

**Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

**<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>**

**Unmasking the Beasts Within: Exploring Eros and Thanatos  
through Characterization in Golding's *Lord of the Flies***



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**Abstract**

This research looks at the psychological ideas in William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies*, especially the Freudian concepts of Eros (the instinct for life) and Thanatos (the instinct for death). It studies how these two instincts appear in the characters and events of the story, showing the struggle between civilization and savagery in human nature. Golding believes that no society is bad by itself, but it is the weaknesses of people that cause a society to fall apart. The novel shows that people follow rules only when there is someone in charge. When that control is gone, their wild and harmful behavior comes out. Using a psychoanalytic point of view, this study explains that without the control of family, society, or institutions, the death instinct (Thanatos) takes over the life instinct (Eros), leading to violence, confusion, and loss of morals. These ideas help us understand how easily order can turn into chaos, both in stories and in real life.

**Key Words:** William Golding, Lord of the Flies, Psychological, Aspects, Eros, Thanatos

**Introduction**

William Golding, a British writer who won the Nobel Prize, is known for exploring the darker side of human nature. His experiences as a teacher and a naval officer during World War II helped him understand how people behave, especially in difficult situations. Seeing the misbehavior of schoolboys and the horrors of war showed him that the line between civilization and chaos is very thin. These life experiences inspired his famous novel *Lord of the Flies* (1954), which tells the story of a group of British schoolboys stranded on an island and how their behavior changes when there are no rules or adults around.

Unlike earlier adventure stories like *The Coral Island* by R.M. Ballantyne or *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson, which show children as brave and well-behaved, Golding presents a more realistic picture. He shows how quickly children can lose their sense of right and wrong when they are free from rules. His novel is an allegory—it uses characters and events to explore deeper ideas such as good and evil, order and chaos, and the constant struggle between civilized behavior and savage

instincts.

Golding's story is also influenced by the ideas of Sigmund Freud, a famous psychologist. Freud believed that human behavior is shaped by two basic instincts: Eros (the drive for life, love, and peace) and Thanatos (the drive for death, violence, and destruction). In *Lord of the Flies*, some characters try to create peace and work together (Eros), while others give in to fear, power, and violence (Thanatos).

This paper will look at how these two instincts—Eros and Thanatos—are shown through the characters and events in the novel. It will also explain how Golding uses psychology to show how easily morality can break down and how fragile civilization really is.

*Lord of the Flies* is often studied for its deep psychological themes, especially from a Freudian point of view. William Golding shows how a group of innocent schoolboys slowly turn into savages, which strongly connects to Sigmund Freud's ideas about the human mind. Freud believed that people are driven by two opposite forces: Eros (the life instinct) and Thanatos (the death instinct). Eros is about love, care, and creation, while Thanatos leads to aggression, destruction, and death.

Freud explained these ideas in his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). He said that people are not just driven by the need for pleasure, but also by a hidden desire for destruction and even death. Eros makes people want to grow, form relationships, and create beauty, while Thanatos pushes people toward violence, harm, and even a return to lifelessness.

Golding's novel gives a clear picture of how these instincts work in people. When the boys are left without adults or rules, they start behaving in different ways depending on their personalities. Some, like Jack, give in to their violent side (Thanatos), while others, like Simon, show kindness and deep thinking, which represent the life instinct (Eros).

Many researchers have used Freud's theory to explain the actions of the characters in the novel. For example, Qiuxia (2016) and Monowar (2018) discuss how the book shows the battle between civilization and savagery. Qiuxia points out that when people go through strong emotions—like happiness, pain, or fear—the death instinct can take over, leading to harmful behavior or even self-destruction. The novel's characters show this struggle clearly, with some choosing peace and others

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**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

turning to violence.

Some critics, like Wilson (2003) and Siegfried (2015), explain that *Lord of the Flies* can be seen as a story that shows the struggle between the conscious mind (which tries to stay in control) and the unconscious mind (which holds hidden and wild desires). Many symbols in the novel help show this idea. For example, the conch shell, signal fire, and shelters stand for Eros—the human desire to keep peace, order, and hope. On the other hand, the hunting, painted faces, and the pig's head on a stick (called the "Lord of the Flies") represent Thanatos, or the human drive toward violence and chaos.

In this way, the novel becomes a picture of Freud's theory. The id, which is the part of the mind that wants whatever it desires without thinking of rules, takes over when the ego (the balancing part) and superego (the moral guide) are missing. This is why the boys lose control and their society falls apart.

The most violent parts of the book—like the killing of the sow, Simon, and Piggy—show how Thanatos wins when rules and morals are gone. According to Wiszniowska (2010), these events are not just physical killings but show something deeper about the human mind: they reveal how the death instinct can take control. However, not all characters follow this path. Simon and Ralph, for example, try to protect life and peace. They represent Eros by showing kindness, thinking carefully, and trying to keep things organized.

In short, Freud's ideas about the battle between Eros and Thanatos help us understand the deeper meaning of *Lord of the Flies*. Many scholars agree that the novel is more than just a story about boys on an island—it is a powerful look at the human mind. It shows how thin the layer of civilization really is, and how quickly people can turn to violence when that layer is removed.

## **Objectives**

- To observe human behavior in an uncontrolled environment
- To determine theories of Thanatos and Eros in the novel

## **Research Questions**

- How can we observe the human behavior?
- How the theories of Thanatos and Eros are proved to be true through the novel *Lord of the Flies*?

### **Textual Analysis**

In *Lord of the Flies*, the character of Jack vividly embodies Freud's concept of Thanatos, the death drive. His descent into violence is marked by the brutal killing of a sow—a mother pig still nursing her piglets. This act, carried out with disturbing enthusiasm, reflects Jack's growing obsession with domination and destruction. His participation in the murders of Piggy and Simon further illustrates his alignment with Thanatos, as he becomes increasingly consumed by aggression and power.

The novel presents a constant interplay between Eros and Thanatos, often symbolized through the emotional and moral struggles of the characters. Ralph's tears at the end of the story—mourning the loss of innocence and the death of his friend Piggy—represent a moment of clarity and remorse. Earlier, Ralph had acknowledged his role in Simon's death, suggesting a deep internal conflict and a recognition of guilt. He also questions the identity of the "beast" on the mountain, realizing that the figure they feared was not a monster, but a fallen human—a dead parachutist. This moment, though drowned out by the frenzied chants of the hunters, echoes Simon's earlier insight and spiritual awareness.

Simon's encounter with the pig's head—dubbed the "Lord of the Flies"—is a pivotal moment in the novel. The severed head, offered as a sacrifice to the imagined beast, becomes a grotesque symbol of evil. Surrounded by flies, it represents decay and corruption. In a hallucinatory dialogue, Simon confronts this figure, which tempts and threatens him, much like Satan's encounters with Christ in Christian tradition. The Lord of the Flies urges Simon to join Jack's tribe and indulge in savagery; when Simon resists, it warns of his impending death. This scene mirrors biblical themes of temptation and martyrdom, reinforcing Simon's role as a Christ-like figure.

Golding's use of Christian imagery—such as the Garden of Eden, original sin, and sacrificial death—adds layers of meaning to the narrative. Simon's vision and his attempt to share the truth about the "beast" are tragically cut short when he is mistaken for the monster and killed by the frenzied boys. His death marks the collapse of reason and conscience among the group. Critics often interpret Simon's fate as symbolic of spiritual purity destroyed by collective hysteria and moral decay.

The boys' treatment of animals also reflects their descent into savagery. They hunt not out of necessity, but for the thrill of killing. Maurice's imitation of the sow during a

ritual dance, and the group's ecstatic violence, reveal a disturbing pleasure in cruelty. Golding portrays this behavior as a regression to primal instincts, where the joy of destruction overtakes the need for survival. As Qiuxia notes, the novel dramatizes humanity's fall into its uncivilized origins, exposing the fragility of moral restraint.

Characters like Roger and Jack exemplify the thirst for control and dominance. Their actions—especially the killing of the sow and the pursuit of Ralph—highlight the destructive potential of unchecked power. As Gregor and Kinkead-Weekes observe, the urge to destroy others becomes a twisted form of self-expression, where violence is equated with identity and authority.

Simon's climb to the mountain and his release of the parachutist's body symbolize a moment of spiritual liberation. His descent to share the truth is met with fatal misunderstanding, as the boys—lost in a frenzy—mistake him for the beast and kill him. This act signifies the death of conscience and the triumph of irrational fear. Piggy's murder, too, is dehumanized; he is treated not as a person, but as an object of ridicule and violence. Ralph, hunted like an animal, narrowly escapes the same fate. Jack's relentless pursuit of power mirrors historical tyrants who eliminate rivals to maintain control.

Freud's distinction between Eros and libido is also relevant. While libido refers specifically to sexual desire, Eros encompasses broader life-affirming drives—hunger, creativity, and the will to live. In the novel, the boys' consumption of fruit and Ralph's efforts to build shelters and maintain a signal fire reflect their desire for survival and order. Ralph's leadership, rooted in cooperation and protection, stands in contrast to Jack's destructive impulses.

Throughout *Lord of the Flies*, the tension between Eros and Thanatos plays out in the boys' actions and choices. Golding's narrative reveals how easily civilization can unravel, and how deeply embedded the instincts for both creation and destruction are within the human psyche. The island becomes a microcosm of society, where the struggle between good and evil, order and chaos, and life and death is laid bare.

### ***Eros in the Novel***

The Eros explained by Freud that it is a bodily strength that enhances the desire of life. Eros is the urge for creativity, construction and productivity (33). In the novel *Lord of*

## **Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

*the Flies*, almost all the young boys are shown eating and enjoying fruits to satiate their hunger. The elements of Eros are often found in the characters of small boys the *Littluns* who are living their lives peacefully on the island even though they are very far away from their sweet homes. They crave to survive with full energy and power because they love life. The protagonist of the novel Ralph also attempts to be saved by igniting the fire on the island and by requesting Jack and Piggy to construct shelter on the uninhabited island. Their all labors and hard work show that they want to live long, yearn to protect themselves from the harsh weather of the island.

Furthermore, Eros means the love and desire of pleasure, happiness, life and delight. In the mythology of Greek Eros is a counterpart of cherub and angel (Qiuxia3). The novel *Lord of the Flies*, symbolically portrays the everlasting theme of the clash between goodness and evil, a clash in which evil dominates over the goodness in the beginning and later on the goodness tries to save itself and finally succeeds, and sin is also redeemed. The kids in the novel allegorically represent bad and good qualities although they are simultaneously capable of development and growth. The limits are set between the evil and good even from the start. Simon has spiritual, human and intellectual qualities. He always helps *Littluns* in taking fruits. He also facilitates Piggy, and takes pain for the benefits of the other boys. He supports Piggy by logically proving that Piggy has also supplied his efforts to ignite the fire by giving his spectacles. His sixth sense tells him that only Ralph from the good boys will remain saved and other will be killed. Through his spiritual qualities, he comes to know that there is no beast outside in this world, but it exists in man's mind only. Simon is directly opposite to Maurice, Roger and Jack who are a symbol of eagerness, cruelty, power, jealousy and Thanatos.

The conch in the novel, symbolizes democracy and Eros. It provides rights everybody to speak freely. It promotes democracy, freedom, unity and love. The conch keeps the boys energetic, vivacious and happy. There is another object that signifies the Eros; the object is fire. The signal fire is ignited to get them saved and rescued. The fire and the conch are believed to put the boys away from brutality and viciousness and to keep the boys on the safe place where love and care prevail. Simon is a humble individual who always helps the *Littluns* in their search for enjoyment and happiness. He is a kind chap who supports everyone and does not

harm anyone. Simon never wishes to hunt the pigs because he loves animals a lot, and he does not join the company of the hunters as he considers it to be bad and cruel acts to kill pigs only for the enjoyment. The fire which is to rescue all the boys, stands as a symbol of hope, but it does not have any importance in the eyes of Jack as he wants to remain on the tropical island. The signal fire maintains expectation for rescue alive that hurdles Jack in his pursuit for power, strength and for gratifying his urges. Both signal fire and conch are imagined to keep them from allowing the beast to overcome. The signal fire and conch are also symbols of life, pleasure, happiness and freedom (Qiuxia 3).

### ***Thanatos in Boys' Gene***

Thanatos is a dark side of man's personality. It is an inner force that compels an individual to do harm to himself, herself or to others. Thanatos is a psychological aspect proposed by Sigmund Freud, which is clearly spotted in the novel *Lord of the Flies* in the character of Jack. He likes blood, torture, and cruelty. Every bad quality of Thanatos is possessed by Jack only.

His pitiless nature is witnessed when he utters these lines:

*"Kill the pig! Cut her throat! Bash her in" (Golding 75).*

These are the lines spoken by Jack indicating his inner self. He hunts and kills pigs more for having enjoyment than for eating meat. Before killing the pig he asks his companions to beat and bash the female pig. He cuts her throat and feels pleasure while the sow (female pig) is bleeding. She is killed when she still suckles her piglets. It is the peak of vindictiveness that the female pig is hunted in front of her piglets. The piglets are left alone and have nobody who feeds them; have nobody who looks after them; and have nobody who gives shelter to them. It is very ruthless to feel pleasure in the pains of others; however, people who have strong Thanatos in their personality, love killing and destructions.

Jack ordered his boys to kill the pig but he also takes an active part to do so. He is the one who initiates hunting.

On another occasion when the narrator tells:

*"Jack was on top of the sow, stabbing downward with his knife...then [he] found the throat and the hot blood spouted over his hands" (Golding 135).*

He mounts on the female pig and starts piercing the animal with his dagger. He enjoys

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**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

when the warm blood begins gushing from the throat of the half dead sow and wets his both hands. This is the unnecessary immoral act to kill the suckling pig; she is not to be slaughtered in a harsh manner.

She is a mother and feeds her small kids.

*“her belly was fringed with a row of piglets that slept or burrowed and squeaked” (Golding 134).*

These lines are presenting the picture and the scene of the murder. The mother pig is surrounded by her piglets; some are sleeping, the others are taking shelters under the arms of their mother, and few are making noises when they are being separated from their mother. To survive on that deserted island, there are too many other things, such as fruits, vegetables and plenty of fish available to satiate the hunger. To quench the thirst, fresh coconut's water is also accessible then why only the hot blood of a mother pig. The Thanatos is deep-seated in Jack's personality; he can do nothing but causes the catastrophe of others.

Only Jack is not the one having Thanatos in him, but his all followers have the same attitudes towards life. They feel pleasure in annihilation, butchery, and hunting, with no gain but only gratification. One of Jack's tribe boys Roger takes life of Piggy hardheartedly.

*“The rock struck Piggy a glancing blow from chin to knee...His head opened and stuff came out and turned red... Piggy's arms and legs twitched a bit, like a pig's after it has been killed” (Golding 181).*

Roger threw the rock over Piggy which crushes his head into pieces and all his brain and the others stuff pour out. His intelligent brain, through which he used to guide and instructs the boys on the stranded island for the sake of safety, comes out and get destroyed.

*“the conch exploded into a thousand white fragments and ceased to exist” (Golding 181).*

In this incidence Piggy's specs that were the sign of science and technology and the conch that is taken for democracy are also squashed. It indicates that Thanatos does not only detest humanity but also the technology which is the vehicle of the progress for human beings. Piggy's murder is the reminder of the bloodshed of the female pig which was also slain cruelly. Piggy's dead body lies on the rock like the

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pig was lying. After the Piggy has been slaughtered, everyone from the Jack group amuses.

They plan to kill Piggy's only friend of Ralph:

*"They're going to hunt you tomorrow" (Golding 188).*

These are the warning words for Ralph, spoken by the twin brothers Sam and Eric. They are very kind to Ralph; they want to save the life of Ralph. On the other hand, Jack and his tribe are in the chase of Ralph; they want to kill Ralph and build their own empire which has no rival at all. In search of Ralph, the tribe burns all the woods and jungle on the island. Now all over the island there is nothing but fire everywhere. This is all a kind of destruction that is really a source of delight for the tribe and a real depiction of Thanatos.

In the same way their Thanatos drive sheds the blood of an innocent child Simon. When Simon is bringing good news regarding the beast that there is no beast outside in the rocks, they take Simon as a beast and in the state of frenzy all the boys begin piercing their spears through the body of Simon.

As the narrator narrates:

*"At once the crowd surged after it, poured down the rock, leapt on the beast, screamed, struck, hit, tore" (Golding 153).*

As Simon appears, all the dancing boys rush towards Simon to slay him as they did with the sow; they do not give him an opportunity to speak a single word with them. Some leap on him; some start crying; some strike and hit him with sticks; others tear his body into pieces. This is the main turning point when the group of educated school boys turns into barbarian. They have become the slave of Thanatos, started taking lives of human being as well as animals without any reason. In the killing of Simon, Ralph also takes part. It is obviously stated that there is also an aspect of Thanatos in the personality of Ralph, the most civilized boy. They only think of themselves and their inner voice.

Another display for Thanatos is believed to be true when another female pig is caught and furiously slaughtered. Now Roger takes the place of Jack and shows his evil nature by jabbing his spear into the body of the sow.

*"Dreadful eruption from an unknown world made her frantic; she squealed and bucked and the air was full of sweat and noise and blood and terror. Roger ran*

*around the heap, prodding with his spear whenever pig-flesh appeared" (Golding 135).*

Due to the scorching heat, a female pig becomes the victim of the Jack's tribe. A band of hunters fling at the pig. The sudden attack from the strange world is really shocking for her; she cannot stable herself and falls there and is killed. She shrieks and jumps, but on the other movement, there are only noise, sweat, blood and terror. Nobody is there to stop the play of spitefulness; no kindhearted boy is there who comes to rescue the guiltless pig. There is the reign of terror because everybody is under the influence of Thanatos. Roger is the one who breaks the pig into pieces, the flesh and the bones are separated wrathfully.

### ***Eros in the Marooned Children***

Eros is the urge for creation, output and formation of life. It is the opposite side of Thanatos that is the destruction, obliteration and eradication. Moreover, according to Freud, Eros is a bodily force and strength that boost life. It is a sign of desire and pleasure. In the novel *Lord of the Flies*, Simon is shown to be having Eros. He spreads love over the island. When the first time a pig is hunted and roasted by Jack, he hands out pig's flesh to all the boys except Piggy, whom he detests. Being a sympathetic person with Eros, Simon offers his own piece of flesh to Piggy to satiate his hunger. It is all out of love, sympathy and Eros. "Simon loved his piece of meat over the rocks to Piggy, who grabbed it" (Golding 74). His offering the piece of meat is a sign of Eros and love for the humanity. He promotes love, without any benefits he feels affection for everyone. He cannot see anyone being unhappy and hungry. He never eats himself but gives away his own share only out of his true love. When stealthily, Simon offers a piece of meat to Piggy, Piggy is also very hungry and takes hold of the meat and starts eating it. Having seen Piggy eating, Simon gets delighted as if he had got the world's pleasure and happiness by serving his poor friend. Simon is a good onlooker and observes everything and everyone on the island, whenever he finds a chance to help the victim he never lags behind.

Ralph can also be counted as having the elements of Eros. He is the first who announces that we have built huts on the island so that for the time being we may live here peacefully. "The first thing we ought to have made was shelters down by the beach... (Golding 45). He along with Simon also wants to make life beautiful and

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**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

secured on the isolated island. His words are the proof that he likes to live a long life and he also creates the ease for others as well. He asks in the first assembly to construct the shelters; however, some of the boys help him but most of them never build the huts. He with Simon initiates the task themselves. "I work all day with nothing but Simon and you come back and don't even notice the huts!" (Golding 54). Here it is observed that Ralph and Simon are more interested in the lives of others than they are interested in their own lives. No one except Simon supports Ralph in making the fire, building the huts and signaling the passing ships. Ralph counsels Jack to work with him for the safe rescue of the kids, but Jack never listens to him. Throughout the novel *Lord of the Flies*, Ralph is busy in making untiring efforts for the salvage of all the boys stranded on the uninhabited island.

Simon is a symbol of love. He seeks beauty in everything and in every walk of life. During the stay in the abandoned island, he searches for the positivity of the place. He observes the birds chirping, butterflies flying, flowers spreading their fragrance and small children playing and making tiny sand's houses. He extends his best wishes to everyone whether they are human beings or they are other creatures. He also visits the isolated areas of the jungle where:

"Nothing moved but a pair of gaudy butterflies danced round each other...[and] the white tips of the flowers rose delicately to meet the open air" (Golding 57).

He takes no interest in teasing and harming others. He never takes part in the killing any animal which he considers to be a great sin. In other lines of the novel, Ralph confesses that only Simon is here to help me in every activity that is made for the rescue. "All day I've been working with Simon" (Golding 50). Simon never leaves Ralph in the time of difficulties and always offers his help for the better cause. Though he is a child, he also wants to play like other kids on the island, but the safety and safe flight of the boys is his priority which he never forgets.

Piggy is also shown demonstrating his inner love for the *Littluns*. Piggy is also influenced by the aspect of Eros. He has visible motherly care, love and instinct right through the novel, attempting to alleviate the worries and distress that the small boys have. There are too many places where Piggy's love is conspicuous for the others especially for the little kids. "Piggy leaned down to him. 'What is your

name?' 'Johnny.' Piggy muttered it to himself and shouted it to Ralph," (Golding 18). He takes interest in memorizing the names of all the boys who are around. He asks the name one by one, and then repeats them to commit them to his memory. He always makes the young boys feel like at home. On another occasion: "Piggy knelt, holding the conch. 'Now then, what's your name?' (Golding 86). Here Piggy is asking the names of small kids for the assembly so that their names may be called out if they wish to say something. Some boys are willing to tell their names; however, others are reluctant to tell their names out of nervousness, yet Piggy is taking pains to make them confident by creating the friendly atmosphere. Piggy comes to the level of the boys so that they may feel relaxed and confident. This is obvious that he has feelings like a mother who knows the level of her child. Piggy loves all the small kids; he wants to make everybody happy so that they should not miss their parents and siblings, and they should feel themselves secured in their surroundings.

### **Conclusion**

William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* is more than a dystopian novel about children lost on an island—it is a profound psychological allegory that illustrates the dual forces governing human behavior. Through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis, particularly the concepts of Eros (life instinct) and Thanatos (death instinct), the novel reveals how quickly civilization can deteriorate when the unconscious mind is left unchecked.

The characters serve as archetypes of these opposing forces. Jack, Roger, and their tribe exhibit the destructive urges of Thanatos, indulging in violence, domination, and chaos. In contrast, Ralph, Simon, and Piggy attempt to preserve the values of Eros, such as compassion, cooperation, rationality, and order. However, as the narrative unfolds, Thanatos begins to overpower Eros, resulting in the tragic deaths of Simon and Piggy, and the complete disintegration of societal norms among the boys.

Golding's novel thus serves as a cautionary tale, warning that beneath the surface of every human lies a struggle between life-affirming and death-driven instincts. When societal structures and moral guidance disappear, even the most civilized individuals may succumb to savagery. By portraying this psychological conflict in a group of innocent schoolboys, Golding highlights that the potential for destruction is not only external, but deeply rooted within the human psyche itself.

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**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

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**Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

[Note: Add full publication details if available.]

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