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ARTICLE DE RECHERCHE

Les dimensions modernistes du Seigneur des mouches de William Golding : une analyse critique

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Résumé

Cette étude du Seigneur des Mouches comme une contribution sur la critique de la modernité peut être d'une importance capitale pour notre société 1 Cheffe de Travaux à l'ISP/Mbuji-Mayi. car elle encourage une réflexion critique sur la fragilité de la civilisation, les aspects les plus sombres et les plus cachés de la nature humaine ainsi que les complexités de la responsabilité individuelle et collective. Dans un monde où les normes sociales peuvent être souvent perturbées et où les idéaux du progrès ou des Lumières peuvent sembler irréalistes ou désillusionnants, l'exploration par Golding de l'effondrement de la société et de la liberté existentielle offre des perspectives précieuses sur les défis auxquels nous sommes confrontés aujourd'hui. En comprenant les thèmes du roman, nous pourrions mieux saisir la tension entre l'ordre et le chaos, l'influence de l'autorité et le potentiel de la cruauté humaine, des questions toujours pertinentes dans les discussions contemporaines sur la politique, l'éthique et le comportement humain. De plus, une telle étude nous invite à remettre en cause la stabilité des structures sociales et à reconnaître l'importance de la conscience de soi et de la morale collective pour construire une société juste et compatissante.

Mots-clés : Civilisation, Nature humaine, Liberté existentielle, Effondrement des norms et Modernisme.

Abstract

This study of Lord of the Flies as modernist contribution encourages critical reflection on the fragility of civilization, the darker and hidden aspects of human nature, and the complexities of individual and collective responsibility. In a world where social norms can often be disrupted, and where ideals of progress or enlightenment can seem unrealistic or disillusioning, Golding's exploration of societal breakdown and existential freedom offers valuable insights into the challenges we face today. By understanding the novel's themes, we may better grasp the tension between order and chaos, the influence of authority, and the potential for human cruelty, all of which remain relevant in contemporary discussions about politics, ethics, and human behavior. Moreover, such a study invites us to question the stability of social structures and to recognize the importance of self-awareness and collective morality in shaping a just and compassionate society.

Keywords: Civilization, Human nature, Existential freedom, Breakdown of norms, and Modernism.

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1. Introduction

Lord of the Flies (1954) is one of the most celebrated modernist novel in the post-W. W II era. Written by William Golding, it tells the story of a group of boys stranded on a deserted island who attempt to govern themselves, only to descend into violence and savagery and this for no apparent reason. On the surface, the novel functions as an allegory of the collapse of civilization; however, when examined through the contact with Modernism, Lord of the Flies reveals itself as a complex exploration of the tensions between individualism and societal structures, the rejection of Enlightenment ideals, and the disillusionment that marked the aftermath of two World Wars. Modernism, as a literary movement, emerged in the early 20th century as a reaction against the certainties of the Victorian era and the rise of industrialization and scientific rationalism. Writers sought to explore fragmented identities, subjective experiences, and the chaos of modern existence. In this regard, Golding's narrative can be read as part of a broader modernist project, questioning the nature of human existence and the viability of traditional social structures. The Breakdown of Social Order is one of the most prominent themes in Lord of the Flies showing the collapse of social order. The boys, initially striving to create a semblance of civilization through the establishment of rules and governance, quickly succumb to barbarism. This descent into chaos mirrors the Modernist skepticism about the stability of societal structures. Modernist writers often depicted a world in which previously established norms were no longer functional, and traditional forms of social organization seemed increasingly inadequate in the face of human violence, alienation, and fragmentation. Lord of the Flies is often classified as an allegory for the fall of man, it can also be seen as a critique of the modernist dilemma: the loss of traditional values and the collapse of cultural certainties. The lack of a clear resolution after the boys ultimately rescued, reflects the modernist belief in the fractured nature of existence. There is no return to innocence or moral clarity, only a recognition of the permanent scars left by the breakdown of social and moral order.

2. Background

Lord of the Flies, emerged from a context of WW II as a poignant critique of these Enlightenment ideals. The novel, which chronicles a group of boys stranded on an island and descending into violence and savagery, portrays a pessimistic view of human nature and the fragility of social order (Golding, 1954). Through the boys' rapid descent into barbarity, the novel suggests that civilization is fragile and that the inherent violence within humanity can surface when social structures break down (Tanner, 1993).

3. Literature Review

William Golding's Lord of the Flies (1954) has been widely studied through various critical lenses, and a significant body of scholarship situates it within the framework of modernism. Modernist literature, with its focus on existential themes, the breakdown of traditional values, and a disillusionment with the Enlightenment ideals of reason and progress, provides a fitting backdrop for analyzing Golding's novel (Childs, 2000). This literature review examines key scholarly perspectives on the novel, focusing on its critique of civilization, human nature, and individual freedom, all of which are central themes in modernist discourse.

3.1. Civilization and the breakdown of social order

Many scholars noted that Lord of the Flies critiques the veneer of civilization and its fragility in the face of inherent human violence. Golding's depiction of a group of boys descending into barbarity after being stranded on an island challenges the notion that civilization is a natural or stable state for humanity (Harrison, 2005). According to Tanner (1993), Golding's novel reflects the modernist skepticism about the possibility of progress and the human capacity for reason. The boys' regression into savagery is emblematic of the collapse of societal norms, a theme often explored in modernist literature, which frequently grapples with the deconstruction of traditional social structures. In this light, Golding's portrayal of the breakdown of social order in Lord of the Flies resonates with the modernist critique of the Enlightenment's belief in the perfectibility of human society.

3.2. Human Nature and the Pessimistic View of Progress

Golding's portrayal of human nature in Lord of the Flies aligns with the pessimistic outlook that pervades modernist thought. The novel suggests that human beings possess an inherent darkness, and when social structures are removed, this darkness is revealed. Golding himself was influenced by the tragic events of World War II, and his novel reflects the broader disillusionment with humanity's ability to progress toward enlightenment (Golding, 1954). Scholars such as Stewart (2009) argue that Golding's view of human nature is a direct challenge to the optimism of Enlightenment thinkers like Rousseau, who believed that humans were inherently good and could be perfected through society. In Lord of the Flies, however, the boys' descent into chaos and violence underscores a modernist rejection of such idealistic visions.

3.3. Existential Freedom and the Absurd

A key theme in modernism is "Existential Freedom" which supports the idea that individuals must confront a meaningless or indifferent universe and create their own meaning. Golding explores this idea through the character of Ralph, who struggles to maintain order and civility in the face of mounting chaos. According to McLeod (2004), Ralph's efforts to preserve structure on the island symbolize the modernist existential quest for meaning in a world where traditional values have eroded. However, as the novel progresses, the boys' embrace of savagery and the destruction of the conch (a symbol of order) suggests a nihilistic view of human freedom, where individual choice leads to destruction rather than enlightenment. The tension between Ralph's attempts to maintain civility and Jack's embrace of primal instinct illustrates the existential conflict between freedom and chaos, a central theme in modernist literature.

3.4. Modernism and Golding's critique of enlightenment ideals

Golding's work also reflects a modernist critique of the Enlightenment's ideals of reason and progress. In Lord of the Flies, the boys' descent into violence and the dissolution of order suggest that reason alone cannot maintain society. This critique of rationalism is aligned with modernist thought, which often questioned the enlightenment's faith in human reason and its ability to secure social harmony (Tanner, 1993). Scholars such as Childs (2000) argue that Golding's novel reflects the modernist disillusionment with the idea that human beings could be perfected through reason and societal progress. The chaotic breakdown of the boys' makeshift society on the island symbolizes the modernist understanding of human nature as fraught with conflict, irrationality, and darkness, challenging the Enlightenment's belief in the steady advancement of humanity.

4. Discussion of The Findings

In Lord of the Flies, William Golding addresses key themes that reflect modernist concerns, particularly the fragility of

civilization, the inherent darkness in human nature, and the rejection of Enlightenment ideals. These themes are crucial to understanding the novel's critique of traditional notions of progress and rationality, which are central to modernist literature. The "breakdown of civilization". Golding demonstrates how easily societal norms and structures disintegrate when there are no external constraints. The boys' descent into savagery, symbolized by the destruction of the conch, reflects a rejection of social order and authority. The conch, initially a symbol of governance and civilization, loses its power as the boys' ties to the structured world of adults weaken, signaling the collapse of the social order they initially attempt to maintain. This breakdown of social order aligns with the modernist critique of Enlightenment beliefs in the inherent rationality of humans and the stability of societal institutions. Modernists, particularly after the trauma of two world wars, expressed skepticism toward the optimistic belief that civilization could progress in a linear fashion. Golding's portrayal of the boys' rapid descent into violence mirrors this modernist disillusionment with the idea that civilization is a stable and enduring structure. As Jameson (1991) suggests, modernism often depicts the fragility of society and the failure of reason, which is mirrored in the boys' experience on the island. Golding's depiction of the boys' regression also evokes a critique of the Enlightenment notion that human beings are inherently rational and capable of creating lasting social systems. The rapid collapse of their makeshift society reflects a modernist view that, without the constraints of a larger social order, humanity tends to revert to its more primal instincts (Childs, 2000). This rejection of the stability of civilization is a direct challenge to Enlightenment ideals that promoted the idea of perpetual human progress through rational thought and social organization. Golding had a "pessimistic view of human nature". Golding rejects the Enlightenment belief that humans are inherently good and can be perfected through societal structures. The boys' descent into violence and cruelty on the island demonstrates Golding's belief that human nature contains an innate darkness that becomes apparent when social norms are stripped away. This pessimistic portrayal of human nature reflects broader modernist concerns. In the aftermath of World War II and the rise of totalitarian regimes, many modernist thinkers began to question the Enlightenment's optimistic view of human potential. Golding, much like other modernists, suggests that humans are not inherently benevolent and that, when freed from the constraints of society, they may regress to a more primal, violent state. As Harrison (2005) points out, modernist works often highlight the darker aspects of human nature, challenging the enlightenment notion of humanity's capacity for improvement through reason and societal development. Golding's exploration of "existential freedom" also plays a significant role in the thematic structure of the novel. The boys' experience on the island can be interpreted as an existential struggle between individual freedom and the constraints of societal norms. Ralph's attempts to maintain order represent an existential need to create meaning in a chaotic world. However, his efforts are undermined by Jack, whose embrace of savagery highlights the rejection of rationality and structure in favor of personal freedom and primal instinct. This exploration of existential freedom and the absurd in Lord of the Flies further reinforces the modernist critique of the Enlightenment's optimistic view of human potential. Just as Camus portrays the absurdity of life in The Myth of Sisyphus, Golding demonstrates the futility of trying to impose meaning and order in a chaotic world. The boys' failure to establish a sustainable society ultimately highlights the fragility of human efforts to impose structure on a fundamentally irrational world. The breakdown of civilization, human nature, and existential freedom are central themes in Lord of the Flies that reflect Golding's critique of Enlightenment ideals and align with modernist concerns. Through the boys' descent into savagery and the collapse of their society, Golding challenges the notion that humans are inherently rational and capable of achieving progress through social structures. The novel reflects the modernist skepticism toward the stability of civilization and the potential for human improvement, highlighting the darkness within human nature and the absurdity of human existence in a chaotic, indifferent world. The analysis of the key themes in Lord of the Flies showed a profound critique of traditional notions of civilization, human nature, and societal progress. Through the breakdown of social order, the portrayal of human nature, and the existential struggles of the boys on the island, the novel aligns with modernist concerns, particularly the skepticism toward Enlightenment ideals of reason, rationality, and progress. The findings suggest that Lord of the Flies reflects a disillusionment with the idea that civilization can be sustained through human rationality and that human nature can be perfected or improved by social constructs. Golding presents civilization as fragile and easily disrupted when external structures are removed. The boys' initial attempts to establish order on the island through the conch and Ralph's leadership quickly unravel as the allure of savagery, embodied by Jack, becomes dominant. This breakdown of social norms is not merely a plot device but a reflection of Golding's view of civilization. The conch, which initially symbolizes authority and collective organization, loses its power as chaos ensues. The eventual destruction of the conch reflects how societal norms, even in a structured setting, are tenuous and dependent on the collective will to maintain them. A second significant finding is Golding's portrayal of human nature as inherently flawed and capable of great cruelty. Throughout the novel, as the boys become increasingly untethered from societal constraints, their actions grow more violent and chaotic. The killing of Simon and Piggy, as well as the ultimate death of Ralph's vision of order, illustrates that the boys are not simply victims of circumstance, but that their descent into savagery is rooted in their nature. In this way, Golding presents a stark challenge to Enlightenment notions of the "noble savage," suggesting that human beings, when left to their own devices, will reveal the darkness within. A third key finding is the novel's portrayal of the existential struggle between order and chaos. Ralph's continuous attempts to maintain structure and civility, while Jack seeks freedom through violence and primal instincts, create an ongoing existential tension. Ralph's struggle is rooted in a desire to impose meaning on a world that increasingly reveals its absurdity. His efforts to cling to rational thought and establish rules are ultimately undermined by the boys' rejection of structure in favor of individual freedom and savagery. This tension can be interpreted as a reflection of existential philosophy, especially the ideas of Sartre and Camus, who believed that humans must create their own meaning in an indifferent, often absurd world. The novel's ultimate failure of order, as the boys spiral into violence, mirrors the existential concept of the absurd, in which human efforts to create meaning are futile in the face of a chaotic and meaningless universe. Camus (1942) argues that humans live in a world without inherent meaning, and any attempt to impose meaning on such a world is ultimately absurd. In Lord of the Flies, the boys' attempts to create a functioning society are undermined by their inability to confront the inherent chaos within themselves, reflecting

the modernist and existential view that human efforts to impose order and meaning are often in vain. A final key finding is that Lord of the Flies critiques the Enlightenment ideals of progress and reason. In the Enlightenment tradition, there was a belief that human civilization would inevitably advance through the use of reason, scientific knowledge, and social organization. However, Golding's portrayal of the boys' descent into chaos and violence suggests that such progress is an illusion. The novel reflects modernist skepticism toward the idea that reason and social order can bring about lasting improvement or stability. This rejection of enlightenment ideals is a key theme in modernist literature, which often challenges the belief in the possibility of progress and rationality. Golding, like many modernist writers, critiques the belief that human beings can improve through rationality or societal organization. As Tanner (1993) notes, modernist works often highlight the breakdown of reason and the disillusionment with progress, particularly in the aftermath of two world wars. Lord of the Flies echoes this disillusionment, suggesting that the collapse of social structures and the inherent flaws in human nature prevent any meaningful or lasting progress. The Modernist rejection of optimism Golding's skepticism toward the idea of human progress can also be seen within the broader framework of modernist literature, which emerged as a response to the disillusionment of the early 20th century. Modernism was marked by a rejection of the grand narratives of progress and rationality that had been central to Enlightenment thought. Modernist writers, including T.S. Eliot, Franz Kafka, and William Golding, depicted fragmented worlds where traditional values and social structures were in decline, often exploring themes of alienation, absurdity, and existential crisis. In works such as Eliot's The Waste Land (1922) and Kafka's The Trial (1925), modernist authors questioned the belief in human rationality and the possibility of redemption through reason. Lord of the Flies follows in this tradition by challenging the Enlightenment notion that society can be perfected through rational organization and moral progress. Instead, Golding presents a world where, once stripped of societal constraints, the boys' true nature (marked by violence, chaos, and self-interest) emerges. This rejection of Enlightenment ideals is a hallmark of modernism, which often expressed skepticism about human nature and the ability of reason to resolve existential crises.

4.1.1. Existential struggle and human absurdity

Another intellectual current that is relevant to the contextual understanding of Lord of the Flies is existentialism, which gained prominence in the mid-20th century through thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Existentialism emphasizes the freedom of the individual and the need to create meaning in a universe that is indifferent or even hostile to human existence. This philosophy is reflected in Lord of the Flies, as the boys are faced with the challenge of constructing their own meaning in the absence of adult authority and societal structure. Ralph's struggle to maintain order on the island, despite the increasing chaos around him, can be interpreted as an existential battle to impose meaning on a world that resists order. Similarly, Jack's embrace of savagery represents a rejection of the effort to impose structure and an acceptance of the absurdity of existence. The boys' failure to create a sustainable society mirrors the existential view, particularly as articulated by Camus in The Myth of Sisyphus (1942), in which he describes the human condition as inherently absurd and futile. By situating Lord of the Flies within this intellectual climate, we can better understand Golding's exploration of existential freedom, the absurd, and the human struggle to create meaning in a chaotic world.

4.1.2. Critique of enlightenment Thought

Golding's own life and experiences also contributed to the novel's critique of Enlightenment thought. As a writer who lived through the Second World War, Golding witnessed firsthand the destructive potential of human violence and the failure of rational systems of governance. His experiences in the British Navy during the war, where he observed both the horror of human conflict and the fragility of societal order, likely influenced his pessimistic view of human nature and civilization. In interviews, Golding has remarked on the darkness within humanity that can emerge when civilization's constraints are removed, a theme that is central to Lord of the Flies. By exploring these intellectual and historical influences, we can see that Lord of the Flies functions not only as a critique of traditional Enlightenment ideas but also as a response to the broader post-war disillusionment with the promise of human progress. The novel's portrayal of the collapse of civilization, the brutality of human nature, and the futility of reason reflects the intellectual currents of modernism and existentialism, as well as the historical trauma of the mid-20th century. The pessimism expressed in The Waste Land is mirrored in Golding's portrayal of human nature in Lord of the Flies. Just as Eliot depicts a world in which humanity is disconnected from meaning and purpose, Golding presents a view of human beings as inherently prone to violence and chaos. Both works reflect a modernist critique of Enlightenment optimism, rejecting the notion that civilization can lead to moral or spiritual progress (Jameson, 1991). As Eliot's narrator declares, "These fragments I have shored against my ruins," the characters in Lord of the Flies similarly attempt, and fail, to piece together an ordered society, illustrating the absurdity and fragility of human efforts to maintain meaning in a chaotic world (Eliot, 1922).

4.1.3. Conclusion

Lord of the Flies shares numerous thematic concerns with other modernist works, such as The Waste Land, The Trial, and Heart of Darkness. Like these works, Golding critiques the Enlightenment faith in the inevitability of human progress, the instability of civilization, and the inherent goodness of humanity. Through their portrayals of the collapse of order, the darkness of human nature, and the absurdity of human efforts to create meaning in a chaotic world, these works reflect the modernist rejection of optimistic, rational narratives and highlight the existential struggles faced by individuals in a fragmented, uncertain world. By comparing Lord of the Flies to these seminal texts, we see how Golding's novel fits into the broader modernist tradition, offering a bleak commentary on the limits of reason and the fragility of civilization. This comparison with other modernist works shows how Lord of the Flies interacts with key themes in modernist literature, such as existentialism, the collapse of civilization, and the critique of Enlightenment ideals.

4.2. Contribution to the field

William Golding's Lord of the Flies has made a significant contribution to both literary and cultural studies, offering critical insights into the complexities of human nature, the fragility of civilization, and the existential struggles of individuals in a modern world. As one of the most prominent works of post-World War II literature, the novel engages with and critiques enlightenment ideals of rationality, moral progress, and the stability of social structures, making it a central text in the modernist tradition. Its lasting impact is evident not only in its influence on later works of literature but also in its contin-

ued relevance in psychological, philosophical, and sociological discourse.

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