

The Myth of Osiris in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and the Inadequacy of Scientific Humanism

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Abstract

This paper explores William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) through the lens of the author's profound interest in ancient Egypt and the Osiris myth, as articulated in his travelogue *An Egyptian Journal*. Golding's fascination with Plutarch's account of the Osiris myth provides insights into his understanding of the inherent flaws in human nature. Golding's technical mastery in *Lord of the Flies* allows for multiple interpretations, with critics suggesting an Osirian reading that unveils the darker aspects of human nature. The menacing beast on the island, akin to Set in Egyptian mythology, serves as a symbolic representation of war and disharmony. Golding's deliberate use of mythological elements, such as the snake-like beast and the association with Osiris and Set, provides a framework for understanding the descent into savagery on the island. The paper draws parallels between Osiris and Jack, noting shared traits and the thematic representation of conflict and power struggles. Further, it explores the characters of Ralph, Piggy, and Simon, relating them to aspects of Osiris's nature and reflecting on the contemporary dissociation of sensibility. In conclusion, the paper delves into the religious vacuum of the modern world, drawing parallels between Golding's critique and the perspectives of thinkers like T. S. Eliot, Martin Heidegger, George Steiner, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Golding's portrayal of Piggy's flaws serves as a commentary on the inadequacy of scientific humanism, highlighting the need for synthesising scientific and spiritual perspectives to address the complexities of human nature.

Keywords: *Lord of the Flies*, William Golding, Osiris, Set, science, humanity

Introduction

William Golding's (1911–1993) profound engagement with Egyptian mythology, particularly the myth of Osiris, represents a significant dimension of his intellectual and literary evolution, reflecting his enduring interest in myth as a lens for interrogating the inherent dualities of human nature, morality, historical cycles, and civilization. This engagement, vividly documented in *An*

Egyptian Journal, is emblematic of Golding's broader literary preoccupations.¹ In recounting his frustration at misplacing Plutarch's account of the Osiris myth, Golding frames the incident as an intellectual crisis: "I could not find Plutarch's account of the story of Isis and Osiris, and this seemed a disaster (...) I felt I should not be able to verify certain quotations" (Golding, *An Egyptian Journal* 13). This lament not only underscores the myth's critical importance to Golding but also highlights his reverence for historical and literary traditions, encapsulating a deep commitment to the preservation of intellectual integrity.

The myth of Osiris, imbued with profound themes of death, resurrection, and the cyclical nature of time, transcends its cultural origins to serve as a universal framework for exploring the fragility of civilization and the duality of human nature. In *Lord of the Flies* (1954), written three decades before *An Egyptian Journal* (1985), Golding employs archetypal mythological structures to dramatize the descent into savagery and the collapse of social order among a group of stranded boys. The tension between order and chaos, embodied in the figures of Osiris and Set, finds a striking parallel in the boys' regression from structured civilization to primal instincts. The mythological "beast" in *Lord of the Flies* reflects humanity's innate fear of disorder and the cyclical struggle between creation and destruction, mirroring the perpetual conflict between Osiris, the symbol of order, and Set, the embodiment of chaos, in the Egyptian myth.

Golding's academic background at Brasenose College, Oxford, where he studied literature and classical texts, provides crucial context for his deep engagement with mythology. Immersed in the intellectual tradition of Greek and Roman literature, Golding cultivated a profound understanding of myth as both a narrative structure and a philosophical lens through which to examine the human condition. Among the texts that significantly influenced him was Plutarch's *The Lives* (c. 75 CE), which includes an account of the myth of Osiris. This work played a pivotal role in shaping Golding's conception of mythology as an allegorical device for exploring universal themes of human existence, including the fragility of social constructs and the cyclical nature of order and chaos.

The influence of Golding's classical education is evident in his ability to seamlessly integrate mythological elements into his novels, transforming them into profound allegories for

the human experience. As literary critic John Carey observes, Golding's use of myth "emerges not as an escape into the past, but as a reflection of the persistent cycles of human violence and renewal" (Carey 187). This insight underscores the allegorical depth of *Lord of the Flies*, where the boys' society unravels, mirroring the precariousness of moral and social order. The cyclical nature of history, a central theme of the Osiris myth, resonates deeply within this narrative, illuminating Golding's broader meditation on the vulnerability of civilization and the enduring patterns of human conflict. By invoking the Osiris myth in *Lord of the Flies*, Golding bridges the ancient and the modern, using myth not merely as a literary motif but as a profound commentary on humanity's unchanging struggles. His portrayal of the eternal tension between order and chaos reflected both in ancient mythology and the breakdown of societal norms in the novel, positions Golding as a writer deeply attuned to the universal rhythms of human history and the enduring power of mythological archetypes.

The temporal gap between *Lord of the Flies* and *An Egyptian Journal* reflects not a discontinuity but rather an evolution in Golding's thematic and intellectual concerns. As Golding remarked in his 1983 lecture, "The ideas that animate *Lord of the Flies*—the collapse of civilization, the resurgence of primal instincts—are not born from mere fiction but from a broader engagement with the moral and metaphysical questions posed by myth and history" (Golding, *The Hot Gates* 86). This remark underscores the preexisting roots of Golding's engagement with Egyptian mythology, which shaped his conceptualization of human nature well before his documented travels to Egypt. In *Lord of the Flies*, myth is universalized, serving as a backdrop for exploring the darker dimensions of human nature. By contrast, *An Egyptian Journal* situates myth within a specific historical and cultural framework, signalling Golding's transition from allegorical fiction to reflective inquiry. This progression highlights his growing interest in the intersection of myth and history as a means of understanding both individual and collective human experiences.

Golding's broader oeuvre reveals a consistent use of myth to interrogate existential and historical questions. In *The Inheritors* (1955), for instance, the Neanderthals' struggle for survival against a more advanced species evokes mythic themes of innocence, loss, and the inexorable march of progress, echoing the cycles of destruction and regeneration found in the

Osiris myth. Similarly, *Pincher Martin* (1956) employs Christian and nautical mythologies to delve into the psychological and existential struggles of its protagonist, underscoring Golding's commitment to using myth as a tool for exploring the human condition. These works, like *Lord of the Flies*, illustrate the breadth of Golding's mythological engagement, bridging the universal and the particular, the allegorical and the historical. His recurring use of myth underscores the cyclical and archetypal nature of human conflicts, suggesting that civilization's collapse is not an aberration but an inevitable recurrence rooted in the very structure of existence.

The intellectual continuity between *Lord of the Flies* and *An Egyptian Journal* is grounded in Golding's sustained exploration of the cyclical nature of history and human existence. The collapse of society on the boys' island in *Lord of the Flies* mirrors the eternal oscillation between order and chaos depicted in the Osiris myth. In *An Egyptian Journal*, this theme is revisited with greater specificity, as Golding reflects on the cultural and historical significance of the Osiris narrative. As Mircea Eliade notes, myths "preserve and transmit the archetypal patterns that define human experience" (Eliade 18). Golding's use of the Osiris myth demonstrates his belief in the enduring relevance of these archetypes for understanding the moral and existential dilemmas of modernity.

The historical and cultural milieu of the mid-20th century further contextualizes Golding's use of myth as a counterpoint to prevailing intellectual currents. The devastation of World War II, the Holocaust, and the existential anxieties of the atomic age, engendered a profound scepticism toward Enlightenment ideals of human rationality and progress, prompting a critique of Enlightenment ideals and a turn toward myth as a means of grappling with the dark undercurrents of human history. In this climate, existentialist thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus challenged the assumption of inherent meaning and moral progress, emphasizing the absurdity of existence. This critique is evident in *Lord of the Flies*, where the veneer of civilization is stripped away to reveal the primal chaos beneath. As Michel Foucault asserts in *The Order of Things* (1966), the emergence of the human sciences after the Enlightenment was not a triumph over irrationality, but a reflection of the deeper currents of violence and chaos that pervade human history (cf. Foucault). Golding's novel can be understood as an allegorical examination of this tension, presenting a world where reason and scientific

humanism falter in the face of humanity's darker instincts. This study employs an interdisciplinary methodology, integrating textual analysis, comparative mythology, philosophical critique, and historical contextualization. The central aim is to examine how William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* employs the myth of Osiris as a symbolic framework to critique modernity's disenchanted worldview and the limitations of scientific humanism. By weaving together multiple scholarly approaches, the study seeks to illuminate the novel's complex interplay of mythological, philosophical, and literary elements. The analysis draws extensively on comparative mythology, particularly Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride*, to trace the symbolic motifs of the Osiris myth within *Lord of the Flies*. This comparative approach elucidates how Golding reinterprets the themes of death, rebirth, and the cyclical nature of existence, using myth as an allegorical lens for exploring the fragility of civilization and the moral dimensions of human nature. Philosophical critique forms another pillar of the methodology, engaging with key texts on humanism, rationalism, and existentialism. Nietzsche's critique of modernity, Jung's insights into archetypes and the collective unconscious, and Steiner's reflections on the estrangement from nature provide theoretical underpinnings for analyzing Golding's portrayal of the human condition. These philosophical frameworks are instrumental in unpacking the ideological tensions within the novel, particularly its critique of the reductive assumptions of scientific humanism. The study also incorporates historical analysis, situating *Lord of the Flies* within the postwar socio-cultural and intellectual milieu. This contextual approach considers how the anxieties of the mid-20th century—marked by the trauma of World War II, the advent of the nuclear age, and the crisis of faith in Enlightenment ideals—shaped Golding's engagement with myth and allegory. By linking the novel's thematic concerns to broader historical and philosophical debates, the analysis underscores the text's relevance as a critique of modernity. Finally, close reading techniques are employed to examine character development, narrative structure, and symbolic imagery in *Lord of the Flies*. This granular textual analysis connects the novel's formal elements to its overarching philosophical and mythological frameworks, revealing the intricate ways in which Golding intertwines allegory with existential and cultural critique. Through this multi-faceted methodology, the study not only highlights Golding's use of the Osiris myth but also situates his work within the broader discourse on the interplay between myth, modernity, and humanism.

The Myth of Osiris and *Lord of the Flies*

William Golding's technical mastery in *Lord of the Flies* renders the text amenable to myriad interpretations from diverse critical perspectives. Among these, the Osirian lens—proposed by critics like Kayser and Fitzgerald—illuminates the fallen nature of humanity. This perspective underscores the fable's moral assertion: humans, when unchecked by moral and societal constraints, are prone to committing the most heinous acts in the service of their hubris (Fitzgerald & Kayser 78). The menacing beast that purportedly haunts the idyllic island manifests in multiple guises: as a snake-like creature, a beast from the water, a beast from the air, and, as Simon insightfully realizes, as an intrinsic part of human nature. The novel's title, *Lord of the Flies* or Beelzebub, alluding to the Devil in Christian theology, reinforces the plausible nature of this beast. The snake-like imagery recalls the myth of Osiris, where Set is often depicted as a serpent-like entity in Egyptian mythology. This resonance is further complicated by the Christian symbolism of the Edenic serpent, suggesting humanity's fallen state arises from its hubristic yearning to transcend its natural bounds and “be as gods.”

Set's associations with the marine world (the beast from the sea) and fire align with the novel's imagery, while the “beast from the air” bears an uncanny resemblance to Set-Typhon. The etymological link between “Typhon” and “typhoon” underscores this connection, as Set-Typhon, in Egyptian lore, was later deified as the god of winds. Golding's deliberate word choice in describing the boys' arrival—“Some act of God – a typhoon perhaps, or the storm that had accompanied his own arrival”—emphasizes divine forces' interplay in the narrative (Golding, *Lord of the Flies* 7). The pronoun “his” subtly anthropomorphizes the typhoon, inviting readers to discern mythological undercurrents in the story. The beast, in its myriad forms, symbolizes discord and destruction, often serving as a harbinger of war. Salvation, embodied by the naval officer, is profoundly ironic, as he represents the adult world's relentless conflict, exemplified by his warship. Similarly, the parachutist's descent from the heavens conveys ominous tidings from a fractured world consumed by ceaseless warfare. This juxtaposition recalls the mythological narrative of Osiris's reign—a time of prosperity and harmony—which was disrupted when Set's jealousy led to fratricide and chaos. Golding's depiction mirrors this mythic archetype: fraternal betrayal and its catastrophic consequences. Interpretations of the Osiris myth as an allegory of natural phenomena further enrich this

analysis. Osiris represents the Nile, Isis the fertile earth, Horus the temperate seasons, and Set the destructive marine forces. The Nile's annual flooding symbolizes Osiris's triumph over Set. Plutarch's assertion that nature comprises both good and evil complements this view, positioning Osiris as the embodiment of human reason and benevolence, while Set epitomizes unrestrained passion and malevolence. This duality finds striking parallels in Golding's characters. Jack, initially introduced as the head of a disciplined choir, evolves into a tyrant consumed by savagery. His trajectory mirrors Set's fratricidal ambition. Notably, Jack's ruddy complexion evokes Set's ominous visage, described in Egyptian lore as 'red' and foreboding. Golding reinforces this connection with vivid imagery: "Jack's face disappeared under a blush of mortification" (19). Jack's wounded pride and growing hostility align with Set's insatiable thirst for power and dominion. Jack's rivalry with Ralph accentuates this mythological framework. Namely, Jack fervently believes that he should assume command instead of Ralph, who represents the civilized counterpart to Jack's primal nature. Jack's physical strength and audacity make him an archetype of a leader suited to a primaeval society where brute force dictates authority. Golding reinforces this perception by noting, that "the most obvious leader was Jack" (19). Yet, the boys' election of Ralph as chief signals a paradigm shift, reflecting a preference for civility and reason over raw power. Jack, deeming Ralph unworthy of leadership, attempts to undermine his authority by proposing a re-election. Upon his subsequent defeat, Jack forms his own faction, establishing a tribe centred on hunting and chaos, thereby fostering an environment where his ego reigns supreme. His tribe's descent into savagery, marked by brawling, warfare, and random acts of violence, underscores the antithesis of the democratic society over which Ralph and Piggy preside.

In contrast to Jack's descent, Ralph appears, at least initially, as a beacon of reason and civility. He demonstrates qualities reminiscent of Osiris, particularly through his rationality and focus on collective welfare. Ralph's discovery and use of the conch shell symbolize order and communication, and his prioritization of maintaining a signal fire reflects foresight and responsibility. Moreover, Ralph's background as a boy from a respectable social class underpins his insistence on adhering to rules and propriety. However, his initial ignorance upon arriving on the island—manifested in his inability to grasp their predicament or utilize the conch without Piggy's guidance—hints at his limitations. Piggy, characterized by his intellect and practicality, complements Ralph by providing crucial insights and solutions, emphasizing the collective effort

required for survival. Ralph's veneer of civility, however, fractures as he succumbs to primal instincts during the pig hunt and, most egregiously, during Simon's tragic death. His participation in the frenzied attack reveals the latent savagery within him, akin to the animalistic impulses he ostensibly opposes. This moral failing sets him apart from the benign and harmonious Osiris, whose conduct remains untainted by such transgressions. Golding's portrayal of Ralph as "the average rather more than average, a man of goodwill and commonsense" (George 48) underscores his humanity—flawed yet striving for virtue. Ralph embodies the inherent tension between reason and instinct, reflecting the broader human condition rather than an idealized archetype. Piggy and Simon further embody Osirian qualities, representing intellect and intuition, respectively. Piggy's "scientific" and "smart" demeanour contrasts with Simon's intuitive connection to nature. Together, they form a synthesis of creativity and reason. However, Golding's decision to separate these traits across two characters reflects a critique of modern sensibilities. Unlike the unified nature of Osiris, contemporary society—as depicted in the novel—fragmentarily assigns rationality and creativity to distinct individuals, complicating the pursuit of harmony. Simon's epiphany regarding the beast's true nature aligns him with Osiris's role as a harbinger of truth and renewal. His sacrificial death parallels the dismemberment of Osiris, whose body parts, scattered by Set, were later reassembled by Isis. Yet Simon's death, unlike Osiris's mythic resurrection, signifies humanity's failure to transcend its inherent flaws. The boys' descent into savagery, culminating in the murders of Simon and Piggy, underscores the fragility of societal constructs in the face of primal instincts.

Golding's allegory, enriched by its mythological resonances, serves as a profound exploration of human nature. The dichotomy between Osiris and Set illuminates the characters' struggles, revealing the tensions between reason and passion, order and chaos, civility and savagery. Through this lens, *Lord of the Flies* emerges not merely as a tale of survival but as a timeless meditation on the dualities that define and challenge humanity. An argument can be made that an Osirian interpretation of *Lord of the Flies* is more fitting than one rooted in Greek influences, as certain narrative elements and omissions suggest intentional divergence from a Greek framework. While the impact of Greek mythology on Golding's work is well-documented—particularly his acknowledgement of Euripides as a literary influence—this

interpretation may be limited in its capacity to encapsulate the novel's deeper mythological resonance. As Radoje V. Šoškić notes:

This [influence] is, naturally, substantiated by Golding himself, who cited Euripides as one of his main literary influences, which copious discernible motifs from *The Bacchae* bolster. Hence, it should come as no surprise as to why *Lord of the Flies* utilizes irony as one of its central devices. In other words, if we cast our mind back to the novel's ending, we can see the irony that is embodied in the naval officer (Šoškić 33).

Indeed, the irony at the novel's conclusion is undeniable, yet the Osirian lens provides a richer framework for interpreting the symbolic and spiritual dimensions of Golding's narrative. If *The Bacchae* invites contemplation of scapegoating, with Ralph potentially representing Pentheus, the novel resists such straightforward parallels. Instead, Simon and Piggy emerge as dual aspects of Osiris, embodying complementary facets of insight and rationality, whose fates underscore humanity's tragic inability to reconcile reason with intuition. Piggy, from the outset, is portrayed as a figure of knowledge and reason, his insights grounded in empirical logic. As George observes:

From the moment we first see the boy on the island, Piggy appears as a Knower. He has an inkling of the chaos into which the adult world has fallen. He understands that their coming to be on the island is linked to the war raging outside. He attempts to dispel the irrational fear of the littluns by the rational account of fear and the beast. Speaking of doctors (...) Piggy concludes that fear is in the beholder; it does not result from a healthy apprehension of the unknown (George 60).

Yet Piggy's reliance on scientific rationalism renders him ill-equipped to address the deeper, irrational forces at play—forces Golding portrays as integral to the human condition. His scepticism toward Simon's suggestion that "maybe it's only us" (96) exemplifies his rejection of ideas that cannot be empirically substantiated. Simon, on the other hand, is endowed with a spiritual and intuitive awareness that transcends Piggy's materialist worldview. His solitary confrontation with the "beast" and his subsequent realization of its true nature—"mankind's

essential illness” (96)—marks him as a prophetic figure, albeit one tragically unable to communicate his revelation to the group.

Simon’s martyrdom, culminating in his brutal death during a frenzied ritual, parallels the mythological dismemberment of Osiris. The boys, consumed by primal impulses, enact a symbolic slaughter that reaffirms their descent into savagery. Piggy’s demise, though less overtly ritualistic, is equally emblematic of the destruction of reason and order. Once these two Osirian figures are eliminated, the island descends into complete chaos, mirroring the mythological narrative of Set’s ascension and the ensuing darkness over Egypt. Jack, embodying the destructive force of Set, assumes tyrannical control, his reign marked by violence and unrestrained barbarism. The symbolic connections between Piggy, Simon, and the Osirian myth are further reinforced by the imagery of the sea, which claims their bodies just as it had claimed Osiris. The novel’s conclusion, marked by the arrival of the naval officer, does not signify the restoration of order or the triumph of civilization. Instead, it highlights the cyclical nature of human folly, as the external war reflects the internal conflict that has consumed the boys. Ralph’s survival offers no assurance that he will disseminate the hard-earned truths of their ordeal, much less transform them into a redemptive narrative.

Simon and Piggy, as dual aspects of Osiris, represent the potential for reconciliation between rationality and spirituality—a synthesis that remains unrealized. As George asserts:

Man, Golding seems to be saying, cherishes his guilt, his fears, and his taboos and will crucify any saint or redeemer who offers to relieve him of his burden by telling him the simple truth. There is a horrible symbolic appropriateness about the corpse itself: the nameless devil and its victims are identical. Evil is ineradicable: the Earthly paradise is a delusion. Man's heart is dark, and no innocence lives beneath the sun, or if it does, it must inevitably suffer and die as Piggy and Simon died; their virtue and wisdom were destroyed by the Beast’s devotees (George 55).

This interpretation underscores the novel’s central tragedy: humanity’s unwillingness to confront its inherent darkness. While it is tempting to assign blame solely to Jack as the embodiment of

evil, the novel suggests that all the boys share culpability, differing only in degree and circumstance. In the end, the Osirian reading not only deepens our understanding of Simon and Piggy's roles but also highlights the universal struggle to reconcile the rational and the spiritual within the fractured human psyche.

Inadequacy of Scientific Humanism

William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* serves as a powerful critique of the modern belief in scientific humanism—a worldview that elevates empirical rationality as the ultimate framework for human progress while neglecting the complexities of moral, spiritual, and psychological dimensions. Through the allegorical disintegration of societal order on the island, Golding juxtaposes the limitations of rationalism against the enduring necessity of myth and transcendence. The boys' descent into savagery mirrors the dismemberment of Osiris in Egyptian mythology. However, unlike the myth where Isis reassembles Osiris, symbolizing restoration and balance, Golding denies any such resolution. This absence highlights the inadequacy of rational systems, particularly the reductionist frameworks of scientific humanism, to fully address the complexities of human nature. While the myth of Osiris acknowledges the necessity of spiritual and communal regeneration, scientific humanism, as depicted in the novel, remains confined to a mechanistic understanding of the world, blind to the deeper, transcendent dimensions of existence.

The ideas of scientific humanism gained prominence in the modern era, championing a worldview in which the principles and methodologies of science were proposed as sufficient tools for understanding human life and improving societal well-being. This doctrine sought to supplant traditional religious and spiritual frameworks with empirical rationality, asserting that human progress could be achieved independently of metaphysical or divine intervention, encapsulating the belief that science alone could resolve humanity's challenges, and offering a path to universal salvation. William Golding critiques this paradigm by exposing its intrinsic limitations, particularly its inability to account for the complexities of human nature through the character of Piggy, who embodies the rationalist ethos of scientific humanism. His assertion that "Life's scientific, that's what it is" (Golding 95) illustrates his unwavering faith in empirical reasoning and humanity's capacity to harness knowledge for progress. Yet, as the narrative

unfolds, Piggy's rationalism proves inadequate in addressing the primal and irrational forces that drive the boys toward savagery. His failure to comprehend the symbolic "beast" within reflects the myopia of a worldview grounded solely in materialism and empirical logic. Piggy's reliance on empirical reasoning becomes a site of tension within the novel. His dismissive question, "What would a beast eat?" (94), reveals his inability to grasp the symbolic essence of the beast as a projection of the boys' inner fears and moral corruption. The boys' chant of "Piggy!" in response presages his eventual demise, highlighting the tragic consequences of his reductionist outlook. This moment serves as a microcosm of Golding's broader critique of scientific humanism: its incapacity to engage with the moral, spiritual, and psychological dimensions of human existence. In stark contrast, Simon represents an alternative mode of understanding that transcends empirical rationality. His solitary meditations and his eventual recognition of the beast's true nature resonate with the myth of Osiris, where dismemberment and reassembly symbolize chaos and spiritual renewal. Simon's insights evoke a metaphysical awareness absent in Piggy's rationalist framework, yet his revelations are dismissed, underscoring the novel's critique of modernity's estrangement from spiritual and mythological dimensions.

George Steiner provides a theoretical lens to understand this critique, observing that modernity's embrace of scientific humanism signals a profound alienation from nature and the primal aspects of human existence: "(...) the break with Nature, the advance into Culture, has been one of estrangement from the environment and from the animal in ourselves" (Steiner 30). Golding aligns with this perspective, presenting a dystopian vision that critiques the hubris of scientific humanism and its detachment from a holistic understanding of human nature. Unlike E. M. Forster and H. G. Wells, who championed the optimism of scientific humanism, Golding's perspective aligns more closely with Aldous Huxley's scepticism. As Baker elucidates, Huxley and Golding both grappled with the moral and existential void exposed by scientific rationality:

Huxley was the near-contemporary so much admired in the early stage of Golding's efforts, and he was quite like Golding – knowledgeable about science and scientists, yet dedicated to literature, intent upon spiritual experience and a search for an acceptable religious faith. Huxley's sceptical views were an update on H. G. Wells and his rather quaint "scientific

humanism," a faith fading in Huxley's mind and lost to Golding and many of his generation (Bloom 65).

Moreover, Usha George critiques the reductionist tendencies of scientific humanism, arguing that its rejection of religious and metaphysical frameworks has left humanity unmoored:

Scientific humanism (...) has stripped man naked of the religious context which gave his life meaning. Confidence in mankind's ability to conquer nature and prejudice gave modern man the sensations that hitherto undreamed of possibilities were now opened to him. However, recent history and (...) the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche indicate that scientific humanism precludes us from positing any value; that is, it precludes us from seeing evil for what it is. The scientific humanist, the "model intellectual," is "literally in a state of free fall" (George 62).

This perspective is dramatized in Piggy's moral blindness, particularly his refusal to acknowledge his complicity in Simon's death. His insistence that "We never done nothing, we never seen nothing" (Golding 174) exemplifies the ethical vacuity of a purely rationalist ethos. As Vesna Lopičić observes, this denial reflects the broader moral shortcomings of scientific humanism: "Piggy refutes the moral implication of their collective guilt. He coldly declares, 'We never done nothing,' highlighting his inability to grapple with the profound implications of human fallibility" (cf. Lopičić 100). In contrast, Simon's mystical understanding of the beast as a manifestation of human darkness underscores the insufficiency of empirical rationality to address existential truths. His death, like Piggy's, signifies the triumph of savagery over reason, yet it also points to the spiritual void left by modernity's rejection of transcendence. Ultimately, *Lord of the Flies* critiques the reductionist assumptions of scientific humanism, revealing its failure to reconcile humanity's moral, psychological, and spiritual dimensions. Through symbolic imagery, character juxtaposition, and narrative irony, Golding dismantles the foundations of this worldview, illustrating its inadequacy in addressing the complexities of the human condition. The novel thus stands as a profound indictment of the hubris inherent in scientific rationalism and a call to reexamine the interplay between reason, morality, and spirituality in understanding human existence.

Religious Vacuum of the Modern World

The modern world, as articulated by thinkers such as Martin Heidegger and T. S. Eliot, and reflected in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, is characterized by a profound spiritual void. This vacuum emerges from the erosion of religious and mythological frameworks that once underpinned human existence. Heidegger's concept of the "flight of the gods" and Eliot's lament for the disintegration of spiritual unity in works like *The Waste Land* converge in their portrayal of a fragmented, desacralized world. Golding's narrative, set against the backdrop of a collapsed civilization, critiques scientific humanism for its inability to address humanity's existential needs. His invocation of the myth of Osiris further emphasizes the necessity of the sacred and mythic in confronting the darker forces of human nature. In *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot poignantly meditates on modern humanity's existence in a world bereft of religious significance. His masterpiece is interwoven with veiled references to mythology, history, and particularly religion, underscoring the chasm left by the erosion of faith.² Eliot suggests that religion, once a pivotal axis providing meaning, moral guidance, and spiritual purpose, has been supplanted by a fragmented and disillusioned worldview. In earlier epochs, religious dogmas served as a unifying force, directing individuals toward a morally grounded existence anchored in divine connection. Conversely, Eliot portrays the modern world as a barren landscape, where the absence of faith has left humanity in a state of existential despair, characterized by repetitive monotony and profound ennui.³ Eliot's disillusionment with the postwar world finds vivid expression in his use of symbolic imagery, allusion, and fragmented narrative. The modern world, he contends, is mired in spiritual decay: cities lie in ruins, mortality looms incessantly, and humanity finds itself trapped in a cycle of despair without the promise of redemption. This spiritual desolation, however, is not merely a lament for the loss of religious authority but an indictment of modernity's failure to provide an adequate substitute for the divine. The stark nihilism underpinning Eliot's vision resonates with the existential anxiety of a world that no longer harbours belief in transcendence or the afterlife. For Eliot, death in the modern age signifies finality, devoid of the solace traditionally offered by religious eschatology.

This perspective aligns with a broader philosophical discourse on the modern condition. Martin Heidegger, in his *Off the Beaten Track*, similarly grapples with the implications of a world estranged from the divine. Drawing from the poetry of Hölderlin, Heidegger reflects on

the existential vacuum created by the “absence of God,” which plunges humanity into an “abyss of nihilism.”⁴ He writes, “The world’s night disseminates its darkness,” capturing the profound disorientation and alienation that arise when the divine ceases to orient human existence (Heidegger 200). This sense of spiritual bereavement echoes Nietzsche’s iconic declaration in *The Gay Science*: “God is dead.” In the parable of the madman, Nietzsche dramatizes humanity’s complicity in the “murder” of God, symbolizing the eradication of absolute values and the destabilization of moral foundations.⁵ Nietzsche’s narrative reveals the existential burden this act imposes, as humanity is left to grapple with a world untethered from divine order. While Nietzsche focuses on the moral and existential ramifications of this “death,” Heidegger delves deeper into its ontological significance, emphasizing the consequences for humanity’s being-in-the-world. He writes: “The gods have fled, and their flight has left a void. The sacred is absent, and the world is left to its own devices. Yet this absence of gods does not signify a lack; it signifies the refusal of the divine to presence itself in a world that has turned away from its primordial essence” (Heidegger 261).

This void is compounded by the inadequacy of modern ideologies to replace the sacred. As George Steiner observes in *Nostalgia for the Absolute*, the calamities of the 20th century—marked by world wars, the Holocaust, and the dehumanizing march of technological rationalism—have eroded confidence in traditional religious and moral systems. He writes:

It is a truism to say that Western culture is undergoing a dramatic crisis of confidence. Two world wars, the return to political barbarism of which the Holocaust was only the most bestial example... provoked a widespread failure of nerve. Already sapped by rationalism and the scientific-technological point of view, organized religion ... proved helpless and indeed corrupt in the face of the massacre of World War One (Steiner 46).

For Heidegger, the absence of Christ is particularly symbolic of this void. As the central figure of Western religious tradition, Christ represented a bridge between the mortal and the divine, embodying redemption and ultimate meaning. His absence, however, signifies the collapse of this connection, leaving humanity adrift in what Heidegger describes as a “world’s night.” This is not merely a religious loss but a metaphysical crisis, as humanity is left to

confront its existence without the guiding light of transcendence. Heidegger further contends: “The absence of Christ is not the absence of a single figure but the absence of a world that orients itself toward the divine. It is the absence of meaning, of redemption, and of ultimate purpose” (Heidegger 262). In his invocation of Hercules and other mythological figures, Heidegger underscores the role of myths and legends in shaping human understanding of existence. Hercules, a figure embodying strength, heroism, and endurance, served as a cultural archetype through which humanity confronted its limitations and aspirations. The loss of such figures in modernity reflects the disenchantment of the world, as the myths that once infused life with significance are dismissed as relics of a bygone era. Heidegger’s lamentation over the absence of Hercules and Christ echoes his broader critique of modernity’s technocratic worldview. In a world dominated by technological rationality, human beings are reduced to mere instruments of production, severed from the sacred and the sublime. This reduction leads to what Heidegger terms *Gestell* (enframing), a mode of existence in which everything, including human life, is viewed as a resource to be optimized and exploited. The divine, in this framework, is rendered irrelevant, its absence a symptom of humanity’s self-imposed exile from the sacred.

The erosion of faith, coupled with the disillusionment with scientific humanism, forms the intellectual and spiritual backdrop against which William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* unfolds, and both Heidegger and Golding highlight the consequences of the religious vacuum in modernity. Heidegger’s concept of the flight of the gods finds literary expression in Golding’s depiction of the boys’ descent into savagery. The absence of divine or mythological structures in their society mirrors the existential void Heidegger describes. Golding’s critique of scientific humanism echoes Heidegger’s rejection of modernity’s technocratic rationalism, emphasizing the need for a deeper engagement with the sacred and mythic dimensions of existence. The myth of Osiris in *Lord of the Flies* serves as a counterpoint to the disenchanting worldview of modernity. It reminds us of the cyclical nature of existence and the necessity of mythological frameworks in providing meaning and orientation. In this sense, Golding’s novel can be read as a call to rediscover the sacred and to confront the existential truths that rationalism and scientific humanism have obscured. Golding was acutely aware of the modern predicament, as evidenced by his pointed critique of scientific humanism. Piggy, as a character, embodies the limitations of a purely empirical worldview. Golding himself remarked in an interview that “Piggy isn’t wise.

Piggy is short-sighted. He is a rationalist. My great curse, you understand, rationalism – and, well, he’s that. He’s naïve, short-sighted, and rationalist, like most scientists” (Bloom, 66). Rationalism, distinct from reason, emerged in the modern European context as a dominant mode of thought detached from the broader intellectual and spiritual dimensions of existence. As C. G. Jung contends, scientific rationalism has led to the degradation of humanity into a collective mass, stripping individuals of their autonomy and reducing them to mere statistical entities within an organizational framework. Golding’s disenchantment with humanity’s headlong rush toward technological advancement is evident throughout his works. While acknowledging the practical benefits of scientific progress, Golding critiques its inability to address the deeper “human problem.” Piggy, despite his scientific acumen, remains unable to comprehend the darker, irrational aspects of human nature—a task that falls to Simon, the intuitive and spiritual counterbalance to Piggy’s rationalism. Simon perceives what Piggy’s empirical mindset cannot: the “beast” is not an external, tangible entity but an internal force residing within the boys themselves.⁶ This contrast illustrates Golding’s belief in the necessity of integrating scientific and spiritual perspectives to achieve a holistic understanding of humanity. The dynamics between Piggy and Simon serve as a microcosm of Golding’s broader critique of modernity. Piggy dismisses Simon’s insights as mere “tomfoolery,” clinging to the belief that the beast can be systematically dismantled. Simon, for his part, fails to challenge Piggy’s perspective directly, retreating into himself until his tragic demise. Their inability to reconcile their views reflects the broader failure of modern society to bridge the gap between rationalism and spirituality. Golding suggests that the integration of these two modes of understanding is essential for humanity’s survival, as neither can independently address the complexities of the human condition. This critique is underscored by Simon’s death, which symbolizes the loss of spiritual insight, and Piggy’s subsequent demise, which marks the failure of rationalism without a moral compass. As Golding poignantly demonstrates, the absence of cooperation between the moralist and the scientist leads to catastrophe. Baker observes that Golding “recovered to some degree from the trauma of disillusionment with scientific humanism suffered during the war and hoped that humanity would somehow evolve beyond the old tragic flaws that assured the rebirth of the devil in every generation” (Bloom 67). The myth of Osiris and its thematic underpinnings echo throughout *Lord of the Flies*, offering a counterbalance to the existential despair of modernity. While the boys’ descent into savagery reflects the consequences of a world bereft of mythic and

sacred structures, the enduring resonance of Osiris points to the possibility of renewal and the rediscovery of meaning. Golding's novel, in this sense, functions not merely as a critique but also as a call to action: a plea to confront the existential void of modernity and to reengage with the mythological and spiritual dimensions of existence.

Endnotes

1. Egyptian mythological texts delineate Osiris as the great god of the dead who once occupied a human form and lived upon the earth, but who, using some unfathomable powers, bestowed after his death a new life upon himself, a life he lived in a new body in a region where he ruled as a king. Naturally, of course, in mythology and myths thereof, it is quite customary to have accounts aplenty of what happened. The myth of Osiris is no exception. In his ripe years, the sun god Ra, a major god in ancient Egyptian religion, decided to abdicate in favour of Osiris, who was to rule Egypt after Ra's ascension into the celestial realm. Under Osiris's reign Egypt prospered. He and his wife, Isis, taught the then-uncivilized Egyptian populace an assortment of useful trades, such as harvesting wheat or grinding flour to make bread. They gave them laws and education. Consequently, the people of Egypt were very happy with their rulers and content to see Egypt flourish once again. Osiris – and this is of paramount importance for drawing parallels between the myth and Golding's *Lord of the Flies* – promulgated peaceful doctrines for settling disputes and resolving differences, instructing and imploring his loyal followers that there was absolutely no need for conflict and strife, that everything could be resolved by sound reasoning. Isis, naturally, was by her husband's side always and supported him in every enterprise. Alas, grim was Osiris's fate, for even though the people of Egypt worshipped him, his own sibling, Set-Typhon, could not hide the baleful ire and jealousy he felt for his brother with every fibre of his being. Hence, he started thinking of conniving ways using which he was to dethrone him and become the sovereign ruler of Egypt himself. To execute his fratricidal design, Set commissioned a craftsman to manufacture a casket (sarcophagus of a sort), the size and dimensions of which were to fit Osiris perfectly. The casket itself was bedecked with jewels and precious stones, and no one was able to hide their admiration at its splendour. Thereafter, Set organized a feast in his brother's name and after the festivities arranged for the casket to be brought out. Naturally, people stood flabbergasted in astonishment as it was sublime in every way.

Cunningly, as was his nature, Set informed that whosoever fits in the casket shall become the sole possessor of it. One by one, people tried it, but no one quite fitted. However, when Osiris tried it, it was a perfect fit. Thereupon, while Osiris was still in a supine position, Set and his traitor cohorts slammed the casket shut. They threw the casket in the Nile. This gruesome act was supposed to finally put the nail in the coffin of Osiris's generous reign (Gadalla 54). Set ruled Egypt with an iron fist and a tyrannous regime. Accordingly, a dreadful darkness engulfed the lands of once-prosperous Egypt and poverty gripped the nation. Without remorse, Set slaughtered all those faithful to Osiris and ordered his followers to wage war on innocent people. He was a tyrant in every sense of the word. Only years later would Isis furtively track down the location of the casket and hide it in the woods. However, Set, whilst on a pig hunt, came upon it and lacerated his brother's body into chunks with a sword, scattering the remains all over the country. Still, Isis managed to locate almost every single one of those fragments, assemble them, and embalm Osiris, making this the first mummy in Egyptian records. It is noteworthy that Osiris and Isis had no children, but by some mystical means, Osiris was resurrected for one night so that he may lay with his wife and sire an offspring. And so, Horus was born and raised secretly in the marshes of the Nile Delta for his protection. In a waking dream, the ghost of Osiris manifested out of thin air in front of his son and prompted him to avenge his death. Upon reaching manhood, Horus gathered an army, and after many a gruesome battle crushed his uncle's skull in twain with a mace. During the battle, however, Set managed to gouge one of his eyes out – the eye of Horus has become one of the most recognizable symbols of ancient Egypt – but that did not prevent Horus from exacting his vengeance. Horus "became a role model, the type of perfect pharaoh" (Gadalla 54). Accordingly, a new age of prosperity was inaugurated by the triumph of good against evil, for even ancient Egyptians knew that love and compassion were the foundation on which healthy human relationships are built.

2. Religion appears in many guises in *The Wasteland*, but most prominently it is represented as being not so potent as it was in the olden days.
3. Take Prufrock, for instance, who constantly tries to reassure himself that "there will be time" to do everything, but in the end, he never lifts a finger. He constantly wavers in his determination, pretty much like Hamlet, and never carries out his plans.

4. Abyss argues Heidegger, "originally means the soil and ground toward which, as the lowest level, something hangs down a declivity. In what follows, however, let us understand the "Ab-" as the total absence of ground. Ground is the soil for taking root and standing. The age for which the ground fails to appear hangs in the abyss. Assuming that a turning point in any way still awaits this desolate time, it can only come one day if the world turns radically around, which now plainly means if it turns away from the abyss. In the age of the world's night, the abyss of the world must be experienced and must be endured. However, for this there must be those who reach into the abyss" (Heidegger 200-201).
5. Nietzsche recounts a rather disconcerting tale of a peripatetic man who, one morning, having woken up, lights a lamp of sorts and goes out in broad daylight in search of God. Wandering the city streets, he starts asking random people whether they have seen God, or whether they know his location at least, for he cannot seem to find him anywhere. After a veritable fusillade of inquires which yield no results, he pitifully bemoans: "The madman jumped into the midst of them and his eyes transfixed them: 'Where did God go?' he cried, 'I'll tell you where. We've killed him - you and I. We are all his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink the sea dry? Who gave us the sponge to wipe the entire horizon away? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? (...) Is there no end to our plummeting?'" (Heidegger 161).
6. Even Piggy and Ralph, at one point, are not able to evade their baser instincts and are inured to violence (when they murder Simon, all of them exhibit a savagery of murderous aggression which is primitivism at its darkest).

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Bionote

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