

Rousseau's Noble Savage Theory

Directions: Read the following comments on an idea promulgated by an eighteenth-century philosopher. Then answer the questions that follow.

In his *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men*, eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau proposed that human beings are, by nature, good. Rousseau held that the “noble savage,” the human untouched by civilization, is a wonderful thing. He said that it is society that corrupts the individual.

Not everyone agreed. Many eminent thinkers were both critical and derisive of Rousseau's view. Voltaire said, “No one has ever used so much intelligence to persuade us to be so stupid.” Still, Rousseau's idea had an extraordinary influence, and his view is characteristic of the literary movement called English Romanticism.

William Golding completely rejected the “noble savage” belief, which pervaded art and literature for generations. Golding takes the youngest people he can, perhaps least affected by society, and puts them in a tropical island paradise. What results is not nobility, but base savagery.

Rousseau and Golding both pondered the same issues: Does the evil in humans destroy civilization? Or does the evil in civilization destroy humans? What is the source of corruption?

1. Can civilization corrupt the individual? Explain.

2. How do some people try to protect themselves and their loved ones from the evils of civilization?

3. Can an individual destroy civilization? Explain.

4. How does civilization try to protect itself from the evils of individuals?

5. Who was right—Rousseau or Golding?

Fun on the Island

Part A.

Directions: Read the following quotations from *Lord of the Flies*, and answer the questions that follow.

“While we’re waiting we can have a good time on this island.”

“Until the grownups come to fetch us we’ll have fun.”

“We want to have fun. And we want to be rescued.”

“Sit down all of you. They raided us for fire. They’re having fun.”

“We hunt and feast and have fun. If you want to join my tribe come and see us.”

1. What do the quotations have in common?
2. Why is fun so important to the boys?
3. What are some examples of innocent fun on the island?
4. What are some examples of fun that is not so innocent?
5. What does the novel, read as an adventure story, say about fun?
6. Read as an allegory, what does the story say about fun?

Part B.

Directions: Many years ago, Joseph Wood Krutch wrote the following comments about fun. Read them, and answer the questions.

Is it—or isn't it—a cause for surprise that the age of fun should be also both an age of violence and . . . an age of philosophical despair? . . . Since you can't possibly have fun all the time, since seeking it too persistently and too exclusively is a sure way of finding boredom and frustration instead, perhaps pessimism is the inevitable reaction of the thoughtful, and violence the inevitable reaction of those who do not analyze their frustrations. . . .

The apologies for a fun-oriented society seem to assume that security and abundance are automatic as well as permanent and that somehow or other they will continue to bless those who have put "having fun" before everything else. Theirs would be, it seems to me, a rather ignoble Utopia and it is certainly an impossible one. At this moment one cannot be sure whether we are headed toward a world more just and happier than it has ever been, or whether (as the news of yesterday and today seems often to suggest) toward a dark age where violence, both private and public, is normal and almost continuous. . . .¹

1. What was Krutch saying about fun?
2. Do you agree?
3. This essay was published more than forty years ago. Is our age more just and happier than it was then, or is it darker?
4. Would William Golding agree with Krutch?

¹Joseph Wood Krutch, "Can We Survive the Fun Explosion?" in *Edge of Awareness: 25 Contemporary Essays*, ed. Ned E. Hoopes and Richard Peck (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1966), 76, 78–79.

Theme Statements

Part A.

Directions: *Lord of the Flies* has many themes about human beings and human life, both individually and as a group. The novel emphasizes that human beings are the source of the evils that plague us. It states that fun can be destructive. Consider each of the following topics, and formulate a thematic statement for each as William Golding treats it in the novel.

1. Responsibility

2. Innocence

3. Authority

4. Reason

5. Freedom

6. Capacity for good

7. Capacity for evil

8. Anarchy

Part B.

Directions: Select one of your theme statements, and write a paragraph to show how William Golding expresses that idea in the novel. Then write a second paragraph in which you either agree or disagree with him.