

The Social construction of childhood: explored with reference to Lord Of The Flies,  
William Golding

Within this assignment the social constructions of childhood will be explored with reference to William Golding's *Lord Of The Flies* (1954). It is believed that childhoods can be experienced differently in different contexts such as, history, culture, language, policy and economics.

Zwozdiak-Mayers (2007, p.7) goes on to say "circumstances force a significant change or re-construction of the idea of childhood, they often utilise existing ideological building blocks in social conventions and wider ideologies such as family structures and religious thinking". Similarly, Doherty and Hughes (2014, p.58) state that "the theory proposes that developmental changes are structured and mediated by society and culture. Childhood is socially constructed during the social events of our lives".

Childhood has changed significantly since pre-industrial revolution in 1780 depending on the context of the community in which they are raised, the dominant discourse before the Industrial revolution appeared to have been the puritanical discourse, this is when children were perceived to be born 'evil' and firm and physical discipline was accepted "Puritans did not necessarily have a high opinion of infants, the more zealous brethren asserting that they were born as 'filthy bundles of original sin', or 'young vipers'" (Heywood, 2001, p.22).

Within this assignment the discourses of childhood will be explored, both in terms of how they portray childhood and their presence within my chosen story *Lord Of The Flies*.

The way in which children are perceived has changed dramatically over the recent period of history, the way children are thought of significantly effects the way people interact with children in a professional context. McDowall Clark (2010, p. 17) states "Two important writers who have argued this case are Phillippe Ariès (1986) and Neil Postman (1994) who both suggest that childhood is a modern phenomenon that has only come into being in relatively recent times".

It is believed that in the medieval period, society didn't have any concept of childhood and children were regarded as small adults, who were required to live the same lifestyles as their parents, small boys would work within family businesses or alike and girls tended to work with their mothers, completeing domestic chores or completing jobs such as basket weaving, supported here by Aries (1986, p. 125, cited in McDowall Clark, 2010, p. 18) "in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist; this is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken or despised".

In the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century children and their families moved to the cities and began working even longer days, Heywood (2004, p. 130) supports this by recognising that "a certain Dame Bernard was employing Marie and two other girls in their early teens for sixteen hours a day".

Children and their families found themselves being exploited by the rich whom they worked for, "The child worker was a central if pitiful figure in both contemporary and classic accounts of the british industrial revolution, but in modern economic history, the children who toiled in early mills, mines and manufactories have become invisible" (Humphries, 2010, p.1).

This began the turning point in the perception of childhood, children became commercially and economically valuable and parents began protecting children more because of this. Lord Shaftsbury, began making changes for the rights of children, in 1833 he attempted restricting the working hours of children, which was declined but because of his attempt of this, the government accepted that children did need protecting more and decided to put forward the 1833 Factory Act, which was passed by parliament on 29<sup>th</sup> August 1833 (Simkin, 2017).

Mary Carpenter who also wanted to help children and in particular, feral children, opened a boy's school in 1846 to help reform them instead of punishing them, a few years later in 1854 she opened a school for girls which had strict rules. Mary Carpenter created revolutionary changes, where the law was changed to look at reformatory schools as an alternative to prison.

Carpenter believed many pupils made a massive change to their life attending a reformatory school, "a series of schools were described, which as far as existing social regulations permitted, have been proved to be eminently effective in checking the process of juvenile delinquency" (Carpenter, 1851, p. 311).

At this point in time there seemed to be a shift in the dominant discourse of childhood, Pre-industrial revolution the dominant discourse appeared to be the puritanical discourse, believing children were born evil and needed strict punishment, children seen in public spaces were seen as a problem, supported here by Maynard and Thomas (2009, p. 22) "he found numerous examples of the brutal treatment of children and of their being introduced to an adult world at a very early

age through both sexual play and exploitation and as a commodity within labour markets”.

As the years went on, this changed to the Utilitarian discourse with the influence of Shaftsbury and Carpenter believing children shouldn't be in the work place and should be protected within education, attitudes changed and people began to realise industrialisation needs educated and healthy workers, James and James (2004, p. 117) state “children learn their social place via the class inequalities perpetuated in the educational codes through which schooling is encrypted”.

It is believed the romantic discourse began to slightly appear around the post industrial revolution period, As Aries (1962, p. 110 and p. 122, cited in Smith, 2009, p. 30) supports here “Children's innocence came to be emphasized, as were their weakness and ignorance”. This seems to be the dominant discourse apparent in today's society.

Discourses relevant within *Lord of the Flies* (Golding 1954) appear to be both the Puritanical and Romantic, with Puritanical being the dominant one, “Bollocks to the rules! We're strong- we hunt! If there's a beast, well hunt it down! We'll close in and beat and beat and beat---” (Golding, 1954, p.114).

This seems to be the turning point at which the puritanical discourse took over, at the beginning of the book, Golding portrayed vulnerable, innocent, middle-class boys, fitting perfectly into the Romantic discourse “They suffered untold terrors in the dark and huddled together for comfort” (Golding, 1954, p.74).

As the book goes on the Savagery increases, Golding repeatedly includes a chant through out the book which the boys do whilst they hunt or kill "Kill the pig! Cut his throat! Kill the pig! Bash him in!". In addition to this, within chapter 9 the boy's savagery seems to be at its peak, they end up killing 'Simon', they create another chant 'kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood! Do him in!'. It states the boys "leapt on to the beast, screamed, struck, bit, tore (Golding, 1954, p. 187).

The social context in Britain around the time of Golding writing *Lord of the flies* (Golding, 1954) was very much still strongly influenced by the war, and young boys seemed to mimick the militarism of their elders and used surplus army equipment to have pretend battles with Germans (Quinault, 2001).

It is believed that Golding's influence for the *Lord of the Flies*, is his experience within world war II, "William Golding's personal life experiences were the thread that pulled together the themes of inherent human evil, the rules of civilization, and boyhood impulse in his novel *Lord of the Flies*" (Overcamp, 2016).

Golding tried to make a point that 'if we don't stand together, a bully can take control'. Jack stands as Ralph's rival, he has the mentality of a fascist and dominates the younger boys from the beginning and doesn't show any concerns for the other boys as they fall, Where as Ralph is tolerant, caring and will take the advice from others but this seems to be his downfall (Wilson, 1986, p. 53). As the group is split and majority of the boys seem to join Jack, it allows the way for the 'bully' to take control. The herald (2018) states that a "white-hot hatred exploded in Hitler for those who signed the armistice. He longed for a future ruled by a Greater Germany".

This seems to support Golding's influence of war and his experience of living in the conditions he did. Jack seems to have been created on Hitler's image. Like Hitler, Jack has a hatred for the boys who didn't do or say as he liked. Golding reinstates that there is a certain way in which bullies and good people behave, on page 224 Golding states how the chief snatched one of the few spears that were left and poked Sam in the ribs. The prodding became rhythmic. Sam yelled. (Golding, 1954).

There appears to be key themes throughout *Lord of the Flies*. These include gender, disability, social class and age. The most dominant stereotype within the book appears to be disability, mainly lying with 'Piggy' and 'Simon'. Piggy's name connects him with the pigs on the island that the boys kill and eat, like the pigs- he is different to the other boys (Haugrud Reiff, 2010, p. 82).

Piggy has Asthma which limits him with doing jobs and hunting, wears glasses, and is also over weight. These disabilities are introduced to the reader from the beginning, he states his Auntie tells him not to run because of his Asthma and that he struggles to catch his breath. He continues to say he has worn glasses since he was 3 (Golding, 1954). Jack almost sees Piggy as inferior to himself, he sees him as a target and picks on him from the beginning of the novel, calling him fatty and giving remarks on his ability and image. This again is almost like Golding is influenced by Hitler and the Nazis, Friedlander (1995, p. 151) states "the long-range goal of ridding Germany of the disabled involved at first compulsory sterilization and then mass murder".

On pages 27 and 28, Simon faints due to his epilepsy. Jack shows no care towards him and tells the boys "let him alone. He's always throwing a faint" (Golding, 1954). Simon is the first child to be killed by the feral boys, this gives reference to Hitler determined to get the disabled killed early on. The state authorized the killing of disabled people who they viewed as inferior degenerates "the ballast existence", who were not able to work and placed an unnecessary economic burden on the community (Poore, 2009, p. 86).

Golding seems to portray an imagine of males being dominant, The book involves a group of boys from a boys school who have been stranded on this island. On page 139 Golding (1954) explains how Ralph begins day dreaming about home and the books in his room.

It says how Topsy and Mopsy had never been read because it was about two girls. Then it highlights the names of a few other books these include, The Boy's Book of Trains, The Boy's book of Ships and The Mammoth Book for Boys.

This is portraying the imagine that as a boy, you can only read books made specifically for your gender or with objects in which are seen as masculine. A research study analysed children's book and found that "children's books revealed distinct gender patterns that include underrepresentation of female characters and instances of gender stereotyping" (Filipović, 2017).

In addition to this on page 212, the boys are talking about how much their hair has grown and that it needs brushing, Piggy says "we could find some stuff and tie your hair back". Ralph's response was "like a girl". Stating that it is only girls who can tie their hair back. Ralph goes on to say they will go as they are to and they wont be

any better – referring to Jack and his tribe. Making out like if they had their hair tide up they would be seen to be weaker and inferior.

Within the video *Golding's introduction to Lord of The Flies (2010)*, Golding states that he chose to write the story using boys as he was a little boy, a brother, a son, a father and that he didn't mean it to be stereotypical. So this gave him the influence of using boys instead of girls.

Golding began writing this book in 1951, six years after the second world war ended, with it having such an impact on Goldings life, he came to the conclusion that people are not naturally kind and that if circumstances demand or allow for incredible cruelty, then even children are capable of it (Francis and Walker, 2010, p. 5). Which gave him the influence to portray this image within his novel, showing that without rules and punishment the boys become savage, fitting perfectly into the definition of the puritanical discourse.

Ralph started out with innocence and hope, at the end of the story he understands the nature of man stands between himself and happiness. This lesson is trite but Golding believes it needs to be driven home (Golding, 1954, p. 256). Golding tries to show that all men are equal, no matter the nation they are from, but the only enemy is inside them, known as innate.

Golding appears to be influenced from the book *The Coral Island* written in 1857 by Professor Carl Niemeyer. Golding read this book and thought that it was too unrealistic, he didn't believe the boys would all get along and nature would take it



course, "Golding was inspired to write the 'real' story of what would happen if boys were stranded on an island" (Presley, 2017).

In Conclusion, within this module I have learnt a great deal about the discourses surrounding childhood, which I wasn't aware even existed when beginning the module. I didn't realize that literature played such a big part within childhood, and the messages in which they hold.

It has been very interesting exploring the change in childhood and society since before the industrial revolution, The dominant discourse pre-industrial revolution was the puritanical, where people believed children were born evil and needed harsh punishment.

"Puritans did not necessarily have a high opinion of infants, the more zealous brethren asserting that they were born as 'filthy bundles of original sin', or 'young vipers'" (Heywood, 2001, p.22). The discourses began to slowly shift, nowadays the relevant discourse is the Romantic. I completely support the Romantic discourse and believe children are vulnerable and innocent and need protection and guidance from parents, guardians or carers.

Which Aries appeared to support, "Children's innocence came to be emphasized, as were their weakness and ignorance" (1962, p. 110 and p. 122, cited in Smith, 2009, p. 30).

From my experience in practice, risk assessment, policies, procedures and safeguarding are highly important factors, which are completely influenced by this

idea of the Romantic discourse. "Providers must take all necessary steps to keep children safe and well" (DfE, 2017, p. 16.).

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