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Society Suppresses Mankind’s Evil Nature

The idea that mankind is inherently evil and needs society to become good is a prominent theme throughout William Golding’s novel, Lord of the Flies. Three of the characters that best exemplify this theme are Jack, Roger, and Ralph. Jack starts out good, but as his freedom from society grows, he becomes more and more evil. Roger, although not perfect at the beginning, becomes increasingly violent, as he puts society’s beliefs and morals out of his mind. Ralph remains good throughout the whole book but only by holding on to society and the one thing that can get him back, the signal fire. Golding expresses that man is born evil and needs society to make him good by having Jack and Roger, who have chosen to disregard the ways of society, become far more violent and evil, and by having Ralph, who still has a strong connection to society, remain good throughout the novel.

Jack demonstrates that he is truly evil many times throughout the book as his connection to society becomes weaker. When Jack and the rest of the boys first arrive on the island, they are mostly good because the expectations of society are still very fresh in their minds. They elect Ralph as chief, and Jack does not complain too much because he assumes that some adult would get mad at him for doing so, even though there are none on the island. In other words, Jack is used to having adults around who would scold him for arguing, so he lets it slide. As the days go by, Jack’s realization grows that there is no one who can tell him what to do. When this idea fully hits Jack, he questions Ralph’s right to lead by saying, “He isn’t a proper chief… He’s a coward himself” (126). Jack feels very powerful because of this realization that no one can tell him what to do, and as a result, accuses Ralph of being a bad leader and then leaves the group. Jack goes and lives on the other side of the island with some of his hunters where he maliciously kills pigs all the time. He understands no one can tell him right from wrong and so he creates a savage tribe, which almost all of the boys join. Jack is chief and is in total control of the tribe. He hosts terrifying feasts in which they eat pig, that they mercilessly killed, and chants things such as “Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!” (182), as they reenact the killing of the pig, pretending to kill one another. The fact that no one challenges Jack and his tribe’s horrible ways fuels Jack to do even more to show his power. By the end of the book Jack is at his most evil state when he orders his tribe to kill Ralph without a second thought. The twins, Sam and Eric, who were forced to become one of Jack’s savages, describe what Jack said to the tribe to Ralph: “And Ralph, Jack, the chief, says it will be dangerous ––– and we’ve got to be careful and throw our spears like at a pig” (188-189). Jack orders the tribe to kill Ralph, pretending that Ralph is a threat so that the tribe can justify its actions. By having Jack say that the tribe has to “throw our spears like at a pig”, Golding illustrates, that Jack is dehumanizing Ralph, so that the tribe will not be hesitant to kill Ralph. Jack starts out as any other kid on the island, happy, enthusiastic, and excited for the adventure that awaits them. However, Jack is one of the first kids to stop following society’s morals and standards, and as a result, thinks that he can do whatever he wants, even if it is obviously wrong. Because Jack stops following society’s ways, Golding implies that he reverts back to what he was born as, an evil human being.

Because Roger no longer has society to suppress his evil nature, he turns extremely violent on the island. Initially, Roger’s life is still heavily influenced by society, and therefore he does not do anything morally wrong. Roger starts to feel a bit more powerful, as his connection to society weakens, but it is still strong enough to keep him from doing anything that harms others. Roger, having nothing better to do, “gathered a handful of stones and began to throw them” (62) at a younger kid named Henry. Roger does not aim to hit him, however, because “there was a space around Henry, perhaps six yards in diameter, into which he dare not throw. Here, invisible yet strong, was the taboo of the old life” (62). The phrase “the taboo of the old life” is referring to the taboo established by society that one can not harm another for no good reason. Although Roger understands that he is free from society, he cannot throw to hit Henry because the society, and therefore the taboo, is still a part of him, even if he does not realize it. If he were to hit Henry with a rock, no one would be there to scold him, but because society is so fresh in his mind, Roger feels as if he would get in trouble and, therefore, purposely misses. Roger becomes progressively violent and evil, as he gives up on society, and when he joins Jack’s tribe, he loses what little morality he has left. When Ralph, Piggy, and the twins come to the tribe to demand Piggy’s specs back, Roger starts “throwing stones” (180) and “dropping them” (180), with “his one hand still on the lever” (180). Roger is contemplating whether or not to pull a lever that would allow a boulder to roll down the hill and, most likely, kill them. Roger is deciding if he should let them live or if he should release the boulder, and take their lives. In the end, Roger, bearing none of society’s morals or beliefs anymore, “leaned all his weight on the lever” (180), releasing the boulder and killing Piggy. Because no one punishes Roger, he continues being a horrible, violent human being and becomes the tribe’s torturer. Through losing his connection to society over the course of the novel, and as a result, becoming more and more evil, Roger illustrates how society can contain a person’s evil inner nature.

Ralph remains good throughout the novel by using the signal fire as a strong link between him and society and, therefore, a link to Ralph’s goodness. Ralph is elected as chief and immediately starts to set some ground rules and stresses how important it is to get off the island by saying, “We can help them find us … We must make a fire” (38). Ralph, a smart leader, knows that the most important thing is to get rescued from the island, and that a signal fire will help them achieve that goal. Later on in the book, when Jack starts to turn evil and is questioning Ralph’s leadership, Ralph continues to stand by his morals and beliefs that he still retains from society. Ralph constantly is using the signal fire and the idea of getting rescued as an argument against becoming a savage group of people. One example is when they believe that the beast is on top of the mountain and Jack foolishly says that he is going to go and kill it, but Ralph realizes that this is just distracting them from getting rescued and states, “Hasn’t anyone got any sense? We’ve got to relight that fire. You never thought of that, Jack, did you? Or don’t any of you want to be rescued?” (102). Ralph is kept moral and fair by continually bringing up the topic of the signal fire and being rescued. When Jack leaves the tribe with most of the others, Ralph, wondering how they are going to keep the fire going, ponders out loud, “We can’t keep the fire going. And they don’t care. And what’s more … I don’t sometimes. Suppose I got like the others ––– not caring. What’ud become of us?” (139). Ralph realizes that if he gives up on the fire, like Jack and his tribe did, then he would be no better than them, evil and violent. Ralph, although it is extremely hard, maintains his connection to society and perseveres through the difficult times. Ralph, for the entire length of the book, upholds society’s values and, as a result, never falters from being good.

Golding uses the characters in the novel Lord of the Flies to conclude that if not countered by the ways of society, the true evil nature of man will reveal itself. Jack and Roger are among the first to realize that they are free of society, and in turn, they turn evil. Ralph holds on to society and its morals, allowing him to continue being good. Jack and Roger are used to demonstrate that without society man will revert back to its evil nature, and Ralph is used to illustrate that as long as man is still connected with society, he will remain a good human being. The concept that mankind’s innate dispositions are evil and that it needs society to be good is a bit exaggerated in the novel, considering that two boys were murdered and most of the boys turned very sadistic. However, there are still many examples of this theme in the real world, ranging in severity. The most explicit example is law enforcement, which will punish a criminal, by prison or other means, if they do anything illegal or against the formal rules of society. Some people will hurt, steal, and even kill for certain reasons because they have some evil tendencies, but law enforcement and society’s rules keeps many people from doing so because they know the consequences. A more basic example of this idea that society keeps people good, is a person’s own life. A person grows up with friends and family who have a certain set of morals and standards that greatly impact one’s decisions. From a young age, a child is taught not to tease, harm, or steal from other people by his family and friends. A young child, until about age four, will not listen to the adults but instead will do whatever they want to do, even if it is evil, because the child has not had enough time to understand what is acceptable in society. Once the child starts to grasp the idea of society’s expectations, through maturity and discipline, the child can then act appropriately in society and, consequently, be a good human being. As long as the child, and people in general, are influenced by society, their evil inner nature will not be revealed.