Freudian analysis of The Lord of The Flies

As children, do we have a perception of what is right or wrong? Can we think for ourselves or do we simply base our beliefs on those of our parents? And when do we really make the change from a trusting child to a discerning adult? For Sigmund Freud, these questions were central in his thesis. Lord of the Flies is a text which is very closely related to Freud and his theories, and throughout the novel, we are given many insights into this Freudian psychoanalysis. (1)

The book begins with a group of kids who are trapped on an island in war time. The interesting thing from a Freudian perspective is that these kids are just that, kids, and they do not have parental guidance on this island. They are left entirely to their own devices, and as a result rely on their previously formed super egos, egos, and id. In the Lord of The Flies, the super ego is interesting because as kids, they have not fully developed this part of their mind. For them, they can only base their super ego on their perception of the rules and laws of the outside world, and they can only imitate what they have seen from their role models and adult figures in their lives but they themselves are not able to appreciate the laws or rules of society.

The boys are characterised in a way that fits perfectly into Freudian analysis. There are many characters, but the three key ones are Ralph, Roger, and Piggy, who could also be interpreted as being the Ego, Id, and close to Super Ego. Roger is the boy who is closest to representing the id. First seen throwing stones at the young’uns, at this stage Roger is not completely id-ridden. He still has that sense of society in his thinking, and as a result throws the stones in order that they just miss the young’uns rather than hit them. He is still held by “the taboo of the old life” and is not ‘N completely conscience free. It doesn’t take long, though, for Roger to become completely id-driven, and when he violently murders Piggy, he is acting completely on his natural survival and selfish instincts, with absolutely no consideration of morals or consequence. According to Freud, this is almost an exact description of the Id. It is the most natural, completely instinctive part of the mind that acts on impulse and the pleasure principle. If something is going to bring satisfaction, however temporary, the Id will seek to obtain it. (2)

Ralph is the boy who is always practical, knows himself and his own limits, and knows what he wants. In Freudian theory, the ego is the part of the mind which seeks to please the id’s desires, however is also concerned about the long term consequences, and will weigh up the pros and cons before making a decision. The ego and Ralph show countless numbers of similarities, Ralph being a representation of this part of Freud’s theory. We see many examples where these exact traits are shown by Ralph, and one such example is seen when the boys are discussing the beast. Naturally, everyone is frightened by the beast, but Ralph shows his discerning qualities when he says “I’m frightened myself sometimes, only that’s nonsense!” His id and natural instincts tell him that he should be frightened, but his ego and common sense tells him that the beast is “nonsense”. Here, Ralph’s calm, thoughtful nature shows us the development of the other part of his mind, the super ego. Ralph is the one character who throughout the story shows a change of nature for the better. The real turning point for him is when quiet, innocent Simon is murdered, and he is involved. Ralph realizes at this moment that there is a difference between right and wrong, and that we control our own destiny, and our decisions affect others, not just ourselves. When the boys murder Simon, their Id takes over control, and they are caught up in the sheer excitement of it all. At
this moment, Ralph’s Id overrules his ego. However while reflecting on the previous night, Ralph begins to ask honest, moral questions, “Didn’t you see what we... did?”, whereas the other boys deny they had anything to do with the murder. He realizes that what they did was wrong, and is willing to accept some of the responsibility for it. It is this thought process that shows he is moving on from the ego way of thinking to a more mature, grown up approach, which is far closer to the superego. Right though the novel, Ralph is in fact changing and growing as a person, resolving his oedipal complex and coming to terms with himself. (3) Piggy is probably the most similar to the super ego, however as he is a child, he is still not fully developed. There are times when Piggy shows appreciation of rules and societal laws, and in fact for most of the text he is always worrying and thinking about what he should be doing, but there is always the underlying sense that although he follows the rules and can see that rules are a necessary part of society in order for it to function, he doesn’t really understand why the rules are put in place, or what they are actually doing. He is able to accept the surface facts that rules are needed, but the deeper thinking required to ask or understand why this is so is not something that he can do at this stage of his maturity. So, while he is the closest to being the critical, considerate superego, Piggy too has some maturing and living to do before he is fully developed. (4) Perhaps it is being suggested that even though none of the kids are fully developed in their thinking, adults are not necessarily either. When the British army man arrives late in the novel to find a pack of savage British boys, he says ‘I should have thought that a pack of British boys... would have been able to put up a better show than that.’ This man is trying to make sense of a situation which he does not fully appreciate, but he has lived for so long in society that his superego has become the main part of his conscience. He has so many biases and prejudices that it is unthinkable that a bunch of educated English boys could be behaving like they are. His superego overpowers his ego or Id, and this imbalance means his judgment has become clouded. He is doing the opposite to behaving instinctively, and instead tries to justify reality by ignoring it. Again we are shown the importance of balance between the three parts of the mind, this time being shown the danger of becoming over “societised”. By stripping society back to its most basic form, without rules law or parental control the novel is questioning the very essence of humans. (5)