

# The Coral Island vs. Lord of the Flies

## Variations in Emotional Intelligence Skills

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### Abstract

*The present paper aims at a close analysis of two novels that bring to light the issue of human behaviour and survival in unfamiliar conditions: The Coral Island, by Robert Michael Ballantyne and Lord of the Flies, by William Golding. Although the former novel has served as a source of inspiration for the latter, its utopian atmosphere and the power relations in it are cruelly overshadowed by the dystopian perspective Golding offers. Strikingly enough, the characters in both novels are cast on islands of almost equal beauty and resources and are let free to choose in fairly similar extreme contexts. However, the reader is faced with two unexpected unveilings of human manifestations that reveal the inner structure of the acting people in both cases. By means of a transfer of concepts from the psychological field of Emotional Intelligence, the profiles of the characters gain new dimensions, and the reader gets a deeper insight into the intricate inner workings of the human mind and human relations, and not in the least, into the power of the context to turn these relations into beneficial or destructive outcomes. The boys themselves - with their emotional and ethical heritage - determine the courses of action and in the end they either rejoice in the emotional and the moral choices they have made or deplore the flaws of their character.*

**Key words:** *Emotional Intelligence, emotional competences, character, context, leadership*

Literature is the best realm where readers can meet themselves in new, unexpected contexts and can face their *hopes, joys, fears, and anxieties*. By means of the characters writers construct, literature opens itself up to new interpretations and it is precisely here that psychology, through the present focus on Emotional Intelligence, can cast a new light on the inner workings

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of people's mind and character and on the impact various contexts can have on their development and manifestation.

Characters in literature have different ways of revealing their *inner self with emotions and values* and the readers can reach a better understanding of them when they are mindful not only of the words that express their thoughts but also of the working mechanism behind the thoughts:

If an author chooses to have access to the thoughts in a character's head, the reader can be aware not only of what he or she is thinking, but can be acquainted with the manner of thought – how the character's mind is made up, and how they approach problems and challenges (Gill 1995: 137).

The thoughts of people are most of the time the result of the emotional states they go through. In his book, *Emotional Intelligence. Why it can matter more than IQ*, Daniel Goleman identifies the following emotions, each of which can assume various shades of manifestation: *anger, sadness, fear, enjoyment, love, surprise, disgust, shame*. The author is inspired in his exploration of Emotional Intelligence by Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*:

In *The Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle's philosophical enquiry into virtue, character, and the good life, his challenge is to manage our emotional life with intelligence. Our passions, when well exercised, have wisdom; they guide our thinking, our values, our survival. [...] The question is how can we bring intelligence to our emotions – and civility to our streets and caring to our communal life? (1995: xv)

The author proposes in his book, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, an Emotional Competence Framework that highlights the areas of Personal Competence and Social Competence and details the aspects that make a person emotionally intelligent:

**Personal Competence** – these competencies determine how we manage ourselves:

### 1. Self – Awareness

Knowing one's internal states, preferences, resources, and intuitions

- *Emotional awareness*: Recognizing one's emotions and their effects
- *Accurate self-assessment*: Knowing one's strengths and limits
- *Self-confidence*: A strong sense of one's self-worth and capabilities

## 2. Self-Regulation

Managing one's internal states, impulses, and resources

- **Self-Control:** Keeping disruptive emotions and impulses in check
- **Trustworthiness:** Maintaining standards of honesty and integrity
- **Conscientiousness:** Taking responsibility for personal performance
- **Adaptability:** Flexibility in handling change
- **Innovation:** Being comfortable with novel ideas, approaches, and new information

## 3. Motivation

Emotional tendencies that guide or facilitate reaching goals

- **Achievement drive:** Striving to improve or meet a standard of excellence
- **Commitment:** Aligning with the goals of the group or organization
- **Initiative:** Readiness to act on opportunities
- **Optimism:** Persistence in pursuing goals despite obstacles and setbacks

**Social Competence** - these competencies determine how we handle relationships:

### 1. Empathy

Awareness of others' feelings, needs and concerns

- **Understanding others:** Sensing others' feelings and perspectives, and taking an active interest in their concerns
- **Developing others:** Sensing others' development needs and bolstering their abilities
- **Service orientation:** Anticipating, recognizing, and meeting customers' needs
- **Leveraging diversity:** Cultivating opportunities through different kinds of people
- **Political awareness:** Reading a group's emotional currents and power relationships

### 2. Social skills

Adeptness at inducing desirable responses in others

- **Influence:** Wielding effective tactics for persuasion
- **Communication:** Listening openly and sending convincing messages
- **Conflict management:** Negotiating and resolving disagreements
- **Leadership:** Inspiring and guiding individuals and groups
- **Change catalyst:** Initiating and guiding individuals and groups

- ***Building bonds:*** Nurturing instrumental relationships
- ***Collaboration and cooperation:*** Working with others towards shared goals
- ***Team capabilities:*** Creating group synergy in pursuing collective goals (1998: 32-34).

The two novels taken into discussion reveal characters that seem to possess many of the competences listed in Goleman's framework. Nevertheless, some fail at manifesting them or manifest some of them at the expense of others, which hinders a complete acceptance of their person as good models and leaders. In the given setting – context in which the authors place the stranded boys, some competences are essential: *self-confidence* with the perspective that one can use all the resources – inner and outer – that one has at hand in order to survive, *self-control* – according to which one would never surrender to the inner menaces and fears and to the threats and discouragements of others, *adaptability* to the new environment and conditions, and *innovation* with the aim of turning the context into a favourable one. Moreover, *motivation* is the trait that keeps one move on and dare overcome all obstacles. On the other hand, placed in a context with people having various personalities, it is also essential to manifest social competences: *empathy* is the core characteristic that will make a tremendous difference in the way the boys in the two novels behave towards the others. In addition to this, good *communication* is the essence of the harmonious coexistence on the islands, as it can lead to avoiding or wisely managing conflicts and to building healthy bonds among the boys and to developing fruitful cooperation.

In an attempt to link emotions to thoughts and behaviour, Seymour Epstein affirms in his book, *Constructive Thinking, The Key to Emotional Intelligence*, that:

Emotions ... are almost always produced by the interpretation of events, which means that emotions are almost always produced by thoughts. If you want to change the way you emotionally react, you have to change your thinking. This, of course, has enormous implications for improving emotional intelligence (1998: 7).

Therefore, what the reader gets in the two novels are two different perspectives on how boys cast on similar islands perceive and interpret the reality. They go through a dynamic process of interpretation of the contexts they are placed in, and one of adapting their feelings and attitudes as a

consequence of this interpretation. The characters' actions give an insight into the workings of the mind of the authors themselves, which are a result of the impact of the historical, cultural, and social context. Consequently, the two books reveal a totally different perspective on life mediated by the external factors. Robert M. Ballantyne writes in a time when there was still hope in the world, whereas for Golding there seems to be no hope in sight due to an absurd war going on in the world. The two novels, *The Coral Island* and *Lord of the Flies*, contrast profoundly in the perspective they offer, although the action is set in fairly similar places. *The Coral Island* places the characters on an idyllic background, but not devoid of threats. However, the whole atmosphere is imbued with the presence of the Divinity. *Lord of the Flies* places the characters on a very good island with spots of breathtaking beauty, but also with places of decay and menace. The atmosphere is devoid of the presence of God and imbued with the oppressive presence of Beelzebub, who seems to demand constant submission through *fear*. William Golding uses the central motif from *The Coral Island* in order to contrast "two radically different pictures of human nature and society" (Baker, cf. R. H. Reiff 2010: 92).

There are many similarities in terms of setting, characters, and challenges that the characters face. The boys in *Lord of the Flies* discover that they have been marooned on a very good island which resembles Eden. The three friends in *The Coral Island* discover the same thing, and the impression will remain with them for the rest of their stay, whereas in Golding's book the edenic place will turn into hell.

Ralph in *The Coral Island* has many moments in which he contemplates the beauty of the island: "My heart was filled with more delight than I can express at sight of so many glorious objects, and my thoughts turned suddenly to the contemplation of the Creator of them all." (Ballantyne 1884: 18) According to Aristotle, *contemplation* is the quality of a *happy* person (2004: 17) and this kind of person will be able to maintain this state of happiness despite all obstacles. Slightly resembling the contemplative Ralph from *The Coral Island*, Ralph in *Lord of the Flies* has a moment of joy and contemplation, mediated by the description of the narrator:

Every point of the mountain held up trees – flowers and trees. Now the forest stirred, roared, flailed. The nearer acres of rock flowers fluttered and for half a minute the breeze blew cool on their faces.

Ralph spread his arms.

'All ours.' (Golding 1954: 30)

The character adds with a tone of satisfaction and a feeling of possession: "This is our island. It's a good island. Until the grown-ups come to fetch us we'll have fun" (35)

Ralph's companions on the Coral Island are described by Ralph himself who elicits the best qualities in those with whom he will spend a lot of his time. There is a kind of *optimism* and positiveness in the presentation of his future friends which reveal much of his *awareness of others* and his inclination of focusing on the positive aspects in someone's personality:

There were a number of boys in the ship, but two of them were my special favourites. Jack Martin was a tall, strapping, broad-shouldered youth of eighteen, with a handsome, good-humoured, firm face. He had a good education, was clever and hearty and lion-like in his actions, but mild and quiet in disposition. Jack was a general favourite and had a peculiar fondness for me. My other companion was Peterkin Gay. He was little, quick, funny, decidedly mischievous, and about fourteen years old. But Peterkin's mischief was almost always harmless, else he could not have been so much beloved as he was (Ballantyne 1884: 6).

In *The Coral Island*, all the three companions seem to be possessed by *positive dispositions*, such as: *mildness*, a kind of *shyness*, *confidence*, *courage*, *joyfulness*, *thankfulness*, *understanding*, *appreciation*, *altruism*, *empathy*, and *self-sacrifice*. Jack – the leading figure – obtains his position naturally, *friendship* is the core concept of the novel, *love* unites the characters, *kindness* and *good will* are shared by all main characters, *empathy* leads to understanding and acts of courage, *savagery* is only a menace from the outside and is tamed, *death* shocks, *hope* is a dominating feeling, *happiness* is pursued and profoundly felt when contemplating the wonders of nature.

Ralph's opponent in *Lord of the Flies* is Jack, whose hidden side comes to life in the very context of this idyllic place. He is no longer the Jack offered as a model in Ballantyne's book, but one that has been distorted:

He knelt holding the shell of water. A rounded patch of sunlight fell on his face and a brightness appeared in the depths of water. He looked in astonishment, no longer at himself but at an awesome stranger. He spilt the water and leapt to his feet, laughing excitedly. Beside the pool his sinewy body held up a mask that drew their eyes and appalled them. He

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began to dance and his laughter became a bloodthirsty snarling (Golding 1954: 63 - 64).

The boys in *Lord of the Flies*: Ralph, Jack, Piggy, Simon – possess a kind of emotional and moral inheritance. The leading figures – Ralph and Jack – attempt to impose their leadership. *Friendship* tends to be a rather marginal concept, *fear* divides the characters, *kindness* and *good will* are the virtues of the outcasts, *empathy* is only manifested by Piggy, the mocked character, who – because he has been bullied, has managed to develop a compassionate understanding of others and a wise interpretation of events, *savagery* takes shape from within – either as an uncontrolled manifestation of freedom or as an outburst of fear, *death* is regrettably pursued, *hope* which should have kept the boys united is a lost feeling, *happiness* turns into despair and there is little joy in contemplating nature.

The outlines of the leading figures become more and more visible on the background of the unfolding events. The reader is faced with two types of leadership: the *emotionally intelligent* and the *emotionally unintelligent* type. In *The Coral Island* there are only three characters, who, however different, manage to overcome differences by appreciating them as endowments that complement the lacks of the others. Therefore, even if the image of Jack emerges as the leading one, the boys form a team and each of them has a vital contribution to the well-being of all.

In *Lord of the Flies* the boys cast on the island form a community made up of big ones and 'littluns' as the small boys are called. It is precisely due to this difference that the idea of leadership emerges powerfully in Golding's novel, whereas it is slightly vague in Ballantyne's book, as each of the three boys represents a kind of leader. *Leadership* is the state or the position that facilitates a good observance of emotions, virtues, and vices in action. Ralph emerges as the leader, being supported for this position by his attractive looks, charismatic personality, and intelligence. The strengths of his character that qualify him as a good, *emotionally intelligent leader* are: *good rapport*, *initiative*, *optimism*, *discipline* (he sees the good side of having rules in order to avoid anarchy and keep fear at bay), he has got that *achievement drive* that can move people towards a set goal, he remains truthful and honest despite his mistakes. His flaws however – *dominance*, *lack of empathy*, *lack of involvement* in the building of shelters – overshadow the positive side of his character. Ralph feels and acts like a leader. He rules through *reason* – the fire should be kept burning – and *order* (the conch shell

is the symbol). He speaks about the island as belonging to them: "This belongs to us!" (Golding 1954: 29) He reminds the boys of the rules and the common-sensical things they have to attend to. In his speech, he likes to have things straight and clear and as a very good orator he summarises the rules the boys have to obey in order to offer themselves a safe stay on the island and a sure rescue. *Emotionally intelligent* and still holding moral virtues in his heart, Ralph manages to understand and master his feelings and contain his impulsive emotions. He will also be capable of admitting to his guilt of participating in the act that led to Simon's death, thus proving that he is *truthful* and *conscientious*. He makes all the efforts to keep the others within the boundaries of *rationality* and *order*. He is the one who takes the *rational decisions* regarding the shelters, the meeting place and the rescuing fire. He pursues the *good* of others out of *reason* and because these are the right things to do. He *encourages* the boys to keep *hoping* but, at the same time, to keep attending to the things that may ensure their survival and salvation. Ralph, closely attended and advised by Piggy, manages with the heart and the mind. A good leader is capable of identifying oneself with those one leads, of observing their abilities so as to put them to good use, and of noticing their needs so as to meet them and thus enhance the progress they have to make in the tasks assigned: "Leadership is not domination, but the art of persuading people to work toward a common goal" (Goleman 1995: 171).

In spite of his efforts of becoming more and more *aware of himself* and *others*, Ralph sees decay creeping not only on their material possessions, but more frighteningly on their spirits, and the idea of rescue will turn into a long forgotten hope. The *emotionally unintelligent* Ralph manifests almost *no empathy* and he laughs when hearing about the *fear* of the others. Ralph stubbornly refuses to believe there is a beast and is incapable of understanding *fear*, up to the point in which the fear instilled in all the boys reduces him to silence, robbing him of all rational arguments. He has the *achievement drive* but fails to understand the others and their emotional needs, a failure that disqualifies him from the position of a compassionate leader able to *build bonds by understanding the others and leveraging diversity*. Consequently, when the alternative of an *emotionally caring leader* looms out of sight, the boys will seek the protection of a leader that can keep them away from danger, even if this protection is assured through violent means. Ralph himself will finally be overcome by fear, a

fear of the untamed 'beast' in every boy who surrenders to irrational anxiety and to evil tendencies: "I'm frightened. Of us" (Golding 1954: 157).

Unlike the *fear* the boys experience in *Lord of the Flies*, in *The Coral Island* the fear Ralph feels in the midst of events gains a totally different magnitude and the attitude towards it is mediated by his upbringing and perspective on life:

When I looked at the white waves that lashed the reef and boiled against the rocks as if in fury, I felt that there was a step between us and death. My heart sank within me; but at that moment my thoughts turned to my beloved mother, and I remembered those words, which were among the last that she said to me – 'Ralph, my dearest child, always remember in the hour of danger to look to your Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. He alone is both able and willing to save your body and your soul.' So I felt much comforted when I thought thereon (Ballantyne 1884: 9).

*Fear* is the perfect tool used by the alternative leading figure in *Lord of the Flies* – Jack. Jack is chosen leader by the choir boys. Jack's indulgence in hunting and ritualistic games seems like more fun and the boys will be more prone to seeking *pleasure* instead of attending to serious stuff. The *strengths* of his personality that qualify him for the leading position are his *free-spirit, courage, practical reason, and a sense of shame* (for having forgotten the importance of the fire). His flaws, however, outweigh the virtues – he is *authoritarian, savage, proud, impulsive, and contemptuous*. He humiliates others, especially Piggy. He subdues the others by means of instilling *fear* as it is the best tool of manipulating them. He wants to be the leader only to satisfy his ego. His thirst for *immediate gratification* will contaminate the others. He assumes a new identity, free from all rules and constraints. He instigates to murder and has no remorse.

In blatant contrast to Jack from *Lord of the Flies*, Jack from *The Coral Island* is the one who embodies all the good qualities a leader should possess. He is not the one to catch the hogs – like Jack in *Lord of the Flies*, but the encouraging leader-companion of Peterkin: "'Well done, my boy!' exclaimed Jack, slapping him on the shoulder when he came up, 'you're the best shot amongst us' " (Ballantyne 1884: 70). From Ralph's perspective, Jack in *The Coral Island* "would have induced people much older than himself to choose him for their leader, especially if they required to be led on a bold enterprise" (20) When they are about to drown due to an

enraging storm, Jack proposes a course of action, and Ralph together with Peterking “gladly agreed to follow Jack, for he inspired us with confidence” (9) His motto is the forever valid one: *Where there's a will, there's a way*. When inflamed to the point of menacing, he is given some emotionally intelligent advice by the missionary teacher, which he will strive to embrace: to “overcome evil with good” (237), not to “give way to anger” (240), and to be patient. When his *rashness* and *loss of self-control* will bring about the condemnation of the three of them, Jack confesses to Ralph: “...I regret deeply the hastiness of my violent temper...” (250). As an *emotionally intelligent leader*, Jack possesses skills such as: a good understanding of the self and others, a good ability of being aware of one's emotions the emotions of others and of the consequences emotional outbursts have, the ability to build and keep relationships, and the ability to motivate others towards seeking the good of everyone.

The two novels, *The Coral Island* and *Lord of the Flies*, bring before the readers' eyes telling examples of the way people react emotionally in unexpected situations, of the way they interact with others based on the emotions that trigger their thoughts and shape their behaviour, and of the way people cooperate towards reaching a common goal or fail to do so. While in the first novel all the three characters possess personal and social competences in the area of emotional intelligence that qualify them as leaders, leadership in *Lord of the Flies* would have required the presence of such qualities in both leaders – Ralph and Jack, but the flaws of their character keep them from attaining this goal. Ralph from *The Coral Island* discovered the key to their harmonious life on the island:

From all these things I came at length to understand that things very opposite and dissimilar in themselves, when united, do make an agreeable whole; as, for example, we three on this our island, although most unlike in many things, when united, made a trio so harmonious that I question if there ever met before such an agreeable triumvirate. There was, indeed, no note of discord whatever in the symphony we played together on that sweet Coral Island; and I am now persuaded that this was owing to our having been all tuned to the same key, namely that of love! Yes, we loved one another with much fervency while we lived on that island; and, for the matter of that, we love each other still (Ballantyne 1884: 96).

In contrast to the harmonious friendship of the boys in *The Coral Island*, the boys from *Lord of the Flies* do not manage to build such a relationship.

Although at first Jack and Ralph seem to manifest a kind of inclination to befriending each other: “[...] once more, amid the breeze, the shouting, the slanting sunlight on the high mountain, was shed that glamour, that strange invisible light of friendship, adventure, and content.” (Golding 1954: 39), as the plot unfolds, things take a sad turn – “They walked along, two continents of experience and feeling, unable to communicate” (54).

*The Coral Island* and *Lord of the Flies* challenge the readers to become aware of the experiences the boys go through, the contrasting outcomes their actions bring about, and the emotional profile of each and every character involved in the plots. The books act as mirrors to the readers who may become aware of their own emotional resources and of the personal and social competences they have as part of their emotionally intelligent profile. In this respect, literature acts as a revealer of human nature and as a counsellor towards adopting the best emotionally intelligent strategy in one’s own behaviour and for the good of all people coming into one’s life.

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