## Student Essay on Criticism on Lord of the Flies

In William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, Ralph asks Piggy, "What makes things break up like they do?" (127). It is a question that has given rise to much speculation in critical circles. What causes the societal breakdown on the island in *Lord of the Flies*? Golding himself has said the cause is nothing more than the inherent evil of man; no matter how well-intentioned he is, and no matter how reasonable a government he erects, man will never be able to permanently contain the beast within. But other critics have offered alternative explanations, most of which are based on the assumption that the beast can, in fact, be contained. Bernard F. Dick argues that the suppression of this natural, bestial side of man results in its unhealthy eruption and the consequent societal breakdown.

John F. Fitzgerald and John R. Kayser suggest that, in addition to original sin, society's failure to reconcile reason with mystery causes the breakdown. Finally, Kathleen Woodward contends that when the beast is not suppressed strictly enough, when law and order is lax, evil erupts. Although we need not automatically accept Golding's explanation of his own text, when alternative views fail to provide an appropriate rationale, it is not unreasonable to assume the author's viewpoint. The three aforementioned critical views can be refuted, and Golding's simple summary can explain what these more complex theories do not.

Golding's own explanation for the breakdown of civilization in *Lord of the Flies* was delivered in a lecture given in 1962 at the University of California at Los Angeles. He describes the breakdown as resulting from nothing more complex than the inherent evil of man: "So the boys try to construct a civilization on the island; but it breaks down in blood and terror because the boys are suffering from the terrible disease of being human" (Golding, "*Lord of the Flies* as Fable" 42). For Golding, the structure of a society is not responsible for the evil that erupts, or, at least, it is responsible only insofar as the society reflects the nature of the fallen man. The shape of the society the boys create is "conditioned by their diseased, their fallen nature" (Golding, "Fable" 41). Indeed, Golding claims to have intentionally avoided inserting some things into the novel that might have led readers to conclude that the society itself, rather than the fallen man, is responsible for the breakdown:

The boys were below the age of overt sex, for I did not want to complicate the issue with that relative triviality. They did not have to fight for survival, for I did not want a Marxist exegesis. If disaster came, it was not to come through the exploitation of one class by another. It was to rise, simply and solely out of the nature of the brute. (Golding, "Fable" 42)

Many critics, in spending time explaining the breakdown, talk about what the children *did* (or failed to do) to make the breakdown occur. The implicit assumption behind all of these explanations is that if the children had simply done something different, the breakdown might not have occurred; in other words, the beast within man can be contained under certain circumstances. But Golding's explanation provides no such hope. Disaster arises "simply and solely out of the nature of the brute."

Of course, we need not accept Golding's explanation for the breakdown in *Lord of the Flies* simply because he is the author. New Critics, for instance, will argue that meaning is inherent in the text itself, and Reader-Response critics will tell us that it is the reader who creates meaning. (In discussing the accuracy of the various explanations for the breakdown, I will be looking to the text itself.) Whatever an author's intention may be, his work may end up communicating something quite different. As even Golding himself admits, at a certain point, the author loses authority over his text: "I no longer believe that the author has a sort of *patria potestas* over his brainchildren. Once they are printed they have reached their majority and the author has no more authority over them, knows no more about them, perhaps knows less about them than the critic who comes fresh to them, and sees them not as the author hoped they would be, but as what they are" (Golding, "Fable" 45). Other views than the author's may certainly be entertained, but they must provide an adequate explanation for the breakdown as it is depicted in the text itself before we can accept them.

One such alternative view is Bernard F. Dick's argument that the societal breakdown is caused by the suppression of the Dionysian, or "brute" side of man. Dick agrees with Golding that "evil is indigenous to the species" (Dick 15). Indeed, he seems to believe that his own explanation for the breakdown is perfectly consistent with Golding's view. Yet, implicit in Dick's argument is the assumption that the brute side of man can, in fact, be contained under other circumstances, a possibility that Golding's view, as presented in his 1962 lecture, does not supply. Dick argues that, in moderation, this brute side of man can actually be "beneficial to society" (13). This is an optimism that Golding does not seem to share when he says, "Man is a fallen being. He is gripped by original sin. His nature is sinful and his state perilous"

(Golding, "Fable" 41). Furthermore, Dick argues that Ralph's "class consciousness" causes him to "think in terms of excess" which leads to his suppression of Jack's bestial side and its consequent eruption (19). Golding, as has already been mentioned, believes that the breakdown "was not to come through the exploitation of one class by another" (Golding, "Fable" 42).

We can not, of course, rule out Bernard F. Dick's view simply because it differs from Golding's. We must at least give a hearing to his arguments and see if they are consistent with the text and if they manage to adequately explain the breakdown in *Lord of the Flies*. Dick bases his explanation on the obvious similarities between *Lord of the Flies* and Euripede's *Bacchae*. In the *Bacchae*, the god Dionysus represents the brute side of man while Apollo (who is associated with Pentheus in the *Bacchae*) represents his rational side. Dionysus, like Jack, "can be gentle when he is propitiated, but when he is rejected, he exacts a terrible vengeance" (Dick 9). The Apollonian Pentheus, who is "rooted in a frigid intellectualism," refuses "to acknowledge the new religion" of Dionysus just as Ralph refuses to acknowledge Jack's counter society (Dick 10). And, just as Simon is mistaken for the beast and killed, Pentheus is mistaken for a lion, hunted down, and dismembered (Dick 10). According to Dick, "[b]oth *Lord of the Flies* and the *Bacchae* portray a bipolar society in which the Apollonian refuses or is unable to assimilate the Dionysian" (10). This refusal, this "immoderate Apollonianism," proves "fatal," and the society breaks down (Dick 13).

Although there are certainly similarities between *Lord of the Flies* and the *Bacchae*, there are dramatic differences as well. If Ralph represents Pentheus, then logically, he should be killed by the hunters instead of Simon. But the greatest difference, and the most damaging to Dick's argument, is the lack of a clear Apollonian-Dionysian dichotomy in *Lord of the Flies*. Elements of the Apollonian may be found in Jack and, conversely, elements of the Dionysian are present in Ralph.