



REPRESENTATIONS OF POWER AND LEADERSHIP IN WILLIAM GOLDING’S “LORD OF THE FLIES”

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Abstract. This article examines how power and leadership are represented in William Golding’s “Lord of the Flies”. Special attention is given to Ralph’s elected leadership, Jack’s rise to command, the role of the conch, the use of speech, and the effect of fear on the group. The article analyzes selected scenes from the novel and reads those scenes together with existing criticism on authority, law, group dynamics, and political control. Close reading, textual analysis, and comparative use of scholarly sources are applied in order to reach clear results. The analysis shows that leadership in the novel is not presented as a natural gift only. Leadership is shown as something built through rules, consent, symbols, public speech, reward, and punishment. The study also shows that democratic authority becomes weak when shared belief in rules is lost, while violent leadership becomes stronger when fear and spectacle replace reason. Such results help explain why the island society moves from assembly to tribe, from discussion to command, and from moral order to chaos.

Key words: power, leadership, authority, democracy, dictatorship, conch, law, group dynamics, speech, William Golding.

Introduction

William Golding’s Lord of the Flies is often read as a novel about evil, fear, and the loss of civilization. Another important line of reading can be built around power and leadership. The island becomes a small social world. In that world, rules have to be made, work has to be shared, and order has to be protected. For that reason, the question of leadership appears very early in the novel. A chief is chosen, a public space is formed, and the boys try to build a system that can keep life together. Very soon, however, leadership is challenged from within. Order is weakened, language becomes harsher, and power slowly changes its form.

The novel does not present leadership as a simple matter of strength. Leadership is connected with public trust, moral responsibility, and the ability to keep a group focused on a common aim. Ralph tries to lead through meetings, rules, and the signal fire. Jack moves toward hunting, display, punishment, and fear. Because of this contrast, the novel offers a clear picture of two different models of power. One model depends on consent and law. The other depends on excitement, threat, and control.

This article studies how those two models are represented in the novel. The main aim is to show how Golding links leadership to symbols, speech, group behavior, and moral choice. The article also asks why Ralph loses influence and why Jack becomes more powerful. Such questions matter because the conflict is not only personal. A wider idea is being tested. Golding shows how fast a group can move away from shared rules when fear grows and when leadership starts to serve desire instead of duty. For that reason, the theme of power in the novel can be read as both literary and social.



Literature review

Research on *Lord of the Flies* has often connected the novel with questions of authority, law, and group control. One of the key studies is David Spitz's "Power and Authority: An Interpretation of Golding's *Lord of the Flies*". Spitz reads the novel through political thought and shows that power cannot stand safely without authority. In that reading, Ralph's position matters because election gives legitimacy, while force alone cannot create a just order¹.

Björn Bruns studies the same theme through symbols. In "The Symbolism of Power in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*", Bruns argues that social power on the island is expressed through objects and signs. The conch is tied to democratic authority, while face paint, the hunt, and the pig's head become part of Jack's dictatorial system. This approach is useful because power in the novel is rarely abstract. Power is carried by things the boys can hold, hear, wear, and destroy².

Christina Olofsson turns to leadership theory and group dynamics. That study compares *Lord of the Flies* with another war novel, but the discussion of Golding's text is especially helpful for the present article. Olofsson explains that Ralph works more like a democratic leader, yet the group around him does not remain stable. Jack, by contrast, becomes effective as an autocratic leader because followers obey, fear, and imitate him. At the same time, Olofsson also shows that such success is shallow because the needs of the group are not truly protected³.

Eliza Wójcik reads the novel from the side of law and morality. That article shows how the text can be used to think about the role of law in society and about the danger that appears when law loses its moral ground. Such a reading is valuable for a study of leadership because the island meetings, the right to speak, and the breakdown of rules are not only story events. Those moments also show what happens when legal order stops being respected by a community⁴.

More recent research has continued this line. Bertin Yélindo Dansou examines the novel as a conflict between democratic and dictatorial leadership and uses psycho-analytical and historicist approaches to ask what kind of leadership can support social development. This study is helpful because it keeps the focus on leadership models rather than on character alone. A similar direction appears in Salim Kadhim Abbas's recent article, which reads the novel through Marxist literary criticism and binarism and shows how the struggle for power pushes the island toward chaos and cruelty⁵.

Another useful contribution comes from Khalid, Sania Gul, and Irfan Ullah. Their article studies language as an ideological state apparatus in the novel and shows that speech itself helps shape power. Jack's language is described as aggressive and controlling, while Ralph's language is more cooperative and inclusive. That idea is important for the present research because leadership in *Lord of the Flies* is created not only through action, but also

¹ Spitz, David. "Power and Authority: An Interpretation of Golding's 'Lord of the Flies.'" *The Antioch Review*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1970, pp. 21-33.

² Bruns, Björn. *The Symbolism of Power in William Golding's Lord of the Flies*. Karlstad University, 2008.

³ Olofsson, Christina. *Leadership and Group Dynamics in Lord of the Flies and Tomorrow, When the War Began*. Karlstad University, 2009.

⁴ Wójcik, Eliza. "The Nature of Law and Its Role in Society: Reflections on the Basis of William Golding's Novel 'Lord of the Flies.'" *Acta Iuris Stetinensis*, no. 3, vol. 31, 2020, pp. 123-138, doi:10.18276/ais.2020.31-08.

⁵ Abbas, Salim Kadhim. "Governance and Leadership: A Critical Reading of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*." *Journal of Misan Researches*, vol. 21, no. 42, 2025, doi:10.52834/jmr.2025.214212.



through the words used in meetings, arguments, and commands. Mate Paksy also adds an important legal and political angle by reading the island through law and literature. That perspective helps show that leadership in the novel is tied to legitimacy, decision-making, and the fragile border between order and force⁶. Taken together, these studies show that leadership in Golding's novel can be examined through politics, symbols, law, speech, and group psychology. The present article uses that work as a base, but keeps the focus on selected scenes where power becomes visible in a simple and direct way.

Methodology

This article uses close reading as the main method. Selected scenes from *Lord of the Flies* are read carefully in order to see how leadership is built, challenged, and transformed. Attention is given to key words, repeated symbols, forms of address, and reactions inside the group. A second method is textual analysis. This method helps connect short extracts with larger patterns in the novel, such as election, obedience, rule-making, punishment, and the loss of public speech.

A comparative use of existing criticism is also included. Scholarly works on authority, group dynamics, law, and language are used to support the reading and to keep the interpretation grounded in research. This method is useful because power in the novel works on several levels at once. Power appears in speech, in objects like the conch, in physical force, and in the emotional life of the boys. For that reason, one method alone would not be enough.

Analysis and discussion

The analysis section follows a simple structure. First, a short extract is presented from the novel. Second, a simple analysis is given. Third, a short discussion shows how the extract helps explain the wider theme of power and leadership. Page references follow the online PDF edition used for this article.

*Extract: (Chapter One, "The Sound of the Shell"). "I ought to be chief," said Jack with simple arrogance, "because I'm chapter chorister and head boy. I can sing C sharp"*⁷. This extract presents the first direct claim to leadership in the novel. Jack speaks through school rank and personal pride. A wish to lead is connected with status, not with care or shared duty. Golding shows that power can begin from self-confidence and social habit. Jack enters the island already used to command, and this makes later conflict possible from the beginning.

Extract: (Chapter One, "The Sound of the Shell"). "This toy of voting was almost as pleasing as the conch". The words sound playful, but the moment creates real public order. A leader is chosen in front of the whole group, and the conch gives the meeting a visible center. Ralph's first authority is built on shared agreement, not on force. Golding connects leadership with public choice at the start of the novel and shows that democratic power survives only while the group continues to believe in it.

*Extract: (Chapter Two, "Fire on the Mountain"). "The conch doesn't count on top of the mountain"*⁸. This line is short, but an important change is already taking place. Jack limits the power of the conch by limiting the place where it works. A common rule is pushed aside when it becomes inconvenient. Leadership starts to divide into two systems here. Ralph still

⁶ Paksy, Mate. "Jolly Good Show. Like The Coral Island' – Golding's Lord Of The Flies in the Perspective of Law and Literature." *Islands in Geography, Law, and Literature: A Cross-Disciplinary Journey*, edited by Chiara Battisti et al., De Gruyter, 2022, pp. 227-248, doi:10.1515/9783110770162-014.

⁷ Golding, William. *Lord of the Flies*, Chapter One. – P.24.

⁸ The same source: - P.25.



believes that one rule should guide the whole group, while Jack begins to create special spaces where personal will becomes stronger than common order.

*Extract: (Chapter Five, "Beast from Water"). "I'm chief. I was chosen." ... "Because the rules are the only thing we've got!"*⁹. Ralph answers conflict by returning to election and rules. A reply is not given through threat or physical force. A reply is given through legitimacy, agreement, and the need for order. This extract shows the moral center of Ralph's leadership. At the same time, the scene also shows weakness, because formal authority becomes fragile when the group stops respecting the rules that created it.

*Extract: (Chapter Eight, "Gift for the Darkness"). "The Chief has spoken"*¹⁰. This short sentence sounds final and official. Speech no longer moves through open discussion. Speech now moves in one direction, from chief to followers, and the answer is obedience. Leadership has become command. Golding shows that Jack's authority is strengthened by ritual, public reply, and fear. Power is no longer shared in assembly. Power is performed and repeated until it starts to look absolute.

*Extract: (Chapter Ten, "The Shell and the Glasses"). "He ceased to work at his tooth and sat still, assimilating the possibilities of irresponsible authority"*¹¹. This line appears after Wilfred is punished without a clear reason. Leadership has moved so far from law that explanation is no longer needed. Control itself becomes enough. This is one of the clearest signs of total power in the novel. Fear remains, but accountability disappears, and Golding suggests that the deepest danger lies in authority that is obeyed even when it no longer explains itself.

Taken together, these extracts show a steady movement from elected authority to authoritarian command. Ralph's leadership is built on consent, rules, and common purpose, while Jack's leadership grows through spectacle, fear, punishment, and ritual obedience. In this way, Golding presents power not as a stable gift, but as something shaped by group belief, language, and moral choice.

Conclusion

The article shows that Golding represents leadership through symbols, speech, public trust, and group response. Ralph stands for lawful authority, while Jack stands for aggressive control. Once rules lose value, democratic order collapses and fear-driven power rises. The novelty of this article lies in combining close reading of central extracts with recent studies on law, language, group dynamics, and political leadership.

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⁹ The same source: - P.51.

¹⁰ Golding, William. Lord of the Flies, Chapter One. – P.110.

¹¹ Golding, William. Lord of the Flies, Chapter One. – P.173.



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