

The Uncertainty of Human Nature in Lord of the Flies from the Perspective of Deconstructivism

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Abstract: It is widely accepted that Lord of the Flies exposes the evil nature of mankind. However, from the perspective of deconstructivism and the idea of “différance” proposed by Derrida, this paper explores the theme of this novel again by analyzing time, space, absence of woman, characterization and imagery. This paper finds that time is temporalized and space is distanced, which reflect the timelessness and regionlessness of the text. The absence of woman is actually the biological and logical absence of origins. The uncertain nature of human beings is directly manifested in the characterization of the novel. Characters are multifaceted with darkness in kind Ralph and light in evil Jack. What’s more, the indeterminate imagery of fire which is a representation of both resurrection and destruction, and the conch which represents both democracy and autocracy also add the uncertainty of the text. And all these reveal the uncertainty of human nature vividly.

1. Introduction

1.1. A Brief Introduction to William Golding and Lord of the Flies

British novelist William Golding (1911-1993) was born in Cornwall, England. Grown up in a middle-class family, he received a good education and developed an interest in literature since his childhood. In 1930, he obeyed his father to study natural science as an undergraduate at Brasenose College, Oxford University. However, two years later he gave up natural science and transferred to English literature because he found that literature was his interest. Golding got his B.A. degree with Second Class Honors in the summer of 1934 and after graduation he took up several jobs, which briefly included theater actor, director, poetry writer and then a schoolteacher. The breakout of the Second World War disturbed the peace of Golding’s life, and he joined the Royal Navy in 1940. As the commander of the fleet, he fought in the Royal Navy and experienced many unforgettable battles during the Second World War. It was these experiences during the war that provided him an incisive view of human nature. In the reference to Lord of the Flies, he said, “The basic point my generation discovered about man was that there was more evil in him than could be accounted for simply by social pressure.” [1] After the war, he retired from the Royal Navy in 1945 and devoted himself to teaching and writing novels. In 1983, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature laureate.

Lord of the Flies became a best-seller both in Britain and the United States the time it was published. It was so influential that a reviewer hailed it as “a book that had captivated the imagination

of a whole generation.” [2] The story happens in the midst of an unspecified nuclear war in the future. In a wartime evacuation, a British plane crashes on a marooned island in a distant region of the Pacific Ocean. The only survivors are boys in their middle childhood or preadolescence. Some of the marooned characters are ordinary students and others are musical choirs. They are quite happy to get rid of the restraints of adults and want to have fun before the adults find them. They make a fire with Piggy’s glasses and keep the smoke as a signal to alert passing ships for help; they build huts on the beach to sleep in during the night. However, they soon split into two different groups, one with Jack as the leader and the other with Ralph as the leader. The former behaves peacefully with a strong hope to be rescued early, but the latter disobeys orders, violates moral rules, indulges in brutality and becomes bloody hunters with painted faces and long hair. Under the leadership of Jack, they not only hunt pigs but also hunt their fellows, Ralph and Simon, to release the bloody desire. These boys finally become dehumanized, falling into savagery.

1.2. A Brief Introduction to the Theory of Deconstructivism

Deconstructivism is a form of philosophical and literary analysis derived principally from Jacques Derrida’s 1967 work *Of Grammatology*. In order to express his deconstructive thoughts, Derrida invented a term “différance” to convey a configuration of spatial and temporal concept together. According to Derrida, “différance is the systematic play of differences, of traces of differences, of spacing by which elements relate to one another.” [3] The creation of this term combines the temporal and spatial difference together. Temporally, “differe” means “temporalization” which is full of delay and meander. Spatially, it means “interval” of space with an implication of the destruction of simultaneity. Letter “a” is both the mark of “de-” in “deconstruction” and the promise of “construction”.

Derrida argues that many things have different sides and the world is not formulaic. Derrida questions the structuralism by putting in question the basic metaphysical assumptions of western philosophy since Plato. This philosophy prescribes pairs of oppositions which are characteristically “binary” and “hierarchical”, such as presence/absence, speech/writing, philosophy/literature, central/marginal, etc. In each pair of opposition, the former is assumed superior and fundamental; the latter is inferior or derivative. All these oppositions are unequal since there is always one privileged over the other with the dominant one as a centering, principle or grounding force. Derrida advocates breaking the logocentric view of one center, one absolute truth, and these binary oppositions. He once described the kind of opposition like this: “In a traditional philosophical opposition we have not a peaceful coexistence of facing terms but a violent hierarchy. One of the terms dominates the other, occupies the commanding position.” [4] Derrida wrote three books *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Speech and Phenomena* to deconstruct the hierarchical and binary oppositions.

As the famous critic Leitch once said, “literary texts deconstructed themselves.” Deconstruction is a way to explore the contradictory and irreconcilable meanings in a text. From the deconstructive perspective, we will see the ambiguity, truce, duality and fusion between these binary oppositions, further have a comprehensive understanding of the theme of this novel.

1.3. Literature Review

When it comes to Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, since Chen Kun's "The Anxiety of Human Evil: Talking about William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*" published in the 5th issue of *Reading* magazine in 1981, studies on the theme of evil human nature have sprung up in China with numerous results. [5]

Among the studies on the theme of "evil human nature", Xing Yuan's insight can be said to be very profound. He believes that one of the uniqueness of *Lord of the Flies* lies in its theme. Taking

the Third World War as the background and the child as the main character, he pointed out that ‘evil comes from the heart of man and that Jack and Roger had evil thoughts because of the defects of human nature’. Further, he pointed out the bankruptcy of democracy, order, wholeness, and science in the modern world. Some researchers have analyzed the theme of *Lord of the Flies* from its language and character design, among which Zhang Zheng is a representative. He mentioned that ‘the language of the characters in *Lord of the Flies* (the impoliteness, inaccuracy, illogic, and vulgarity of children's language) and the character design (vicious Jack, kind Ralph) were intentional and had a clear reference’ so that they could better serve the novel's theme of evil human nature. At the same time, he affirmed that human nature is evil and that civilization could hardly defeat human nature. [6]. In *Macmillan Modern Novelists: William Golding* written by overseas scholar James Gindin, Gindin claimed that ‘the darkness and evil manifested in children reflects the dark side in human beings’. Zhang Helong believed that ‘the traditional historical and cultural connotations and the special literary context of the time determined the thematic acceptance of *Lord of the Flies*’. He also pointed out that Chinese researchers were deeply influenced by foreign studies on the evil human nature expressed in *Lord of the Flies*. In addition, because of the complexity and openness embedded in *Lord of the Flies* itself, Zhang Helong argued that it is unilateral to simply arrive at one single interpretation so he called on scholars to break through the single interpretation on its theme. [7]

Until the end of the twentieth century, research on the theme of *Lord of the Flies* became more diversified, and some scholars proposed that the theme of human salvation was also implied, which undoubtedly added new vitality to the academic circle. In “The theme of salvation implied in the theme of human evil in *Lord of the Flies*”, Guan Jianming first admitted the feasibility of the theme of evil human nature, then he started with the analysis on Simon, who had the image of Jesus Christ, to illustrate the theme of salvation implied in the text, revealing that ‘only after human beings have recognized their own evil can they obtain spiritual salvation’, foretelling the brightness and hope of human beings in the future, which is an innovative assertion. His academic innovation directly influenced the research priorities of future scholars. Taking the theory of archetypal criticism as an entry point, Wang Xiaomei argued that *Lord of the Flies* referred to the main themes of Greek mythology and the Bible - the fall, the search and the salvation - and pointed out that ‘its fundamental purpose is to search for the way of salvation for human beings’. [8]

Furthermore, Chen Liping studied its theme from a new perspective, namely, deconstructivism. In her “The “Differance” of Evil - The Uncertainty of Human Nature in *Lord of the Flies*”, Chen Liping mentioned that ‘human nature is uncertain without an explicit boundary between good and evil’ by applying the concept of “differance” which was proposed and created by Derrida. She also believed that the binary opposition can be deconstructed by the absence of woman. [9] Later on, Zhao Ningyi in “An Interpretation of the Postmodern Thought in *Lord of the Flies* from the Perspective of Derrida's Deconstructivism” argued that *Lord of the Flies* deconstructed the theme of “kind human nature” in traditional desert island literature. [10]

Over the past years, some scholars have ever analyzed or criticized the theme of this novel, but few of them have a detailed analysis from the perspective of deconstructivism applying Derrida’s “differance”. In other words, it is immature when it comes to the deconstruction of the traditional theme of *Lord of the Flies* and the use of “differance”. Therefore, it is significance for me to explore the uncertain human nature from the perspective of deconstructivism and “differance” at length to help readers understand the theme of this novel dialectically and multifacetedly.

I wish to argue the uncertainty of human nature by “differance” of absence of woman, temporalization of time and interval of space. Uncertain nature of mankind can also be found in multifaceted characters, such as Ralph and Jack, and in indeterminate imageries, such as fire and the conch.

2. Différance of Time, Space and Absence of Woman

2.1. Temporalization of Time: Future-Past-Present

The setting of time and place, two elements of the background, is an important way to construct the novel text. Different from the linear chronological order of traditional novels, time is temporalized and delayed in *Lord of the Flies*. The story begins in the future time, then continues to the primitive and past time, and finally ends in the modern and present time. This time construction with the characteristics of postmodernism expands the dimension of time. The inverted concept of time delays the meaning of the text, thus making the story seem both real and unreal. Therefore, the uncertainty of the meaning of the text is increased.

Lord of the Flies begins in the future time, when a group of boys between the age of six and twelve are stranded on a desert island due to a plane crash during a war in the future world. When the group of children are introduced in the first chapter and a child named Ralph is chosen as their leader, primal time becomes the narrative subject. The novel presents us with a scene of primitive life that continues until nearly the end of the story. During this primal time, the children experienced everything that primitive tribal people experienced, from gathering to making fire to hunting. At the beginning of the primitive life, with the establishment of power and order, children seemed to be able to live peacefully in the beautiful utopian world they constructed. However, with the advance of it, the complex nature of children was gradually revealed. Ralph and Piggy, who originally represented rationality and wisdom, participated in the process of killing Simon with the mask of carnival. When the barbarity of primitive time was exposed to the extreme, Piggy died tragically under the boulder deliberately plotted by Roger, and Ralph was hunted by Jack's tribe. However, when Ralph was tortured in the fire, it was the fire that attracted rescue ships. The appearance of the British naval officer ended the primitive time with modern time, making Ralph "weep bitterly: for the loss of childlike innocence and the darkness of human nature." [11]

This variation of time, namely, future-past-present, in *Lord of the Flies* largely deconstructed the authenticity and certainty of the story. The rescue at the end, to some extent, added to it the uncertainty of the meaning of the text and the uncertainty of human nature, because we did not know whether the cruiser was sailing to a peace world with the children or to another battlefield.

2.2. Interval of Space: Sense of Distance between the Reader and the Novel

Considering the spatial dimension of the novel, namely the setting of the place, the uncertainty of the meaning of the text can be better understood. Golding set the story on a geographically unknowable desert island, which gave us a sense of distance and mystery. On this desert island, all the behavior of the children, whether right or wrong, whether moral or not, was determined by themselves and formed naturally without any guidance or correction from the adults.

Therefore, this setting away from the real world and the adult world provided children with a microcosmic world that could fully exposed their nature without any disturbance of the outside. At the same time, it widened the distance between readers and the novel so that enables readers to examine human nature more rationally and objectively.

2.3. Absence of Woman: Biological and Logical Absence of Origin

The absence of female characters has always been the focus and difficulty of criticism in *Lord of the Flies*. Naturally, we can attribute it to the great tradition of desert island literature, but here it will be analyzed from the "différance" point of view of Derrida's deconstructivism. The absence of woman can be seen as the disappearance of origin, which contains two levels: the explicit level is biological

absence of origin, while the implicit level is logical absence of origin.

The biological absence of origin is manifested in the children and the boar they hunt. What can be called the female character in the book is only a sow, and such a symbol of biological origin is eventually killed under the spears of the children:

Here, in the blistering heat, the sow collapsed and the hunters swarmed. This terrible outburst from a strange world sent the sow into a frenzy. She squealed and jumped, filling the air with water, noise, blood, and terror. Roger ran around the crowd, thrusting his spear wherever the pig appeared. Jack got on the pig's back and jabbed down with his spear. When Roger found an empty space in the pig, he jabbed at it with his spear and pushed it in until all his weight was on the spear. Gradually the spear pricked in, and the sow's scream of terror became a high-pitched whine. Then Jack found the sow's throat, and with a stab, blood gushed into his hand. The old sow collapsed under the weight of the children with these hunters packed on it. [12]

The explicit biological absence of origin further implies the logical absence of origin. As we all know, western metaphysics is built based on the origin and its aim is to pursue the origin of things and set the existence logic beyond the perceptual world. However, what metaphysicians pursued is what Derrida opposed. A series of binary oppositions based on the concept of origin, such as presence/absence, male/female, all contain hierarchical differences from Derrida's perspective. The word to the left of the slash takes center stage with precedence, while the word to the right of the slash subordinates to that in the left. In other words, the word on the left takes precedence over the contrast of the word on the right. When that contrast is lost, the word on the left will lose its priority. So, if there is no inferior, how does the superior exist? Due to the absence of female characters in *Lord of the Flies*, this binary opposition collapses immediately, and in turn, this collapse directly destroys the existence of origin. With the disappearance of the origin, the meaning of the novel becomes uncertain, which permeates the whole text through "différance" of evil human nature and is concretely manifested as the uncertainty of human nature.

3. Uncertain Human Nature in Multifaceted Characters

The uncertainty of human nature is directly manifested in the characterization of the novel, in which the two main characters, Ralph and Jack, are analyzed.

3.1. Ralph: Evilness inside Good Ralph

Ralph is the representative character of goodness in this novel. He is a natural leader by virtue of his unique height, strength and beauty. In order to maintain civilization, he wants to establish an orderly and rational society on the island. Realizing the importance of fire, he leads others to set fires as a signal for hope and rescue. Together with Jack and Simon, he embarks on an expedition to learn about the geographical features of the island. Thus, it can be seen that Ralph is a projection of the good impulses of human beings and he tries to establish the necessity of effective ethical and social behavior of human beings.

However, Ralph's evil side can easily be seen in his attitude towards Piggy. He treated Piggy badly, but Piggy was always loyal to him, even when he was alone. Due to Piggy's obesity, asthma, and humble origins, Ralph looks down on him and never regards him as a friend, but only makes fun of him. He makes Piggy an object of ridicule by telling other people his nickname. When Piggy complains about Ralph's treacherous behavior, Ralph realizes that he has hurt Piggy's dignity. With conflicts in his mind, "Ralph, looking with more understanding at Piggy, saw that he was hurt and crushed. He hovered between the two courses of apology or further insult." Ralph struggles between the good and evil, and finally the evil triumphs, which is also a subversion of good always defeating evil. Ralph tries to defend himself with the directness of genuine leadership, saying "better Piggy

than Fatty...and anyway, I'm sorry if you feel like that. Now go back, Piggy, and take names. That's your job. So long." [12]. Ralph's wickedness also lies in his impolite interruption of Piggy's mention of his aunt, leaving women out of their conversation. Although Ralph has never considered Piggy as his friend, he relies on his intelligence as Piggy is the only one on the island who can think.

In Ralph's mind, good and evil meet with each other and hold a long blame meeting, with struggle, compromise, and truce. That's why he is often torn between good and evil. Out of the desire for a civilized life, he tries to do good things, but sometimes, driven by the lust, he also does bad things. In a word, in Ralph, good and evil are intertwined.

3.2. Jack: Light in Jack's Heart of Darkness

There is no doubt that Jack is an id-ridden character whose actions are primarily driven by his desire to hunt, injure and dominate others. With a strong appetite for meat, he hunts with his team and holds a grudge against Ralph's leadership. Over long periods of time, the hunters became more and more savage with painted faces, long hair and a good understanding of the wild liberation of the hidden mask. Their chant was "kill the pig, cut her throat, spill her blood", which is a metaphor for blood-drinking rituals. Jack seems almost irrational and inhuman, and sometimes he acts like an animal. When hunting, for example, he was "uncomfortably dog-like," with his "nose only a few inches from the humid earth," and "on all fours" forward into the dark forest.

Despite his bad deeds, Jack is not totally evil. He also has positive characteristics, such as courage and sharing spirit. In the beginning, he actively explores the outline of the island and had already visited every corner of the island. Jack declares that if there is a beast, his hunters will kill it, much to the comfort of the others. It is also this courage that makes Jack the leader, who can obtain meat and security for his team, the two things most needed for survival on the island, while Ralph cannot, because his main concern is only fire - a signal of rescue. From this perspective, we can see that good and evil are relative. Although Jack is authoritarian, he is not selfish. Every time they caught a pig, he wanted to share the meat with children who didn't hunt. At first, ego in Jack's heart also played a leading role in controlling his instincts, and he acted rationally during his first meeting. He is the first one to cry excitedly: "we'll have rules...Lots of rules!" [12] When the leader Ralph emphasizes they need more rules, Jack readily supports him: "I agree with Ralph. We've got to have rules and obey them. After all, we're not savages. We're English, and the English are best at everything. So, we've got to do the right things" [12]. This suggests that Jack has a civilized instinct, though it was largely replaced by a savage instinct under difficult circumstances. Another good characteristic about Jack is his intelligence, which can be seen from his idea of starting a fire with Piggy's glasses.

4. Uncertain Human Nature in Indeterminate Imagery

The imagery of "fire" and "conch" in *Lord of the Flies* also play a role in adding the uncertainty of the text, and at the same time, the uncertainty of human nature is vividly interpreted.

4.1. Indeterminacy of Fire: Resurrection or Destruction

The imagery of "fire" is quite ironic and has always been in a state of self-deconstruction. So, it is difficult for us to give "fire" a definite symbolic meaning, because at each stage, "fire" represents both hope and destruction, and actually implies both good and evil of human nature. It is both a symbol of resurrection and a symbol of destruction. As Bakhtin put that "Deeply ambivalent is the image of the fire in carnival. It is a fire that simultaneously destroys and renews the world." [13] This means that fire brings rebirth and death at the same time.

There is destruction in resurrection. Fire symbolizes life to Ralph and Piggy, who consider it as

the most important thing on the island because they rationally realize that luck can't save them. The fire also provides warmth and light to the cold and fearful boys in the endless dark and uncertain night. For the little guys, fire drives away the darkness of the imaginary beasts and gives them a sense of safety and warmth. At the same time, it is a symbol of their connection with the outside world. At first, the children lit fire by using Piggy's glasses to gather the sunlight as a signal asking for help to the outside world. However, it is this resurrected fire that burned and destroyed half of the forest, even swallowed the life of a child:

"That little -" Piggy gasped - "the little boy with the mark on his face, I didn't see him. Where is he? "

The crowd was as still as death.

Piggy threw himself down on a rock and held on with outstretched hands.

"That little guy with the mark on his face - where - is he now? I didn't see him."

The children looked at each other, frightened and confused.

"- Where is he now?" "Murmured Ralph, seeming ashamed." Probably he goes back there, that -"

Below them, on the cold side of the mountain, the drumbeat of fire continued to reverberate. [12]

In addition, there is also resurrection in destruction. Jack sets fire to the island, forcing Ralph to leave the forest. The fire at that time becomes a symbol of destruction destroying the forest which is the source of food and shelter for the boys and foreshadowing their tragic future. However, it is this forest fire that draws the officers' attention and saves the boys, rather than the signal fire they lit. As Golding suggests in the dramatic ending, fire has a symbolic meaning of resurrection from destruction.

All in all, the symbolic meaning of fire in *Lord of the Flies* is difficult to be defined in terms of its dualistic nature. Throughout the whole text, the imagery of "fire" has been in the process of self-contradiction and self-deconstruction. It is both the representative of good and evil, vividly showing the "differance" of human nature.

4.2. Indeterminacy of the Conch: Democracy or Autocracy

The conch is the first image appeared in *Lord of the Flies* and is the only image Golding gave special portrayal throughout the story. In the beginning, Ralph finds a conch in the sea and blows it on Piggy's advice: "A deep, harsh note boomed under the palms, spread through the intricacies of the forest and echoed back from the pink granite of the mountain." Hearing the sound of the conch, the scattered boys gather together for their first meeting, during which Ralph is elected as the chief because of his good looking and the conch he owns. The conch shows its function and charm as soon as it appears. In the eyes of children, it is mysterious and has an uncanny authority. As Ralph says, they can't speak at the same time, and only the person holding the conch has the right to speak. Thus, the conch is a symbol of order and democracy, signifying the continuation of civilization on this isolated island. They make the conch as a signal for meeting, as the leader Ralph says, "With the conch. I'm calling a meeting even if we have to go on into the dark. Down on the platform. When I blow it. Now." [13]

However, this democracy is not absolute and is always broken by some kind of autocracy. In fact, this kind of democracy, which depends so much on the power of the speaker, is the dictatorship and autocracy of a few big boys like Ralph, Jack and Simon. The little ones do not have any right to speak except for one little boy, Percival, who is given the right to speak with the conch when others want to learn from him about the beast. What's more, among the big boys, the physically weak Piggy, though holding the conch, is often interrupted and rebuffed; but the physically strong Jack has not got the conch and thus speaks against the rules; but nobody minds. To some extent, the conch becomes a symbol of autocracy, which is the same as dictatorship in the adult world. It is difficult to determine whether it symbolizes democracy or dictatorship, or both. In the conflict between the two groups, the

conch becomes insignificant, even useless, as the boy degenerates from civilization to barbarism. Ralph and Jack have contradictory feelings about this. Only Piggy always loves and respects this conch. Though shimmering and beautiful, the conch breaks easily and ends up exploding into many white fragments, suggesting the fragility of civilization. In short, the symbolic meaning of the conch in *Lord of the Flies* is uncertain and changeable, as it is understood by the reader and changes as the story progresses.

5. Conclusion

Although *Lord of the Flies* is deeply rooted in people's minds as a classic work that reveals "the evil of human nature" and Golding as a pessimist, as an important novel born in the post-modern period, the simple "evil human nature" seems to be difficult to cover all its implications. In fact, Golding's view of human nature can hardly be defined by simple pessimism or optimism. His deconstruction of "origin" in *Lord of the Flies* makes his text with great uncertainty. "Without absolute origin the understanding and interpretation of the text have considerable openness, randomness and uncertainty. The deconstruction of "origin" also shows his originality as an important writer in the post-modern period. Temporalization of time, interval of space, the multifaceted characters (Ralph and Jack) who are both good and evil, and the images (fire and conch) all reflect the complexity and diversity of Golding's own view towards human nature. With his original writing skills, Golding "differance" the "evil of human nature" in *Lord of the Flies*, and puts the diversity of human nature in uncertainty.

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