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Is Inhumanity Humanity?

If one were to conduct a survey of everyday Americans on the human condition, many people would likely reply with a jaunty line such as, “we have a long way to go but I feel like we’re progressing. We’re more tolerant, enlightened, and smart.” Such would be the vague, complacent submission of most comfortable, middle-class Americans. According to a blithe declaration from The Washington Post, “humanity itself has never been better off. People are living longer, healthier, richer lives than ever before.” (Plumer) But beneath the soaring achievements of technology, medicine, and science, lurks an ancient, primordial monster: man’s heart. Such is the monster of William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, which causes the most quintessentially innocent of characters, young boys, to devolve into murderous savages. In this harsh, grim work, Golding explores the root cause of human behavior: stranded on an uninhabited island, a group of pre-pubescent boys struggle to survive, first against hunger and the elements, then against their inner spite, jealousy, and violence. Golding’s choice of age for his characters brings to mind Paul’s exhortation in 1 Corinthians 14:20: “Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men.” As a model of Christian behavior, Paul speaks of the moral innocence of children tempered by discernment; however, in both respects the boys blunder catastrophically, morally degenerating into monsters while remaining ignorant of their folly.

Paul's words in Corinthians seem highly paradoxical, but their two elements do not contradict. First, Paul speaks of the discernment of the mind. As Solomon discusses in Proverbs, Biblical wisdom involves recognizing the consequences of sin. Biblical reasons for avoiding sin are moral, yes; however, they are often also pragmatic, analyzing the damage sin does to those who practice it. To this end, Proverbs 5:8-10 says, "Remove thy way far from [the harlot], and come not nigh the door of her house: lest thou give thine honour unto others, and thy years unto the cruel: lest strangers be filled with thy wealth; and thy labours be in the house of a stranger." Thus, Paul in 1 Corinthians is not speaking of esoteric philosophical ramblings, but of a grounded, Biblical understanding of the consequences of man's actions.

Paradoxically, however, Paul also calls upon his readers to be child-like, a quality generally associated with ignorance and immaturity. However, in Biblical context, it means something more: innocence and purity. Though possessing knowledge of sin and its dangers, the Corinthians are to be, experientially, unfamiliar with moral transgressions, similar to how a child is incapable of being addicted to smoking or sex. Paul does not say that such guileless purity comes naturally to humans. Rather, as Golding makes clear in *Lord of the Flies*, innocence is opposite to man's nature. The effort to be "wise as serpents" but "harmless as doves" must be a conscious and daily endeavor in the life of a Christian, but the boys in *Lord of the Flies* falter, succumbing to their own internal corruption.

In some senses, *Lord of the Flies* is a story of slippery slopes. As the boys, no older than twelve, allow greater and greater darkness into their hearts, their minds justify greater and greater acts of wickedness. Ultimately, this causes them to degenerate into avaricious, violent barbarians with full intentions of torture and violence. In these slippery slopes lie both of the boys' failings according to Paul. Firstly, led by the choir-boy Jack, the boys become desensitized to the

brutality they inflict on the pigs of the island in the name of hunting. In their first encounter with the animals, Jack hesitates with the beast at knife-point: “They knew very well why he hadn’t [killed it]: because of the enormity of the knife descending and cutting into living flesh; because of the unbearable blood.” (Golding 35) But a later hunt unforgivingly shows the corruption of the boys’ hearts:

... [The sow] squealed and bucked and the air was full of sweat and noise and blood and terror. [...] Jack was on top of the sow, stabbing downward with his knife. Roger found a lodgment for his point and began to push till he was leaning with his whole weight. The spear moved forward inch by inch and the terrified squealing became a high-pitched scream. Then Jack found the throat and the hot blood spouted over his hands. (189)

After the hunt, the boys sever the head and skewer it into the earth on a double-pointed stick. Though disturbing enough, their lust for blood is driven to new lengths each chapter. By the end of the novel, the boys’ prey is not a pig, but a wounded boy named Ralph. Now naked and painted barbarians, they chase him through the jungle, carrying a double-pointed stick for the consummation of their inhumanity – or, as Golding would propose, their natural humanity.

Paul’s message of youthful innocence is not easily followed; even the school-boys and choir-boys of Golding’s novel fail to follow it. *Lord of the Flies* teaches readers that moral purity is antithetical to man’s nature. Thus, Golding’s novel is not an easy read; it is a dark and troubling one. Readers feel the piercing allegory: the island in *Lord of the Flies* is the human world at large; the boys are not insane psychotics, but normal children who represent the whole of humanity. It is this correlation that brings the violence and despair of *Lord of the Flies* into the reader’s world, the reader’s consciousness, and the reader’s heart.

Works Cited

Golding, William. *The Lord of the Flies*. New York: Penguin, 2003. Print.

Plumer, Brad. "The environment's getting worse, yet humanity's doing better than ever. What gives?" *The Washington Post*. 22 April 2012. Web. 15 April 2015.