island literature from the perspective of trauma theory. Desert island literature can help people understand and explore the psychological reactions and coping styles of individuals in the face of trauma, as well as the long-term effects of traumatic events on individual psychology. It also reveals the complexity and diversity of human

nature, explores the impact of trauma and underlying anxiety on individual psychology, examines the significance and limitations of social order and cultural values, and praises the persistence of human kindness and reminds people of the bestiality of human beings. Therefore, desert island literature provides an important platform for people to think deeply about the meaning and values of life.

## 7. Conclusions

By applying the trauma theory to analyze *Lord of the Flies*, this thesis discusses the traumas of Ralph along with their trauma recovery and the enlightenment to find out the significance of trauma research for individuals, societies, and civilizations. William Golding in this novel contemplated the evil of human nature differently from the tradition. The future of mankind can be optimistic but blind optimists are not necessarily better than serious pessimists. A deeper understanding of human nature can be provided in the analysis of desert island literature under the trauma theory.

In the novel, Ralph and his traumas under the lens of trauma recovery indicate that traumatic environments and experiences can leave a brain-eroding effect on the minds of people with sanity. Ralph stuck to the bottom line of civilization and might have the chance to recover from the traumas, but the trauma sequelae may lead him to a misdirection in his future life if there is no timely treatment interventions; Han Song (2022) in his introduction of *Lord of the Flies* expressed that the novel is not only a science fiction but also an anti-utopian works. If we naively believe that all the traumas can be healed through time or the goodness of human nature, the outcome can be of holocaust. Just like the ending of *Lord of the Flies*: Ralph wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy. (Golding, 1954:122), all the good is disillusioned due to the untimely trauma recovery. Therefore, only the thorough understanding and analysis of the trauma experience, trauma recovery and the desert island literature have been fulfilled, and the tragedies of Ralph no longer happen.

In conclusion, studying the novel under the trauma theory will provide readers with a new perspective to understand this novel. The purpose of this thesis, on one hand, is to discuss the relation between the human nature, society and civilization, and meaning of the desert island literature under the trauma theory; on the other hand, calls for understanding for the people who have trauma experience and elimination towards the discrimination against the bias during the process of trauma recovery to build up a supportive, inclusive, and healthy social environment to address the challenges posed by individual trauma and to promote the sustainable development of societies and civilizations.

## Conflicts of Interest

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