

The Evil Within:
Human Nature in *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord of the Flies*, and *The Great Gatsby*

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Although they represent three very different time periods, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* all address the same fundamental issue: what truly lies in the hearts of men? *Heart of Darkness* examines this question through the disintegration of the individual mind in the wilds of the Congo, while *Lord of the Flies* shows the breakdown of social norms among school children stranded on an island. In *The Great Gatsby*, though, no one is sent out into the wilderness. In fact, the main characters live a seemingly charmed, upper-class life, but nonetheless the main characters prove themselves to be just as vicious as the men who lose themselves in the jungle. All three novels present the human creature as vicious and self-absorbed and warn the reader that violence, insanity, and man's true animal nature are ever-present just below the surface in our supposed civilization.

In Conrad's work, nature quickly works to strip away the illusion of civilization and safety that the explorer Marlow brings with him to the jungle. In the wilderness of his company's field station, Marlow interprets the Manager's gesture toward "the forest, the creek, the mud, the river" by saying that it offers "a treacherous appeal to the lurking death, to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness of its heart." (35) The evil that haunts Marlow and his story comes from death, the most fundamental fact of nature. What is hidden by the trappings of London life is laid bare by the forest, the mud, and the river. It is a truth that cannot be escaped. Marlow feels this keenly when he finally lands at Kurtz's camp, as far from civilization as he will ever be. He declares that "never, never before, did this land, this river, this jungle, the very arch of this blazing sky, appear to me so hopeless and so dark, so impenetrable to human thought, so pitiless to human weakness." (55) Stripped down to its essence, the wilderness Marlow finds in Africa cares not one bit about human morals, ideas, or existence. Exposing "the human ego, unshielded by civilization and its self-contents, to a world of savagery presumed to be far beneath it [...] is to come up against the innate" (Stewart, 319), and in Conrad's story, the innate is truly horrifying. Surrounded by an indifference to which they are wholly unaccustomed, the Europeans in the story lose the morals and ideals that they feel make them human.

It is this loss that Marlow fears. He finds the smell of the damp earth to be "an intolerable weight oppressing [his] breast," intimating "the unseen presence of victorious corruption, the darkness of an impenetrable night." (62) The wilderness is not passive its quest to undo mankind, and Marlow can feel this animosity as a weight. He has seen this corruption in Kurtz and is afraid that he, too, will be brought face-to-face with whatever it is that lurks just out of his sight, and so lose something of himself. He declares Kurtz's final words to be "a moment of triumph for the wilderness, an invading and vengeful rush." (72) Kurtz let the unspeakable in nature take hold of him, and when the wilderness rushed in, all civilized human thought was gone. And something worse than savagery had taken its place. Of the severed heads Kurtz has spiked in front of his house, Marlow says they are "only a savage sight, while I seemed at one bound to have been transported into some lightless region of subtle horrors, where pure, uncomplicated savagery was a positive." (58) Any animal in nature, he is saying, can kill. It is a special kind of horror for a formerly civilized man to lose himself to blood and power and hidden evils.

The children of Golding's *Lord of the Flies* are similarly stripped of their "civilized" selves when they are marooned on an island with no supervision and no way off. At first they are able to maintain a semblance of order: they elect leaders and organize themselves around the conch shell that represents their ersatz civilization. In their minds, the boys still cling to their old ways:

“Roger gathered a handful of stones and began to throw them. Yet there was a space round Henry [...] into which he dare not throw. Here, invisible yet strong, was the taboo of the old life. Round the squatting child was the protection of parents and school and policemen and the law” (16). Very quickly, though, the boys descend into chaos and violence. The images of parents and policeman fade from their minds and are replaced by shadowy island beasts and bloodlust. In a short time they go from being afraid to throw rocks to brutally murdering their classmates.

Simon, the most thoughtful of the boys, wants to blame the wilds of the island for their savagery, but eventually comes to the realization that “the beast” they’ve been hunting is actually their own human nature. The Lord of the Flies, a severed pig’s head, says to him “fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill! . . . You knew, didn’t you? I’m part of you? Close, close, close! I’m the reason why it’s no go? Why things are the way they are?” (113). There was no way the boys would be able to escape the suffering they created, because they carry that animal nature within themselves. For Golding, “evil is innate in man [...] and those, therefore, who look to political and social systems detached from this real nature of man are the victims of a terrible, self-destructive illusion” (Spitz, 29). Their ad-hoc system of government stood no chance of surviving the overwhelming need for violence and control that was hiding inside each boy.

In contrast to these men and boys who find their true nature in the wilderness, the characters in *The Great Gatsby* let their selfishness, violence, and greed run free right in the middle of the most civilized of settings. The characters hide behind their money, dancing at lavish, champagne-filled parties that mean nothing and that serve only to distract them from their sorrows. The civilized world leaves them unfulfilled: a guest tells Nick “you see I usually find myself among strangers because I drift here and there trying to forget the sad things that happened to me” (36). Despite the wealth and beauty around him, Nick himself feels “oppressed and uneasy” at Gatsby’s parties because he can see they provide only the illusion of real human interaction (Harvey, 16). Everyone is pretending to be civilized and carefree when really they are anything but.

Later in the novel, this ennui and forced ease leads to death, when Daisy Buchanan, a rich New Yorker who should represent the virtues of society, runs down a woman with her car. Nick says of Daisy and her husband Tom “They were careless people [...] they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made” (156). For Fitzgerald, civilization does little to hide man’s true nature, and while the book’s narrator struggles to overcome his failings, the other characters float along unaware of their hideousness, insulated by the belief that their money and their possessions make them good people. But, ultimately, even the trappings of civilized society can’t mask man’s true, horrible nature.

The main characters of *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord of the Flies*, and *The Great Gatsby* all start their stories believing themselves to be safe in a world of civilized rules and learned men. But as the novels progress, Marlow, Piggy, and Nick are horrified as they watch the world around them go mad with violence and greed. Each witnesses men turning to evil, but it’s not just the murder and selfishness that they find so terrible—it’s also the fact that this behavior comes so easily. Each novel shows its characters slipping off the mask of civility quickly and completely, revealing just how close to the surface we all hide our savagery.

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