Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 10 (59) No. 1 – 2017

Tribal organisation in *Lord of the Flies*. An anthropological perspective

Aniela TOMA[1]

It has been shown that man developed from a peaceful, fruit-picking being into a violent, carnivorous one. A similar development can be seen in William Golding's "Lord of the Flies", where a group of children gradually separates into two tribes, each being organised based on a different set of principles. As such, placing the text into the broader context of anthropological studies and analysing the way in which the theme is constructed from a narrative point of view, I will argue that the tribal organisation on the island closely resembles that of the primitive man. It is this pattern that, although it cannot justify violent acts, could make one argue that there is something in our collective consciousness that makes one act and develop in a similar manner.

Keywords: *consciousness, Fruit-pickers, Lupine organization, tribe, violence*

1. Introduction

If we are to think about the finality of a literary work, one could claim that one of its purposes is to highlight, or criticise certain elements of the society at a specific moment in time, while playing with the subtleties of language. Nevertheless, even if the point of reference, i.e. the surrounding world, is the same, with the afferent cultural variations, one could not deny the fact that literary studies are needed in order to help the reader decipher the text, both from a linguistic point of view and in terms of plot significations.

Ignoring the scenarios where the reader fails to comprehend specific meanings due to language-related limitations, one needs to acknowledge the fact that literary studies are relevant and important mostly because a literary text can be so opaque and coded that the average reader could not see the meanings behind the plot by judging solely the narrative body. It may be that placing the text in a specific historical/sociological/religious context completely changes the significations of the text. Moreover, the text could play on intertextuality, so meanings would be definitely lost if the reader is not familiar with the intertexts. Consequently, I believe that a broader literary analysis is important because no text is written in isolation,

[1] West University of Timisoara, aniela.toma92@e-uvt.ro

BDD-A27312 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:30 UTC)

but the narrative is definitely shaped by cultural and historical factors, factors which become embedded in the narrative, conscientiously or not. In this sense, a diachronic type of analysis is necessary in order to highlight the possible meanings that would not be grasped by a reader who is not familiar with the context, or with the intertexts.

On the other hand, one must not forget that literature is not only about the plot, or meaning, but it is also about language, so placing a literary text in a specific context does not suffice for fully disclosing its significations. As such, close-reading and paying attention to specific language structures are imperative for understanding how meaning is built from a linguistic point of view, this type of analysis being closely linked to the synchronic approach. We see therefore that literary studies imply a balance between the two types of approaches, as a literary text cannot be isolated from the historical context, but the narrative body itself should not be neglected in favour of the historical background.

As such, in what follows, I will make use of an interdisciplinary approach for studying the tribal organisation of the children in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies.* I will argue that the way in which the children organise themselves on the island closely mimics the development of the primitive man from a peaceful being into a violent one. I will firstly discuss Robert Eisler's observations regarding the primitive man and I will then move on to analysing the way in which this is reflected in *Lord of the Flies.* Consequently, it is important to notice that for this type of analysis, I will both place the text into a broader context and I will closely look at a literary text in order to see how the theme I am interested in is constructed from a narrative point of view.

2. On Lycanthropy

Talking about *Lord of the Flies*, many critics focused on the ideas of Christianity and of violence, on the way in which one acts when one departs from the civilized world. Another aspect which is of great interest is the cruel way in which children are capable of acting. For example, Woodward talks about the impressive violent potential that children have, who, unless they are educated and disciplined, can cause great problems in the society (2010, 57-58). She goes on to add that children do not necessarily mirror the violence of adults, but they actually become penitential enemies of the adult world (2010, 60). Although one acknowledges the presence of violence, it is necessary to notice that it is not the entire group of children that turn to violent practices, but they split in two different tribes, this split being very similar to the one Eisler saw between the fruit-pickers and the carnivorous tribes.

If we are to discuss religious rituals, such as the Dionysian ones for example, one could easily regard them as savage and primitive. Nevertheless, the primitive man is not exactly how we imagine him to be and Robert Eisler describes this very

BDD-A27312 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:30 UTC)

well in *Man into Wolf An Anthropological Interpretation of Sadism, Masochism and Lycanthropy*. What Eisler is saying is that the primitive man was not at all savage, in the way in which we understand the term today. The primitive man was mainly a fruit-picker, who would not kill animals and, most importantly, who would not kill one of his own (1951, 27-29). In order to prove that it is possible for the primitive man to have been peaceful, Eisler gives examples of numerous tribes, such as the Eskimo and tribes from India, New Guinea, the Philippines, etc., that do not have the notion of war even today (1951, 28). What is more, Eisler points out the fact that most of the monkeys, whose nature is closer to that of the primitive man, eat fruit and seeds only (1951, 28).

A very interesting idea that Eisler puts forward is that sin became a concept when a part of the herd started to do something which was not done before and this was probably the shift from the vegetarian diet to the carnivorous one (1951, 40). Moreover, when man began killing animals and when he sensed that what he was doing was wrong, he started killing even more animals, which were offered as sacrifices to the gods, in order to appease them and in order to ask for forgiveness for their initial wrong doing (1951, 40). The fact that many tribe names, such as Luvians, Lucanians, etc., contain the word "wolf" makes one believe that this dietary shift was a conscious one which had a great emotional effect on the primitive man (1951, 33-34). The subconscious trauma triggered by this transition is visible in a certain type of madness, called lycanthropy and which is characterized by a violent behavior of the ill, who believes that he is a wolf (1951, 34). Eisler explains that there were cases of mass lycanthropy, such as in France in the late 16th century and he compares the behavior of the mad with that of Dionysus' followers (1951, 35). We see therefore that there are certain behavioural patterns which do not belong solely to one group, or to one religion, but which are rather widespread; hence they appear to be universal.

Just like any transition, the one from the vegetarian diet to the carnivorous one was by no means smooth. In this sense, Eisler describes how the lupine tribes would raid the fruit-pickers' tribes, killing the men, raping the women and destroying their habitat altogether (1951, 37). Therefore, we notice that the shift was not only a dietary one, but it was also a shift from a peaceful organisation to a violent one, mainly because the act of killing animals, even if it was done for survival purpose only, kindled one's violent impulses. Consequently, Eisler traces the roots of one's sadistic drives in this exact lupine organisation of the tribes, organisation which is still present in our collective consciousness (1951, 50-51).

3. The Fruit-Pickers vs. the Carnivorous

Boyd very well notices that confining the children on the island enables one to study the human nature and its development (2008, 30). Therefore, even if one observes

BDD-A27312 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:30 UTC)

one's behaviour in a limited environment, one will still be able to draw general conclusions and one such conclusion is Boyd's belief that the separation of children in two tribes reflects very well the political organisation of the Western world (2008, 34). Nevertheless, even if the children's actions on the island seem to perfectly mimic the organisation of our contemporary world, I would argue that they mirror even better the development of the primitive man, from a peaceful to a violent being.

As seen in the first part, Eisler discusses about the shift from the vegetarian diet to the carnivorous one and about the changes that this transition entails (1951, 40). It is very interesting to notice that this transition is visible in *Lord of the Flies* as well and it is exactly the dietary choice that separates the children in two groups: Ralph's group and Jack's group. Initially, the children are all the same: they wake up in the middle of the nature and at first they feel overwhelmed by it, without having the feeling that they could possess it. Their initial organisation, under Ralph's command, is a peaceful one and in terms of diet, they survive at fist by eating all types of fruits.

Nevertheless, fruit-picking seemed not to be enough and, realising that they will probably remain on the island for a long period of time, they began to think at new survival solutions. It is Jack who, mainly because of his thirst for power, shouts first: "We'll get food […] Hunt. Catch things…" (39). One must not forget the fact that they are not only children, but that they are also living in a world where food is taken for granted and hunting is, at best, a sport for the rich. As such, having to fight with one's own hands for one's food must have had a great effect on the children and this is visible in their first attempt to kill a piglet:

> The three boys rushed forward and Jack drew his knife again with a flourish. He raised his arm in the air. There came a pause, a hiatus, the pig continued to scream and the creepers to jerk, and the blade continued to flash at the end of a bony arm. The pause was only long enough for them to understand what an **enormity** the downward stroke would be. Then the piglet tore loose from the creepers and scurried into the undergrowth. They were left looking at each other and the place of terror. Jack's face was white under the freckles. He noticed that he still held the knife aloft and brought his arm down replacing the blade in the sheath. Then they all three laughed ashamedly and began to climb back to the track.
>
> "I was choosing a place," said Jack. "I was just waiting for a moment to decide where to stab him."
>
> "You should stick a pig," said Ralph fiercely. "They always talk about sticking a pig."
>
> "You cut a pig's throat to let the blood out," said Jack, "otherwise you can't eat the meat."
>
> "Why didn't you—?"

BDD-A27312 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:30 UTC)

> They knew very well why he hadn't: because of the **enormity** of the knife descending and **cutting into living flesh**; because of the **unbearable blood**.
> "I was going to," said Jack. He was ahead of them, and they could not see his face. "I was choosing a place. **Next time**—!" (40-41, my emphases).

We see therefore that the first attempt to kill a pig, even if it is for survival purposes and not for entertainment, does not come naturally to the children, mostly because of the fact that they are shocked by the "enormity" of what they are about to do. What is more, killing is not a clean act, but it involves struggle, screaming and, eventually, the sight of the "unbearable blood" (41). As such, in order to be able to go through with the act, one needs to change one's attitude and mentality, as acting peacefully would result in starvation. Although the transition towards violence is by no means an easy one, one notices that Jack's attitude slowly changes right after his initial hunting failure. His promise that next time is going to be different, that "next time there would be no mercy" (41) is accompanied by a fierce look, which is meant not only to prove Jack's power to the group, but also to encourage Jack himself, to reassure himself that he is capable of providing for the tribe, even if this implies killing.

In order to increase their chances of surviving on the island, the children split into smaller groups, each group having its own responsibility. For example, some of the children would be in charge with building shelters, while others would be responsible for providing food, their daily activity being therefore hunting. However, there was one duty that they were all responsible for, in turns, and that is keeping the fire burning, since in Ralph's view, fire was their only chance of escaping from the island. However, if Ralph identifies survival with the idea of being rescued from the island, for Jack and his group, survival comes to mean hunting. As such, a very important episode of the novel is that when Jack and the boys that follow him choose hunting instead of watching the fire exactly at a moment when a ship was sailing by.

What makes this passage really powerful is both the different natures of Ralph and Jack, difference which becomes more and more difficult to manage, and the violence that is kindled by the successful hunting spree. The contrast between what Ralph sees as a failure (letting the fire out) and what Jack sees as a success (killing the pig) would eventually result in the complete separation of the two groups, similarly to the way in which the primitive man developed from a vegetarian, peaceful being, into a carnivorous, violent one.

Besides the actual ideological differences between Ralph and Jack, it is interesting to analyse how the passage of the dying fire and of the pig hunt is made from a narrative point of view. Seeing a ship sailing in the horizon, Ralph is initially optimistic that they will be rescued, since their smoke signal would be seen by the sailors. Nevertheless, Ralph's dream of being rescued is soon shattered by the realisation that the fire is no longer burning, which leads Ralph to exclaim: "They let

BDD-A27312 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:30 UTC)

the **bloody** fire out." (85, my emphasis). I find that the choice of the word bloody is a very interesting one, since, even if it could be perceived simply as a swear word, it actually foregrounds the following episode, the description of the hunt and the way in which the two groups will interact from this point onwards.

Ralph's disappointment with Jack and Jack's group is very interestingly intermingled with the success of the hunters, who, just like Jack promised, showed no mercy next time. Thus, just as Ralph realizes that the fire has died out, one hears the chants of the hunters, who approach carrying a dead pig. Excitedly, Jack begins to recount how the hunting episode unfolded, however, Ralph keeps interrupting him with the accusation "You let the fire out." (87 twice, 88 twice). Nevertheless, Jack's enjoyment of having killed the pig is not so easily overshadowed by the fire mishap and he and his group continue to brag with their brave, savage actions:

> Jack checked, vaguely irritated by this irrelevance but too happy to let it worry him.
> "We can light the fire again. You should have been with us, Ralph. We had a **smashing time**. The twins got **knocked over**—"
> "We **hit** the pig—"
> "—I **fell** on top—"
> "I **cut** the pig's throat," said Jack, **proudly**, and yet **twitched** as he said it. "Can I borrow yours, Ralph, to make a nick in the hilt?"
> The boys chattered and danced. The twins continued to grin.
> "There was **lashings of blood**," said Jack, **laughing and shuddering**,
> "You should have seen it!"
> "**We'll go hunting every day**—" (87, my emphases)

What is very interesting about this passage is the fact that the shift towards the lupine organisation of the group becomes more and more visible. The blood, which was initially "unbearable" (41), becomes a reason for joy and a sign that one has triumphed. Moreover, the satisfaction that one feels as a result of killing a living being is obvious from the vocabulary employed in this passage: the struggle with the pig is emphasised by using verbs which imply violence through their meaning – "knocked over", "hit", "fell", cut" (87) – and the whole experience is described as "a smashing time" (87), which can make one also think about the idea of breaking and tearing something apart. Even if this episode is perceived in a positive manner by the hunters, it is still interesting to notice that they are not yet completely at ease with the act of killing. As such, Jack cannot help but twitch and shudder while talking about the hunt, which shows that what Eisler said about sin, i.e. that it came into existence when someone from the herd did something one did not do before, such as kill an animal (1951, 40), is probably true. Therefore, we notice that the act

BDD-A27312 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:30 UTC)

of killing has outcomes of a dual nature: on the one hand it makes one feel empowered, but on the other hand it triggers a sense of guilt, this guilt being caused by the fact that one has acted in a different way from the rest of the group. Nevertheless, despite the negative implications of the act of killing, the empowering feeling is still of a greater impact, this being seen in the children's conclusion – "we'll go hunting ever day" (87).

But the hunting will not be limited to animals only, as one will soon begin to hunt those who refused to join Jack's side and I believe that the roots of the group's complete separation are found in this exact episode. This is mainly due to the fact that during the successful hunt, a large amount of violence was unleashed and, together with this violence, a large amount of power. Although Piggy was mocked from the very beginning, it is only after Jack and his group killed the pig that Piggy is physically abused:

> "You didn't ought to have let that fire out. You said you'd keep the smoke going—"
> This from Piggy, and the wails of agreement from some of the hunters, **drove Jack to violence**. The bolting look came into his blue eyes. He took a step, and **able at last to hit someone**, stuck his fist into Piggy's stomach. Piggy sat down with a grunt. Jack stood over him. His voice was vicious with humiliation.
>
> "You would, would you? Fatty!"
>
> Ralph made a step forward and Jack **smacked** Piggy's head. Piggy's glasses flew off and tinkled on the rocks." (89, my emphases)

What is extremely interesting is the fact that Jack, although he always had rather violent drives, is "able at last to hit someone" (89) and this happened only after he saw that he was able to kill a living creature. Therefore, if he was strong enough to kill a pig, he would not have to listen to Piggy's reproaches, he would not have to listen to Ralph anymore and he would be perfectly capable to be the leader of the group. As such, we notice that this episode marks a very important rupture in the group, rupture which would result in total war between the tribes, this being just so similar with what Eisler describes about the fight between tribes of fruit-pickers and lupine ones (1951, 37).

As far as the actual separation of the group is concerned, one of the arguments against continuing to have Ralph as a leader is that "[h]e's not a hunter. He'd never have got us meat" (157). Moreover, all Ralph does is give orders, but he does not appear as powerful anymore, simply because he does not do any killing, like Jack does. As such, since he fails to accommodate to the new way in which the group is

BDD-A27312 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:30 UTC)

organised, Ralph loses credibility, at least in front of those who came to know the power conferred by the act of killing.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that Jack and his group seem more equipped to survive, there are still some basic elements that they are not familiar with, such as making a fire. The day Jack and his boys managed to kill a pig for the first time, it was not only the pig that died, but they let the fire die as well, which resulted in their prolonged stay on the island. Now, even if the hunters separated themselves from Ralph's fruit-pickers, they encounter yet again the problem of the fire, since they do not know how to build one. The solution Jack proposes seems simple enough: "We'll raid them and take fire" (169), he says, and this is exactly what they do. What is more, they do not raid Ralph's group only for fire, but also for bringing more children to their side. We notice therefore that Eisler's account on the fight between the fruit-pickers and lupine groups is very accurately transcribed in *Lord of the Flies* as well: the group is not only divided as a result of dietary change, but the carnivorous groups having known the power of murder, begin to act violently against the peaceful fruit-pickers.

The moment that probably marks best the complete separation between the two tribes is in my view Piggy's death. Of course, Simon's death is an important episode as well, but Simon was murdered in a kind of unconscious manner, whereas Piggy was killed deliberately. This is the point where the violence of the children reaches its peak, mostly because they are not afraid to act violently anymore. They have hated Piggy from the very beginning and they have started by verbally and then physically abuse him, but it was difficult to imagine that they would actually go through with killing the boy. Nevertheless, they do and there is no sense of remorse in the gesture. What is more, it is not only Piggy that is killed, but the conch, the symbol of Ralph's power and tribal organisation is shattered as well. Jack takes advantage of the moment and warns Ralph: "See? See? That's what you'll get! I meant that! There isn't a tribe for you any more! The conch is gone" (223). As such, we notice that the act of killing Piggy has no feeling of guilt attached to it, but it is yet another proof of Jack's power and of what Dalrymple called the "dionysiac excitement of the hunters' life" (2010, 86).

As for Jack's threat that Ralph will get the same treatment as Piggy, this is by no means an empty one, since Jack is not happy just with destroying Ralph's tribe, but he wants to hurt the former leader as well. Consequently, the group plans to hunt Ralph, just like they would hunt a pig. Discussing the Christian ideas that could be found in Golding's work, Anderson notices that God is absent, mainly because he is no longer needed, and this results in many horrible and savage acts that man does in the name of his ideas, be it religious or not (2010, 56-57). This is exactly what happens in this case as well, since Jack proves capable of acting extremely violent in order to enforce his ideas on how the group should be organised. Since the only remaining thing that could threat his authority is Ralph, hunting Ralph becomes paramount. Ralph himself finds out about the hunt from the twins:

BDD-A27312 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:30 UTC)

> "They hate you, Ralph. They're going to do you. They're going to hunt you tomorrow."
> "But why?"
> "I dunno. And Ralph, Jack, the chief, says it'll be dangerous—"
> "—and we've got to be careful and throw our spears like at a pig."
> "We're going to spread out in a line across the island—"
> "—we're going forward from this end—"
> "—until we find you."
> "We've got to give signals like this."
> Eric raised his head and achieved a faint ululation by beating on his open mouth. Then he glanced behind him nervously.
> "Like that—"
> "—only louder, of course."
> "But I've done nothing," whispered Ralph, urgently. "I only wanted to keep up a fire!" (232)

Probably the most interesting aspect of this episode is the fact that one plans to hunt Ralph as if he were a pig. Crawford discusses this overlapping between the pig hunt and the human hunt and he identifies anti-Semitic connotations, since the human hunt results in the annihilation of the unfit (2010, 77). While the parallel with Nazism and anti-Semitism might be a valid one, I believe that the human hunt could be seen simply as the continuation of the animal one, through the unleashing of violence and through the feeling of power attached to the act of killing. What is more, in order for the children to be able to kill one of their own, they need to dehumanize their victim. As such, Piggy, even because of the name one gave him, was always closer to an animal, to a pig, than to a human being, so killing him was not so different from a regular hunt. As far as Ralph is concerned, one needs to compare hunting him with hunting an animal and one needs to reduce Ralph to the condition of a prey, this enabling the children to continue feeling empowered and entitled to murder their former leader. Thus, we see that killing Ralph would be necessary for the preservation of Jack's status, nevertheless, one needs to make use of animal and hunting-related imagery in order to be able to proceed with the act. Does this make the act of murder more understandable? Probably not, but given the fact that the primitive man evolved in a similar manner, it seems that there is something in our collective consciousness which makes us seize power from the weaker, through violence.

BDD-A27312 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:30 UTC)

4. Conclusions

To conclude, we have noticed that the way in which the children organise themselves on the island closely resembles the development of the primitive man from a peaceful being into a violent one. While this cannot act as a justification for engaging in violent acts, this could definitely make one argue that there is something common in our collective consciousness that makes one behave and develop in a similar manner. This common pattern is also obvious in the characters one constructs, characters that follow the very same model that seems to be inscribed in our consciousness.

For my analysis, I made use of Eisler's observations on the primitive man and then looked at how these observations are reflected in Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. I was interested in the text not only from a thematic perspective, but I also wanted to see how this theme is constructed from a narrative point of view. As such, I would argue that literary analysis needs to be a combination between synchronic and diachronic approaches, as each type of approach contributes to decoding various layers of meaning.

References

Anderson, David. 2010. "Golding's Difficult Christianity". In *William Golding's Lord of the Flies,* ed. by Harold Bloom, 55-58. New York: Infobase Publishing.

Boyd, Stephen. 2008. "The Nature of the Beast in *Lord of the Flies"*. In *William Golding's Lord of the Flies*, ed. by Harold Bloom, 27-45. New York: Infobase Publishing.

Crawford, Paul. 2010. "On Human Depravity in the Novel". In *William Golding's Lord of the- Flies*, ed. by Harold Bloom, 74-79. New York: Infobase Publishing.

Dalrymple, Theodore. 2010. "On Human Depravity in the Novel". In *William Golding's Lord of the Flies*, ed. by Harold Bloom, 84-90. New York: Infobase Publishing.

Eisler, Robert. 1951. *Man into Wolf An Anthropological Interpretation of Sadism, Masochism, and Lycanthropy*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.

Golding, William. 2005 (1954). *Lord of the Flies.* London: Faber and Faber.

Woodward, Kathleen. 2010. "The Capacity for Evil in Children". In *William Golding's Lord of the Flies*, ed. by Harold Bloom, 58-60. New York: Infobase Publishing.

BDD-A27312 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:30 UTC)