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psychiatry in literature

What *Lord of the Flies* teaches us about primitive defence mechanisms and societal discontent

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Published in 1954, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* is one of the most celebrated pieces of literature of all time. Its depiction of a fragile community descending into violence and chaos seems all too relevant to modern-day society, where increased levels of societal division and civil unrest need to be understood in the context of economic recession, increasing acts of terrorism, fear-mongering, and the fostering of 'in' and 'out' group mentality by politicians and the media. Reviewing the novel's narrative from a psychoanalytic perspective offers an insight into a number of primitive defence mechanisms which may be important for conceptualising current issues in British society.

Faced with the growing realisation that their chances of survival are dwindling, a group of boys stranded on an island with no adults surviving soon reverts to more primitive modes of functioning. Without adult containment, the group disintegrates and regresses to the paranoid–schizoid position, held by Melanie Klein to be the earliest phase of psychic development. This position is dominated by persecutory anxieties and schizoid mechanisms, such as projection and the splitting of objects into either good or bad. At the same time, repressed id drives towards violence and death begin to surface, creating a dangerous mix of fear, anxiety, rage and lust for destruction.

As the fabric of their society appears to crumble around them, the boys become more and more preoccupied with the perceived dangers lurking on the island. Together, they create an external object – the 'beastie' – which they identify as a threatening, hostile entity. The 'beastie' can be viewed as both a projective identification of the boys' anxieties about fear of extinction and an evacuation of the urges for violence and destruction that this anxiety has created.

Dealing with primitive defences that arise from unconscious fear and anxiety is a common part of psychiatric practice. The paranoid–schizoid position, where fear and anxiety are unconsciously projected into external objects, manifests itself as suspicion of and aggression towards others. This may become worse at times of uncertainty. What we are now seeing is the enactment of these defences on a much wider sociological level. In times of uncertainty, it is not uncommon for groups to look for a collective enemy into which they can project and evacuate their anxieties as well as direct their growing feelings of anger and discontent. This is reflected, for instance, in the current discourse around migrants and refugees. We see a reinforcing and validating of an 'us' and 'them' mentality. In *Lord of the Flies*, the group disintegrates into two distinct factions with two opposing leaders. Such splitting can also be viewed as the enactment of primitive defences. Perpetuating this 'us' and 'them' narrative and stoking of the boys' fear of the 'beastie' helps one of their leaders to gain control over the group.

For psychiatric practice, this 'in' and 'out' group mentality is particularly dangerous, as it may begin to extend to other marginalised groups in society. Patients with mental health difficulties may, therefore, be at risk of vilification and further stigmatisation.

Where the schoolboys were eventually saved from impending destruction by a rescue party of adults, it is difficult to see how the enactment of these primitive defences will be ameliorated in British society when the current discourse in many quarters seems to be seeking to perpetuate it.

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