

How does Society treat and influence children in the novels Lord of the Flies and Oliver Twist?

Throughout the course of the two novels, *Oliver Twist* and *Lord of the Flies*, the child characters are forced to assume adult roles because they have been isolated from, or excluded by society. The change the children undergo, particularly in *Lord of the Flies* could be described as 'growing up', obtaining experience and knowledge beyond their years, or a loss of innocence.

One of the main ways in which children in these novels assume adult roles is through the way they attempt to govern themselves. This is particularly evident in *Lord of the Flies* as the boys are forced into a situation many of that age dream of; living without adult supervision. This quickly loses its appeal as the boys realise they have to establish some kind of rule and democracy, they elect a leader and soon something akin to a hierarchy is established, much like that of a real Western society. There is also a link to old tribal methods of establishing order, for example the Conch, which is similar to a Native American talking stick, which you had to possess to speak at a meeting and it was passed around so everyone had the opportunity to speak.

However, the boys attempt to establish a society with a set of British values such as having a 'stiff upper lip' and conducting yourself like a gentleman fails somewhat as they begin to retreat into a primitive state of mind, competing with each other for survival.

Jack initially claims that the boys are "not savages. We're English, and the English are best at everything". However as a divide appears amongst the group, led by Jack and Ralph, it becomes evident that Jack's initial desire for order has gone as he and his tribe repeatedly chant "Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!"

In contrast to this, as savagery begins to take over the majority of the boys, Ralph begins to crave law and order; "the attraction of wildness had gone. His mind skated to a consideration of a tamed town where savagery could not set foot."

It is possible to argue that both Oliver and other boys his age such as the Artful Dodger and Charley Bates are also forced into having to govern themselves, as they have to work and provide for themselves at such a young age.

The governing bodies such as "the Board" are portrayed as faceless beings who we are encouraged not to trust as they hold Oliver's fate in their hands. It is suggested throughout the novel that men in positions of power are often not particularly good role models; Sikes and Fagin are outlaws who use children to commit petty crimes on their behalf; "the Board" and Mr. Bumble fail to hold Oliver's best interests at heart as they put him in positions where he is abused, mistreated and left uncared for.

The representation of adults is not completely negative in *Oliver Twist*, as it is in *Lord of the Flies* which draws parallels between the boys governing methods and that of the adult government of the time. The upper class adults in *Oliver* such as Mr. Brownlow are represented in a positive light as he, unlike Fagin and Mr. Bumble treats Oliver with care which means he no longer has to fend for himself. This Christian charity is only shown through Mr. Brownlow and the people who care for Oliver after he is shot, being forced to break into a house by Bill Sikes.

Hierarchy in Victorian times often dictated how a person was treated. Oliver is particularly poorly treated as his mother is seen to be without a wedding ring .

On the other hand, in *Lord of the Flies*, there is an initial attempt by the boys to establish democracy and equality through use of the conch to call meetings. However, this begins to fail as the group divides. The “savages” move to the other side of the island and “the world, that understandable and lawful world, was slipping away”.

Throughout the book, Golding repeatedly describes the children’s innate sense of wrong-doing as the influence of “the old life”. Despite a lack of authority figures or “grown-ups”, the boys seem to possess knowledge of the difference between right and wrong. The boys sometimes throw stones at one another, but they often “aim to miss”. In one situation, when fun and games become too serious, a boy sits in the middle of a circle being pelted with stones but “around the squatting child was the protection of parents and school and policemen and the law.” However as their society begins to fall apart there are conflicts in the established hierarchy between elected chief Ralph and the rebellious Jack, they lose this sense which results in the murder of Simon and Piggy. Jack’s tribe then hunt pigs, and ultimately Ralph, in their pursuit of power. This was despite Jack’s initial failure to kill a pig because of “the enormity of the knife descending and cutting into living flesh”. This loss of innocence is evident at the end of the novel; “Ralph wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man’s heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy.”

It is often the influence of adults that force Oliver and his companions to grow up. Fagin and Sikes use the boys as minions to commit petty crimes such as theft as, even if they are caught, the two men will not be traceable.

During this period children were used for such things, as well as other dangerous and demeaning jobs such as chimney sweeping. It is evident that the wellbeing of the child was not considered by their ‘owners’ and confrontation existed in society between boys and men, as the adults exploited them for money and slave labour; “the man against the child for a bag of gold”.

Throughout the two novels the characters evolve and are influenced by the society and events around them. Oliver is described as having experience beyond his years and over the course of the novel he begins to realise more and more about the cruelty of society. He is described as being “too well accustomed to suffering, and had suffered too much where he was, to bewail the prospect of a change very severely.” This shows that he has gradually come to accept that he has been rejected by society, and he is doomed to live in poverty for what he believes will be a short life. This emphasises his loss of innocence as a child of his age should not be in such a situation.

The boys portrayed in chapter twelve of *Lord of the Flies* are very different characters to those innocently swimming in the lagoon in chapter three; they have become tribal savages who have hunted and killed animals and even their fellow boys in order to survive. Also, the severed sow’s head represents the influence of human suffering on childhood innocence, as it is impaled on a stick in a clearing which had previously been a place of peace and tranquillity, where Simon had

innocently sat amongst nature in chapter three.

The influence of society from the boys old life was initially evident, but soon they descend into an underworld of murky morals; "In his other life Maurice had received chastisement for filling a younger eye with sand. Now, though there was no parent to let fall a heavy hand, Maurice still felt the unease of wrong-doing".

The theme of civilization is also evident throughout the two novels. In *Lord of the Flies* the boy's intentions are initially very civil, as they use the conch to bring order to their discussions in an attempt to create a fair democracy during their stay on the island. However, this civil attitude doesn't last and is soon replaced by one of savagery.

The moment when Piggy is killed by the falling rock is a very symbolic as it results in the conch being smashed and Piggy's glasses being destroyed. The conch was a symbol of democracy, which was crumbling under pressure from Jack and his determination to turn to savagery. Also, Piggy's glasses were a symbol of civilization as they are stereotypically worn by intelligent people. Furthermore, they were used to make fire and their loss results in them no longer being able to do so. Therefore, this event symbolises the final depletion of society, morals and law and order.

In *Oliver Twist*, the line between civilization and savagery is not so clear, as it is suggested that civilization itself can be savage in the sense that many of the people in positions of authority are not concerned about the people their decisions affect. It is often suggested in *Oliver Twist* that people in high ranking positions are not trustworthy and are not role models, whereas in *Lord of the Flies* after a long period unsupervised on the island, the boys begin to desire an adult influence to guide them; Piggy expresses a wish that his "auntie was here", while Ralph also believes that if an adult was there they would know what to do, and would be able to help them to agree and survive.

This links to social hierarchy, which also plays a part in the way the children in the two novels adapt. Oliver is clearly resigned to the fact that he will never be given opportunities to better himself because of his social class, and his mother is not properly cared for when giving birth to him by Mr Bumble and Mrs Mann when it is noted that there is "no wedding ring, I see, Ah! Good night!" this shows that as Oliver is, to their knowledge, an illegitimate child he and his mother are not thought of as important enough to care for. On the rare occasions Oliver finds courage to ask for more care, or for help in his suffering, he is accused of being "the ungratefullest and worst-disposed boy as ever I see" by Mr Bumble. Despite Mr Bumble's higher social status, and position of authority he and the other powerful figures fail to help Oliver out of his situation. This reflects the failure of society and charity to help the poor. The collapse of social hierarchy and civilization is much less subtle in *Lord of the Flies*, as they lose their sense of moral values and return to a primitive lifestyle with no rules as they battle for survival. There is a suggestion that this reflects the erosion of society and the way in which the government have failed to preserve civilized values.

Furthermore, in *Lord of the Flies*, the idea that children are the future is foregrounded and questioned. The novel has been described as a political satire as it portrays government as children making childlike errors.

It is possible to draw parallels between Simon and Oliver. They both represent innocence and human goodness as Simon is depicted in the clearing in chapter 3 in a scene of natural tranquillity. Simon's childlike innocence and naivety is a theme throughout the book, and he is described as having "eyes so bright they had deceived Ralph into thinking him delightfully gay and wicked". Oliver also possesses an innate sense of hope despite his desperate situation. When he is shot and dying he "stirred and smiled in his sleep, as though these marks of pity and compassion had awakened some pleasant dream of a love and affection he had never known".

In conclusion, *Oliver Twist* and *Lord of the Flies* both depict children in their struggle for survival against a society dominated by adults; a situation which is summed up by Fagin as "the man against the child, for a bag of gold". On the other hand, in *Lord of the Flies*, the threat to the boy's survival is largely caused by the lack of the very same society. It is necessary for Oliver and the stranded boys in *Lord of the Flies* to grow up emotionally, although this is not portrayed as a positive thing as the boys gradually lose their innocence. This process is evident in Ralph, as he begins the novel as "old enough, twelve years and a few months, to have lost the prominent tummy of childhood; and not yet old enough for adolescence", and ends the novel weeping for his loss of innocence and the death of his friends.