

Reimagining Progress of Prehistoric Humans: Technological Adaptation and Ethical Complexity in Golding's *The Inheritors*

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Abstract

This study reexamines William Golding's *The Inheritors* (1955) as a critical meditation on the interplay between technological innovation and ethical responsibility within a prehistoric setting. Integrating literary analysis with archaeological findings and philosophical theory, the research challenges linear narratives that equate technological superiority with civilisational advancement. Golding frames the encounter between Neanderthals and Homo sapiens as an ethical confrontation between two modes of consciousness: the embodied, empathetic worldview of Neanderthals and the instrumental rationality of Homo sapiens. Through techniques of defamiliarisation and shifting cognitive perspective, the novel distinguishes between sensory-integrated understanding and the analytical, object-oriented cognition of modern humans. The adoption of a Neanderthal infant by a Homo sapiens mother emerges as the novel's ethical fulcrum, symbolising the potential synthesis of technological capacity with moral awareness. Recent paleogenetic discoveries confirming Neanderthal DNA in modern humans lend scientific significance to Golding's vision of cross-species integration. By deconstructing conventional progress narratives, this study illuminates Golding's vision of ethical evolution—one that regards technological adaptation and empathetic understanding as complementary components of human advancement, offering timely insights into contemporary ethical dilemmas posed by accelerating technological change.

Keywords: William Golding; *The Inheritors*; progress; Homo sapiens; Neanderthals; technological adaptation; ethical complexity

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Introduction

William Golding regarded *The Inheritors* (1955) as his most significant literary achievement (Carey 2009, 173), despite the widespread recognition of *Lord of the Flies* (1954), which contributed to his 1983 Nobel Prize in Literature. *The Inheritors* portrays the existential struggle of a Neanderthal family 40,000 years ago against the technologically advanced and socially organised *Homo sapiens*, or “the new man/people.” Far from offering a straightforward account of human advancement, the novel provides a complex meditation on the origins of human society, challenging readers to reconsider fundamental assumptions about technological innovation and ethical complexity as portrayed in prehistorical inter-species encounters.

Research on *The Inheritors* has spanned diverse disciplines, exploring its narrative techniques, linguistic features, and ethical implications. The novel’s use of “upside-downness” (Biles and Evans 1978, 87), a reversal of perspective that forces readers to see *Homo sapiens* through Neanderthal eyes, has been a focal point of literary analysis. Linguistic studies highlight the Neanderthals’ simplistic language—characterised by non-human subjects, intransitive verbs, and limited past-tense structures—as indicative of their cognitive limitations and frustrations (Halliday 1981, 344–349) or incomprehension of human violence (Hoover 1999, 50). Ethical interpretations range from critiques of humanity’s flawed nature (Crawford 2002, 68) to allegories of colonial violence, the Holocaust, and the broader atrocities of war (Bergonzi 1970, 29; Boyd 1990, 38–44; Crawford 2002, 68).

Most significantly for our purposes, since the 1980s, with increasing Neanderthal fossil discoveries, scholarly perspectives have shifted towards more scientifically grounded interpretations, categorising the novel within Prehistoric Fiction (PF), a subgenre of Science Fiction. *Science Fiction Studies* has explored *The Inheritors* as a text that resonates with evolutionary anthropology, discussing its portrayal of Neanderthal “alienness” (Alterman 1978, 3), their perceived cognitive limitations (DePaolo 2000, 428; Walker 1981, 300), and the novel’s broader engagement with scientific discourse (James 2004, 142). However, these recent studies predominantly focus on the Neanderthals’ depiction, particularly their biological and social limitations, while largely neglecting the portrayal of *Homo sapiens* (“new man”) and the technological innovations they introduced.

This scholarly evolution has been further enriched by breakthroughs in paleogenetics. A significant breakthrough in Neanderthal studies came in 2010 when Swedish evolutionary geneticist Svante Pääbo sequenced the Neanderthal genome, revealing that many present-day humans share approximately 2–4% of their DNA with Neanderthals (Pääbo 2014, 237). Subsequent research has further clarified that this genetic contribution is primarily found in non-Sub-Saharan African populations (Green et al. 2010; Sankararaman et al. 2012). This discovery, which earned Pääbo the 2022 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine, has reshaped discussions about early human history and the novel’s implications. Mandala (2018, 69) suggests that these findings open a

“new direction” in our understanding of human ancestry, highlighting the complex interplay between conflict and cooperation, regression and progression, rather than a simplistic replacement model. The scientific confirmation of interbreeding between species lends new significance to Golding’s imaginative portrayal of cross-species adoption.

Golding’s scepticism towards scientific rationalism and uncritical notions of progress is a recurring theme in his work. He has been described as an “anti-rationalist-scientific-progressivist” (Biles 1970, 40), critiquing Enlightenment-era optimism regarding technological and intellectual advancement. While scholars frequently acknowledge the theme of progress in *The Inheritors*, there remains a significant gap in research that thoroughly examines the relationship between the technological development of *Homo sapiens* and its ethical implications. Traditional perspectives view progress as the linear accumulation of scientific knowledge—from Bacon’s notion of the “augmentation of knowledge” (Bury 1920, 51) in the 17th century to Sarton’s (1948, 24) view of science’s exclusive progressiveness in contrast to art in the 20th century. Golding, however, presents progress as non-linear, highlighting the moral consequences of technological superiority.

Golding challenges the linear narrative of human progress by positioning *The Inheritors* as a deliberate counterpoint to H.G. Wells’s portrayal of Neanderthals in *The Outline of History*, which serves as the novel’s epigraph. Wells depicted human development as an inevitable march towards perfection, reflecting what Golding termed “a kind of furtive optimism” typical of nineteenth-century thought (Biles 1970, 4). Golding refutes this teleological view by portraying Neanderthals as morally superior to *Homo sapiens*, thereby questioning the assumption that technological and ethical progress necessarily advance in tandem. This critique is embodied in two complementary elements: first, through the stark ethical contrast between species, with Neanderthals demonstrating profound empathy and communal harmony despite their technological limitations; and second, through what becomes the novel’s most powerful symbol—the adoption of a Neanderthal infant by Vivani, a grieving *Homo sapiens* mother. This pivotal moment represents the central ethical thesis of Golding’s work, with the child embodying the potential synthesis of two evolutionary lineages: the technological ingenuity of *Homo sapiens* and the profound empathy of Neanderthals. This critique of Wells’s progress narrative will be examined more thoroughly in the third section, where we will consider how Golding specifically challenges the moral implications of technological superiority.

Methodologically, this research reexamines *The Inheritors* through an interdisciplinary lens, integrating recent archaeological findings, evolutionary anthropology, and philosophical theory to deconstruct traditional narratives of human evolution. The study unfolds across four sections: first analysing technological adaptation during the Paleolithic era, then exploring the cognitive and social drivers behind these adaptations, followed by a dialectical critique of the presumed correlation between technological progress and civilisational advancement, and concluding with a redemptive perspective

on the Neanderthal child's adoption as a symbolic bridge between ancient and modern humanity—representing the potential for ethical evolution and continuity. Through this analytical framework, *The Inheritors* serves as a critical lens for reassessing the relationship between technological capability and ethical responsibility, challenging readers to acknowledge the complexity of adaptation, survival, and morality while envisioning a future where innovation and ethical development might be reconciled.

Exploring the Phenomenon of Technological Adaptation in *The Inheritors*

The concept of “progress” requires careful deconstruction in this context. Historically, it has been interpreted through multiple frameworks: linear technological advancement (Bury 1920, 1–7; Nisbet 1980, 4–5), moral development (Kant 1991, 88–89), and a problematic narrative of human superiority (Gray 2004, 10–17). As Gray emphasises, the belief in “progress” emerged in Europe only about two centuries ago and was unknown in ancient philosophies and world religions (Gray 2004, 10). This historical specificity raises an important question: How can we meaningfully examine human progress through the lens of a prehistoric novel like *The Inheritors* when the concept itself was absent during the period depicted?

This apparent anachronism is precisely what makes Golding's approach so illuminating. By portraying prehistoric encounters through a contemporary lens, Golding invites readers to question their assumptions about evolutionary development. The 19th century, with its embrace of Darwinian theory and industrial advancement, popularised a teleological view of human history—one where earlier hominids were inevitably positioned as inferior stepping stones towards modern humanity. H.G. Wells exemplifies this perspective by explicitly using prehistoric humans as evidence for his progress narrative. In *The Outline of History*, Wells writes: “Man at that time was not a degraded animal, for he had never been higher; he was therefore an exalted animal, and ... represented the highest stage of development of the animal kingdom of his time” (Wells 1921, 63). By retrofitting contemporary notions of progress onto prehistoric humanity, Wells constructs a narrative where even our earliest ancestors were participants in an inevitable march towards perfection—a quintessential representation of the “myth of progress” that dominated 19th-century Western thought.

This mythologised view of human development did not go unchallenged. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was among the earliest philosophers to question this linear progress, arguing that “all human progress is constantly causing people to leave their primitive state” (Rousseau 2008, 34). For him, civilisation represented not improvement but degradation from a more harmonious “state of nature,” introducing artificial inequalities and moral corruption. This critique of progress has been echoed by later thinkers: Jared Diamond's “The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race” argues that agriculture was a catastrophic step backwards that led to inequality, disease, and despotism (Diamond 1999, 3–5), while David Graeber and David Wengrow (2021), in *The Dawn of*

Everything, reject linear advancement in favour of understanding human development as a series of diverse social experiments.

The Inheritors resonates with these critiques, treating progress as a non-linear process shaped by environmental challenges and survival pressures. More significantly, Golding explores how technological advancement often coincides with ethical regression—a paradox that challenges conventional narratives of human improvement and forms the philosophical core of his prehistoric vision.

Understanding the historical setting of *The Inheritors* enhances our comprehension of the survival conditions it portrays. The novel is set during the late Lower Paleolithic period, a pivotal moment when *Homo sapiens* and Neanderthals coexisted. Contrary to the common assumption that *Homo sapiens* were the rightful “inheritors” of the Earth, Harari (2011, 9) emphasises that at least six human species coexisted between 2 million and 10,000 years ago, with Neanderthals sharing the closest evolutionary relationship to *Homo sapiens*. Both species likely evolved from *Homo heidelbergensis*, a hominin found in both Africa and Europe around 500,000 years ago. Their divergence—Neanderthals in Europe and *Homo sapiens* in Africa—was likely driven by environmental pressures, such as climate and geography (Stringer 2011, 202).

The relatively abrupt disappearance of Neanderthals around 40,000 years ago remains academically contested. Explanations range from environmental shifts (Finlayson and Carrion 2007, 213) and climate-linked events (Finlayson 2004, 8) to theories of gradual assimilation into anatomically modern human populations (cited in Trinkaus and Howells 1979, 130). However, another long-held view suggests that competition with intrusive *Homo sapiens* played a decisive role in Neanderthal extinction (Mellars 2004, 464). While Neanderthals disappeared around the same time *Homo sapiens* arrived in Europe, no conclusive evidence is available to suggest that the “new man” directly caused their extinction. It is more likely that Neanderthals faced ecological pressures and social disadvantages that made it difficult for them to compete with *Homo sapiens*. Nevertheless, Golding’s novel aligns with the view that competition with *Homo sapiens* contributed to the Neanderthals’ eventual decline, portraying *Homo sapiens* as technologically and strategically superior.

The historical encounters between *Homo sapiens* and Neanderthals occurred on at least two significant occasions. The first occurred around 100,000 years ago when early *Homo sapiens* migrated into Europe, only to be repelled by Neanderthals. Fifty thousand years later, however, *Homo sapiens* returned with significant technological advantages, securing dominance over their Neanderthal counterparts. Harari (2011, 19) controversially describes this event as one of the earliest instances of “ethnic cleansing.” While the extent of direct conflict remains uncertain, *Homo sapiens*’ superior tools, including bows, arrows, and projectile weaponry, gave them a distinct survival advantage over Neanderthals, who continued to rely on thrusting spears.

The Inheritors not only depicts this struggle for survival between two species but also vividly illustrates the technological superiority of Homo sapiens. In the novel, the most noticeable technological advantage of Homo sapiens is reflected in their everyday utensils. To highlight the advanced nature of these seemingly trivial objects in the primitive era, the narrative employs a literary technique of “defamiliarisation,” presenting familiar human technologies from the unfamiliar perspective of the Neanderthal protagonist, Lok. When encountering shelters built by Homo sapiens, Lok perceives them as “magic trees” that have “reorganized themselves,” “woven their branches,” and “made caverns” (Golding 1955, 128), interpreting the shelters as natural growths rather than constructed objects. Lok is also puzzled by dugout canoes, wondering, “where does such a log grow?” (Golding 1955, 116), unable to recognise that the canoes are human-made. Similarly, he is confused when he sees Tuami, a Homo sapiens, “pull a piece of hide and step out of it” (Golding 1955, 143), equating the hide with Tuami himself rather than recognising it as separate.

Lok perceives objects as extensions of himself or as inherently connected to the natural world. In contrast, the products of the new people represent a form of alienation from nature. This gap reflects the significant technological divide between Homo sapiens and Neanderthals in terms of their ability to modify and control the natural environment. In fact, statistics indicate that approximately 70% of contemporary technologies related to clothing, food, shelter, and transportation can be traced back to primitive innovations (Yuan and Ding 2000, 3). In *The Inheritors*, Lok’s defamiliarised observations of these early innovations highlight how our ancestors harnessed natural resources to adapt to their environment. While there was certainly no conscious notion of “progress” in prehistoric times, these everyday tools and techniques, when compared to those of the Neanderthals, reflect a significant advancement, particularly from the perspective of modern readers.

This cognitive divergence is further illuminated by Elizabeth Black’s analysis, who interprets Lok’s defamiliarisation as a deliberate linguistic device underscoring how radically the Neanderthals’ worldview differs from our own. Black (1993, 41) suggests that the Neanderthals’ cognitive mode is rooted not in analytical detachment but in a direct, experiential connection to their environment. The tension—between appreciating the Neanderthals’ embodied wisdom and recognising the survival advantage conferred by Homo sapiens’ technological innovations—lies at the heart of Golding’s complex meditation on human development and the nature of progress itself.

Another crucial aspect of human evolution is the creation of art, which reflects symbolic thinking. This theme is subtly present in *The Inheritors*. Archaeological evidence shows that Homo sapiens began to exhibit artistic and symbolic behaviour around 40,000 to 50,000 years ago, marking a cognitive leap often referred to as the “Creative Explosion” (Price 2013, 56). During this era, humans utilised simple materials such as animal bones and teeth, employing techniques such as moulding, polishing, engraving, and pecking to create striking artworks used for personal adornment. For instance, the discovery of

ostrich eggshell beads from the CL layer, dated to approximately 42,000 years ago in East Africa, represents some of the earliest known fully manufactured ornaments (Deacon 1995, 123). Additionally, bone-eyed needles from 40,000 years ago were crucial for the creation of tailored clothing.

In *The Inheritors*, Golding echoes this narrative through his depiction of early humans. One notable scene features a plump woman who picks up a piece of bone “divided like the fingers of a hand” and repeatedly “passes the bone fingers through her hair” (Golding 1955, 154), clearly using it as a comb. These new humans also adorn themselves with white bones placed between their eyes and nostrils, functioning as nose rings, and wear “rows of teeth and seashells” around their necks (Golding 1955, 138), which are unmistakably necklaces. These details signify a burgeoning sense of identity and social expression within their culture.

Beyond artistic adornment, the novel also depicts the new humans engaging in ritualistic worship of a totem animal, the stag. Tuami begins by drawing a stag totem on the ground. Another person then dresses up as the stag, while the others clap, dance, and chant rhythmic incantations. They bow their heads and touch the stag drawing, showing reverence and respect. Subsequently, they select one among themselves by lot and sever a finger as a sacrificial offering to their god.

This artistic ritual, undeniably marked by blood and violence, holds irreplaceable symbolic significance. Harari in *Sapiens* (2011, 35) refers to this symbolic system as shared “fiction,” “social constructs” or “imagined realities.” This capacity for symbolic thought and communication not only enables them to form cohesive social structures based on common beliefs and narratives, but also allows for flexible cooperation on a scale that their Neanderthal predecessors could not replicate. Through these rituals, the new humans demonstrate not only a different practice but a fundamentally distinct cognitive ability. This cognitive shift—the ability to imagine and share fictive concepts—would ultimately become a key factor in their evolutionary success, giving them the capacity to collaborate in large, complex groups and to dominate their environment.

This progressive development in craftsmanship likely led to the invention of increasingly complex tools, particularly bows and arrows. In *The Inheritors*, Golding describes how Neanderthals observed the arrows made by early humans as resembling a “twig,” complete with “a barbed bone point, red feathers, and a smooth nock at the end” (Golding 1955, 113). These three elements—the barbed bone point, red feathers, and notch—represent the arrow’s essential components: the head, fletching, and nock. Its creation involves selecting a sturdy, straight stick, sourcing and sharpening a bone point, attaching the point to the stick, and balancing the assembly with feathers. This multi-step process demonstrates that early humans grasped basic physics, such as the need for feathers to reduce air resistance and ensure balance. As Marx noted, “Bows, strings, and arrows are already very complex tools. Their invention required long-term

accumulated experience and relatively developed intelligence” (Marx and Engels 1972, 18). Archaeological evidence suggests that the earliest known bow and arrow dates back over 61,000 years, found in South Africa (Lombard and Wadley 2016, 274). This is supported by rock art depictions of musical bows in Namibia (Bahn 2015, 60) and the discovery of a 61,700-year-old bone point at Sibudu Cave (Backwell et al. 2018, 290). Similar stone points found in Grotte Mandrin, France, indicate that *Homo sapiens* may have carried these innovations from Africa through the Levantine corridor into Europe (Slimak et al. 2022, 7).

In contrast, Neanderthals relied on heavy hand-thrust or thrown spears. This technological gap likely influenced their interactions with *Homo sapiens*. *The Inheritors* vividly depicts these conflicts: Neanderthals like Ha, Nil, and Fa were killed by early humans, while two children were captured (Golding 1955). These scenes emphasise that a technological gap might have been a decisive factor in their confrontations. Despite their common ancestry, *Homo sapiens* triumphed due to their innovations, especially in weaponry.

Golding, who claimed to be an “amateur archaeologist” (Golding 1965, 62), drew on archaeological insights to authentically recreate these prehistoric technologies. Many of the innovations depicted—clothing, shelter, comb, necklace, weaponry etc.—form the foundation of modern human technology. Yet, Golding’s narrative forces readers to consider whether these advancements came at the expense of empathy and communal integrity. The Neanderthals, while technologically limited, demonstrate a profound connection to their environment and to each other that the more “advanced” *Homo sapiens* appear to have lost in their pursuit of dominance. By presenting *The Inheritors* through the eyes of the vanquished, Golding offers a powerful counter-narrative to traditional triumphalist histories of human progress, suggesting that technological adaptation, while enhancing survival capabilities, may simultaneously diminish certain forms of embodied wisdom and ecological harmony.

Unveiling the Drivers behind Technological Adaptation in *The Inheritors*

Beyond illustrating technological advancements, *The Inheritors* investigates the underlying factors driving these changes. In *The Idea of Progress*, Bury (1920, 65) argues that mere advancements in knowledge and the arts do not constitute a comprehensive theory of progress. It was not until the 17th century that Descartes’s declaration, *Cogito, ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”), gained recognition as a foundation for rationalism and the intellectual independence of humanity. Bury further notes that this Cartesian framework fostered the development of modern progress theory. However, Descartes conceptualised reason as a disembodied faculty, independent of material influences (Descartes 2006, 29).

Golding’s *The Inheritors* challenges this traditional view by presenting reason as deeply intertwined with the body and the environment rather than an isolated mental process. This embodied view of cognition is central to understanding how technological

innovation in the novel shapes not just survival capabilities but ethical consciousness itself. Modern psychology supports this perspective, emphasising that cognition emerges through interaction with the physical world, including communication, play, and tool use. The process of crafting stone tools, for example, required advanced visuomotor coordination and an understanding of cause and effect, reinforcing cognitive development (Malafouris 2013; Stout et al. 2008). Research further indicates an overlap between the neural circuits involved in tool-making and those governing language, suggesting technological innovation and cognitive evolution exist in a mutually reinforcing relationship that ultimately shapes ethical capacity. As Vallor argues, “humans have always engineered our worlds as mirrors of our distinctive needs, desires, values, and beliefs” (Vallor 2016, 13).

Golding explores two primary catalysts for the cognitive advancements of the new man: physiological conditions and social behaviours. One key physiological distinction emphasised in *The Inheritors* is bipedal locomotion. Although modern research has revised earlier assumptions that bipedalism is unique to humans, in the mid-20th century, when Golding was writing the novel, it was widely regarded as a defining human characteristic (Jablonski and Chaplin 1992, 113). For instance, Darwin considers being erect or bipedal as clearly advantageous for human progenitors (Darwin 2009, 142). Lok, the Neanderthal protagonist, perceives the movement of the new man as unfamiliar:

The new people did not move like anything he had ever seen before. They were balanced on top of their legs, their waists were so wasp-thin that when they moved their bodies swayed backwards and forwards. They did not look at the earth but straight ahead. (Golding 1955, 143)

This ability to “look straight ahead” provided significant survival advantages, including improved accuracy in spear-throwing, enhanced ability to detect prey from a distance, and increased vigilance against predators. Lok describes the new man as “wary or infinitely knowing and secure in their strength” (180). Bipedalism also likely facilitated face-to-face communication, fostering cooperative interactions. Lok observes that the new men “speak sideways to the others” using a “soft twittering speech” (Golding 1955, 139), suggesting a more advanced capacity for verbal communication compared to the Neanderthals. This linguistic sophistication reflects the cognitive and social adaptability that underpinned *Homo sapiens*’ survival advantage.

Bipedalism further frees the hands of the new man for complex tasks beyond locomotion, enabling intricate tool use. Lok notes their dexterity as they “dig” into the underbrush for logs, “join” logs with strips of hide, “strike” stones against wood, “round” the edges of the wood, and “chop” wood (Golding 1955, 137–140). These actions are indicative of a more sophisticated tool-making ability, an essential skill for survival. Although not explicitly stated at this moment in the narrative, these woodworking activities clearly relate to the construction of their dugout canoes, which feature prominently in their ability to navigate the river. Their manual dexterity and problem-solving skills—

evidenced in observation, imitation, and cooperation—stimulated cognitive growth and technological innovation.

According to Golding, the new men's ability to "sail up the river towards the fall" (Golding 1955, 231) is a "central symbol." The fall represents "the second law of thermodynamics" (Carey 2009, 182), which describes the inevitable transition of energy from order to disorder. This concept, introduced by Rudolf Clausius in 1865, "destroys the notion of history as progress" (Rifkin and Howard 1980, 6), revealing that everything in the universe moves from structure and value towards random chaos and waste. However, Golding considered the law the "Satan of our cosmology," suggesting that "life is in some sense a local contradiction of this law" (Carey 2009, 182). In the novel, the Neanderthals believe that "we cannot go over the fall!" (Golding 1955, 121), symbolising their resignation to natural limits. In contrast, the new men demonstrate their technological ingenuity not only by navigating the river in a sophisticated dugout canoe equipped with a steering paddle, skin sail, mast, and leather seating (see Golding 1955, 223–231), but also by portaging their vessel around the obstacle (Golding 1955, 225). This ability to adapt—both by sailing and by physically carrying their boat past barriers—represents an evolutionary advancement. Golding (as cited in Carey 2009, 182) interprets this moment as symbolising an evolutionary force that propels the new man forwards, even as it leads to moral and existential dilemmas.

Furthermore, the novel contrasts the social structures of Neanderthals and the new man. Neanderthals operate within a communal framework centred on sharing—food, shelter, and experiences, and they also share responsibilities such as child-rearing and spouses within their extended family. Their interconnectedness is likened to "strings" binding them together, "the strings were not ornaments of life but its substance. If they broke, a man would die" (Golding 1955, 78). This absence of rigid boundaries fosters a collective ethos, where individuals are not distinguished as separate entities but as integral parts of a larger whole.

When Ha ventures out to hunt alone and is killed by the new man, Lok could not comprehend it: "How could Ha meet another? There's no other in the world" (69), as he finds it unimaginable to conceive of a human with fundamentally opposed nature. Even the relationship between people and the environment is integrated. The Neanderthals experience their surroundings not as external objects but as extensions of themselves, blending perception with natural elements in ways that dissolve conventional boundaries. Even time itself is perceived as cyclical and static, reflecting a worldview in which change is minimal and continuity is emphasised: "Today is like yesterday and tomorrow" (Golding 1955, 46).

While both the Neanderthals and the new men practise communalism as early human societies, the novel highlights the distinct nature of their collective lives. The Neanderthals are bound by an intrinsic emotional connection, creating a seamless unity and sense of "we" without internal differentiation or distinct boundaries. In contrast, the

new men's communalism is more hierarchical yet adaptable, forming strategic alliances—such as uniting to defeat the Neanderthals or building dugout canoes to escape the forest—but prone to internal divisions once external threats disappeared. This contrast illustrates how social organisation evolves in response to shifting circumstances, shaped by the interplay between collective needs and individual ambitions

A telling example of their individual approach is sexual relations, which, rather than reinforcing communal bonds, is depicted as an act of dominance and competition. A striking scene illustrates this vividly: “The two people were making noises fiercely as though they were quarrelling ... They fought against each other and consumed each other, reaching a rowdy climax.” Black blood ran from the lobe of the woman's ear, and finally, “their fierce and wolf-like battle was ended” (Golding 1955, 175–176). This aggressive, consumptive tendency in sexual conduct, while not representative of all of humanity, starkly contrasts with the Neanderthals' sense of interconnectedness. Such behaviour signals a shift towards a self-centred worldview, where every interaction becomes an opportunity to assert dominance and secure personal advantage, thus prioritising individual desires over the well-being of the group.

This competitive sexual behaviour bears striking resemblance to what primatologists have observed in chimpanzees. As Diamond notes in *The Rise of the Third Chimpanzee* (1999, 263), chimpanzees exhibit aggression and competition during sexual and social interactions, while bonobos display a more cooperative and peaceful nature. This raises an intriguing question: Why, despite similar social and sexual behaviours, have chimpanzees not developed rational thinking as the new men in *The Inheritors* seem to have? The answer likely involves the complex interplay of several factors, particularly the sophisticated social structures of early humans. The new men's sexual behaviour occurs within a broader social context. As they vie for sexual dominance, they simultaneously engage in other forms of social interaction—cooperation, negotiation, and conflict resolution—that are mediated by increasingly complex symbolic communication. Unlike chimpanzees, their actions reflect not merely instinctual drives but a nascent understanding of power dynamics and a calculated approach to achieving goals through strategic thinking.

Golding's portrayal of the new men's individualistic tendencies, particularly through their sexual behaviour, serves as an allegorical representation of modern humanity's cognitive patterns. While Cartesian thought and the subject-object dichotomy would only emerge millennia later during the European Enlightenment, Golding suggests that the cognitive foundations for these developments were already present at humanity's earliest divergence from Neanderthals. This emerging cognitive framework in the new men bears striking resemblance to what Adorno and Horkheimer would later term “instrumental reason” in their seminal work *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ([1944] 2002). For the Frankfurt School theorists, instrumental reason represents a mode of thinking that reduces everything to calculability, utility, and control—precisely the cognitive

pattern displayed by the new men in their approach to the environment, to other species, and to each other.

Golding critiques this rational framework through his portrayal of how the new men's perception of the world as manipulable objects fosters both technological innovation and ethical detachment. The new man's persistent fear despite eliminating the perceived threat—"There is no danger in the forest, yet they are frightened of the air where there is nothing" (Golding 1955, 206)—reveals the psychological cost of this rational framework. Their treatment of Neanderthals as "devils" reflects what Adorno and Horkheimer identified as reason's tendency to mythologise what it cannot comprehend, creating new irrationalities even as it claims to dispel myth. Through his narrative, Golding anticipates critical theory's central insight: Technological rationality, when severed from ethical reflection, contains the seeds of regression into barbarism. The dilemma Adorno and Horkheimer articulated—"Human beings have always had to choose between their subjugation to nature and its subjugation to the self" ([1944] 2002, 25)—is embodied in the new men, who have conquered nature only to become prisoners of their own fear and alienation, illustrating progress's hidden psychological toll.

Ultimately, *The Inheritors* raises profound questions about the trajectory of technological advancement. Does technological superiority necessarily lead to moral and societal progress, or does it create new tensions and divisions? Golding's portrayal of the new man suggests that technological advantage inevitably creates power imbalances, which in turn lead to the abuse of that power. The novel vividly illustrates Golding's critique of the "might is right" ethos that arises whenever one group gains dominance over others. Rather than simply questioning the so-called "myth of progress," Golding addresses the ethical corruption that follows technological superiority, showing how tools designed for survival are transformed into instruments of oppression. By challenging simplistic notions of advancement, the novel invites reflection on the moral responsibilities that accompany technological capabilities and whether humanity can ever transcend the tendency to exploit power imbalances created by technology.

Mitigating the Adverse Impacts of Technological Advancement in *The Inheritors*

As previously established, Golding's *The Inheritors* challenges Wells's teleological narrative of human evolution. In this section, we examine how Golding specifically confronts the ethical implications of technological advancement by inverting Wells's premise. The prologue of *The Inheritors* ironically references Wells's description of Neanderthals as beings of "extreme hairiness," "ugliness," and "repulsive strangeness"—derogatory characterisations that reinforced their supposed evolutionary inferiority. By incorporating these descriptions, Golding signals his intention to dismantle the oversimplified vision of human history as a linear progression of improvement (Golding and Baker 1982, 138), engaging with broader post-

Enlightenment critiques that recognise the ethical complexities accompanying scientific advancement.

In *The Inheritors*, the triumph of *Homo sapiens* over Neanderthals is not framed as an inevitable evolutionary success but rather as a consequence of their capacity for calculated violence. Bhattacharjee (2011, 5) suggests that Golding associates intelligence with moral depravity, as the new men's superior reasoning abilities enable them to exterminate the more empathetic Neanderthals. This critique emerges through Golding's contrast between the technological approaches and ethical frameworks of the two species, particularly in their divergent relationships to tool-making and empathetic understanding.

Neanderthals and *Homo sapiens* exhibit significant differences in their tool-making cultures. Archaeological research indicates that *Homo sapiens* developed the sophisticated "Aurignacian tool culture," which was characterised by the first appearance of projectile weapons, such as blades, spears, and arrows (Pääbo 2014, 237). In *The Inheritors*, the lethality of these long-range weapons is vividly illustrated through Lok's encounter with an arrow. When "the twigs came twirling across the river and vanished beyond him in the forest," Lok mistakes the arrow for a "present," despite Fa's warning to "throw it away" (Golding 1955, 111).

While Neanderthals are capable of crafting simple tools like stone spears, axes, and wooden clubs for close-range defence and hunting, Lok's unfamiliarity with the arrow not only highlights the Neanderthals' insufficient capacity for advanced weapon-making compared to *Homo sapiens* but also reflects a profound divergence in the cultural utilisation of tools. *Homo sapiens* have extended the application of tools into the realm of violence. Archaeologists refer to modern humans as the "replacement crowd" as "wherever they appeared, earlier human forms disappeared sooner or later" (Pääbo 2014, 237). The extinction of Neanderthals, as depicted in *The Inheritors*, is merely a small part of this historical process. Scholars thus regard *The Inheritors* as an allegorical response to the atrocities of World War II, suggesting that the novel criticises the moral implications of applying scientific advancements to warfare, especially with the development of nuclear weapons, whose destructive potential is far from morally neutral (Crawford 2002, 69).

In contrast to the new man's weaponry, the Neanderthals employ non-lethal means of self-defence. They use thorn bushes to ward off hyenas rather than killing them, demonstrating a philosophy of deterrence rather than extermination. Once the hyenas have retreated, Ha "lifted the thorn bush until it was no longer a weapon" (Golding 1955, 29), signifying a deliberate choice to cease hostilities. This restraint aligns with J. Robert Oppenheimer's post-war reflections on nuclear weaponry. As one of the architects of the Manhattan Project, Oppenheimer later advocated for the renunciation of arms, arguing that the very existence of such weapons posed an existential threat (Oppenheimer 2013, 162–163). Similarly, Golding's depiction of the Neanderthals'

approach to technology reinforces the idea that technological power, if not tempered by ethical responsibility, leads to irreversible consequences.

Golding's concern with the destructive potential of advanced weaponry was deeply personal, rooted in his own wartime experiences. As a lieutenant in the British Navy, he participated in developing anti-submarine weaponry, including the "hedgehog" depth charge system responsible for sinking numerous submarines (Carey 2009, 89). This firsthand exposure to the consequences of modern warfare informed his literary critique of weaponisation. *The Inheritors* traces this trajectory back to the earliest human conflicts, demonstrating that even rudimentary tools, when used for conquest, set a precedent for future technological escalation.

Beyond the critique of tools, Golding also extended his scepticism to the broader implications of human rationality, always connected with "original sin." This concept was central to a televised debate between Golding and biologist Julian Huxley on the British programme *Brains Trust*. Huxley, firmly grounded in the realm of scientific rationalism, dismissed the idea of original sin as "absolute nonsense," since humans suffer from an intrinsic inability to live harmoniously in social environments (Golding and Baker 1982, 134). Biologically, this inherent flaw can be understood as a product of evolutionary pressures, specifically, the enlargement of the human brain—a precondition for greater cognitive abilities. Bigger brains, together with a narrower pelvis resulting from bipedalism, introduced constraints such as premature birth, a state known as altriciality where infants are born in a relatively underdeveloped condition. These evolutionary trade-offs help explain why, as Golding argued, "human nature is to want to grab something that belongs to somebody else," which is "an elaborate definition of original sin" (Golding and Baker 1982, 134). In essence, while greater cognitive abilities brought technological advancement, they also introduced moral and ethical challenges that define the human condition.

Golding's portrayal of human nature parallels the religious concept of the Fall while simultaneously challenging the myth of progress. These seemingly distinct narratives—one suggesting descent from innocence, the other ascent towards perfection—are revealed as complementary frameworks within the novel. Just as Adam and Eve gained knowledge at the cost of innocence, the biological developments that enhanced human cognitive abilities simultaneously introduced moral complications. The new people embody this paradox: Their technological superiority comes at the cost of ethical integrity, recalling the Eden narrative where knowledge brings both enlightenment and alienation. By interweaving these contradictory mythic structures, Golding creates a more nuanced critique than either framework could provide alone. The myth of the Fall complicates the narrative of progress by suggesting that technological advancement represents not merely improvement but a form of corruption—humanity's continuous reaching for forbidden knowledge. Simultaneously, the progress narrative complicates the Fall by suggesting that humanity's "original sin" might paradoxically drive beneficial adaptation. This dual framework challenges us to question whether progress,

defined solely by technological capability, represents genuine human advancement or simply another manifestation of our inherent moral contradiction.

Tuami, a male figure within the new man group, is a typical embodiment of the rational progress and moral “fall.” He meticulously sharpens an ivory weapon with the intent of assassinating Marlan, his leader. Marlan, in turn, engages in deception and manipulates those around him, such as having an affair with Vivani, another man’s wife. Both characters exhibit an ability to strategise, deceive, and exploit others to achieve their objectives. This instrumental rationality—reasoning directed towards self-serving ends—extends beyond individual figures and permeates the entire society of the new man. Their willingness to consume the flesh of a Neanderthal child while simultaneously offering their own daughter Natalie as a bargaining tool underscores their prioritisation of survival and self-interest over ethical considerations.

The new man’s rational approach stands in stark contrast to the empathetic consciousness of the Neanderthals. Golding provides a poignant example of Neanderthal compassion through the character of Mal, an elderly and frail leader. When Mal falls into the water and catches a cold, the Neanderthals instinctively gather around him, rubbing their bodies against his to provide warmth. Their shared suffering is evident: “The people gathered round in a tight group, crouched and rubbed their bodies against him ... When Ha grimaced, the people grimaced with him” (Golding 1955, 17–21). This scene illustrates the Neanderthals’ capacity for collective empathy—an ability to internalise the pain of others and respond with care. While Scarry (1985, 3) argues that pain is inherently incommunicable, the Neanderthals overcome this barrier by mirroring Mal’s suffering, effectively “walking a mile in his shoes.” This communal response to vulnerability contrasts sharply with the new man’s exploitation of weakness through cheating, hostage-taking, and even cannibalism.

This distinctive form of empathetic engagement has been insightfully analysed by Caracciolo, who notes that Golding invites readers to experience kinaesthetic empathy with Lok by employing internally focalised descriptions of bodily actions (Caracciolo 2016, 228). This approach is further contextualised by Golding’s own theoretical work in *A Moving Target*, where he examines kinaesthesia as the ability to sympathetically identify with and understand another person’s physical movements and actions (Golding 1982, 104). The novel distinguishes Neanderthal empathy as fundamentally different from modern human cognition, exemplified when Lok encounters the scent of a new man:

There built up in Lok’s head a picture of the man, not by reasoned deduction but because in every place the scent told him—do this! ... the scent turned Lok into the thing that had gone before him. (Golding 1955, 77)

This portrayal reveals a radical form of sensory understanding that transcends contemporary human cognitive boundaries. Unlike modern empathetic experiences, Lok’s perception represents an immersive, transformative connection where sensory

input becomes a direct portal to another's experience. Caracciolo describes this phenomenon as a profound "lack of self-other differentiation" (2016, 229). The Neanderthals experience empathy not as a partial emotional mirroring, but as a total, immersive transformation. Where the new men maintain strict interpersonal boundaries, the Neanderthals engage in a more fluid, holistic connection that collapses the distinction between self and other, extending to their entire environmental experience.

The archaeological record provides empirical support for Golding's portrayal of Neanderthal social care. Shanidar I, discovered in Iraq during the 1950s when *The Inheritors* was being written, represents the most renowned prehistoric disabled individual. Despite severe injuries—including partial blindness, deafness, and significant skeletal injuries—Shanidar I lived to over 40, an advanced age for Neanderthals, suggesting community care. Archaeologist Solecki notes, "Shanidar I provides proof that his people were not lacking in compassion" (1971, 195). Golding, aware of this discovery, used it to challenge the stereotype of Neanderthals as brutish savages (Haffenden 1985, 114), instead presenting them as models of social cohesion and ethical engagement.

By portraying Neanderthals as possessing a redemptive power capable of modifying the new man's destructive tendencies, Golding offers a path towards mitigating technology's adverse impacts. In the early 20th century, Neanderthals were often depicted as brutish and degenerate beasts, as seen in H.G. Wells's *The Grisly Folk*. Golding reverses this negative image by highlighting two distinctive Neanderthal traits: their empathetic interconnectedness and their ethical approach to tool use. Together, these qualities provide a counterbalance to *Homo sapiens*' rational thinking and technological exploitation, suggesting that genuine progress must integrate technological capability with ethical responsibility.

Ultimately, *The Inheritors* challenges the assumption that technological advancement inherently constitutes progress. While *Homo sapiens*' rational and technical capabilities enable environmental domination, they achieve this at the cost of ethical integrity. Golding forces readers to confront the moral implications of advancement, questioning whether progress, in its conventional sense, truly represents human betterment. By presenting the Neanderthals as the ethical counterpoint to the new man, he invites us to reconsider the costs of civilisation's pursuit of technological dominance and imagine alternative paths that might integrate innovation with empathetic understanding.

The Neanderthal Child as a Bridge: Continuity and Ethical Evolution in Golding's Vision

The novel's most profound ethical statement emerges through two complementary narratives of continuity: the adoption of a Neanderthal infant by Vivani, a grieving *Homo sapiens* mother, and Lok's gradual cognitive transformation. These parallel narratives present not just a critique of linear progress, but a constructive ethical vision

in which empathy and innovation exist in creative tension rather than in opposition. Together, they challenge the binary distinctions between species and gesture towards a synthesis of embodied empathy and technological capacity. As Caracciolo (2016) observes, Golding's portrayal of literary proto-humans articulates a "complex trade-off" between archaic and modern mentalities.

The child, referred to as "the new one," embodies this synthesis: not only a biological link between species (later confirmed by genetic research), but also a symbolic convergence of *Homo sapiens*' ingenuity and Neanderthals' empathy. Vivani's caregiving—feeding, holding, and breastfeeding the infant—represents more than maternal instinct; it becomes a quiet yet powerful act of ethical recognition. Though her motivations remain implicit, these intimate gestures of care suggest that reconciliation may begin at the most fundamental human level. While this act does not fully dissolve the "self-other" distinction that Caracciolo identifies in Neanderthal consciousness, it challenges the perceived incompatibility between these evolutionary cousins.

As the true "inheritor" of both lineages, the child represents a new evolutionary possibility that transcends the binary opposition of progress versus moral regression. Golding himself emphasised the child's extraordinary significance in an interview with Baker, stating: "He will probably be a shaman or something. He obviously has powers that they will regard as unnatural superhuman" (Baker 1982, 140). This authorial insight reinforces the child's role as a transformative figure whose hybrid nature suggests a third way that recognises the interdependence of technological adaptation and ethical development.

Beyond literary symbolism, these parallel narratives challenge deterministic views of evolution by suggesting that empathy itself has evolutionary value. While technological advantages secured *Homo sapiens*' immediate survival, their capacity for empathy—demonstrated in Vivani's adoption—represents an equally important evolutionary adaptation. Recent archaeological and anthropological research supports this view, with studies of prehistoric medical care suggesting that compassion has deep evolutionary roots (Spikins 2015). These findings align with Golding's portrayal of Neanderthal society, where care for vulnerable members like Mal demonstrates the adaptive value of empathy. Rather than presenting empathy as merely a moral virtue, Golding suggests it is a fundamental survival strategy—one that the new men must rediscover and integrate with their technological capabilities.

The second narrative of continuity emerges through Lok's gradual transformation. His journey from Neanderthal consciousness to a more rational, object-oriented perspective mirrors the evolution of human cognition, suggesting that the boundaries between species are more fluid than they first appear. Lok's transformation begins with his ambivalent reaction to new technologies, particularly the fermented beverages of the new people. His response to their wine, described as "repelled and attracted, daunted

and enticed” (Golding 1955, 181), marks the first fracture in his integrated worldview, signalling the onset of cognitive dissonance.

As he continues to engage with the new people, Lok experiences a profound psychic splitting, developing an “inner” and “outer” self. The inner Lok retains the instinctual, embodied responses typical of Neanderthal consciousness—fear and aversion to the unfamiliar—while the outer Lok begins to exhibit rational traits, becoming “brave and still as ice” (Golding 1955, 183). Lok’s transition is further marked by his use of similes, such as comparing people to “a famished wolf in the hollow of a tree” (Golding 1955, 195). Black (1993, 45) notes, the introduction of “like” as a comparative tool “marks a great step in Lok’s intellectual development.” He starts to link the uncomprehensible new man to a familiar, observable or tangible object, which is an important milestone in cognitive development.

The pivotal moment in Lok’s transformation occurs when he attempts to command a log to move (Golding 1955, 202), marking the development of a scientific mindset, where the external world is seen as separate from the self and subject to manipulation. His transformation culminates in his declaration, “I am one of the new people” (Golding 1955, 204), symbolising not only an external identification but an internal reconciliation of the cognitive dissonance that has defined his journey.

As the biological father of the adopted Neanderthal child, Lok’s cognitive evolution holds profound symbolic meaning in relation to the novel’s central “bridge” metaphor. His ability to bridge the cognitive gap between species suggests that the child, carrying both lineages, might one day achieve a more complete integration of these seemingly opposed modes of consciousness. Lok’s transformation thus complements the adoption narrative, reinforcing Golding’s vision of continuity and transformation, rather than rupture and replacement, between species.

This vision of continuity connects to broader philosophical and etymological dimensions within the novel. Golding described the Neanderthals in *The Inheritors* as embodying “an almost Rousseauesque picture of the universe” (Golding and Baker 1982, 140). This deliberate philosophical framing connects his narrative to a long-standing critique of progress in Western thought. Bury noted that Rousseau introduced “a theory of historical regress ... that the farther man has travelled from a primitive simple state the more unhappy has his lot become” (Bury 1920, 177). While *The Inheritors* echoes Rousseau’s concerns about the moral costs of technological advancement, its conclusion offers a more dialectical perspective: The adoption of “the new one” suggests continuity and transformation, symbolising a bridge between two distinct civilisations rather than the triumph of one over the other.

The concept of “newness” in the novel carries rich philosophical implications that further support this bridge metaphor. Golding presents a multi-layered interpretation: The “new man” represents humanity’s technological evolution, yet their moral

ambivalence challenges conventional progress narratives. Notably, “Neanderthal” derives from the German “Neander Valley,” historically written as “Neumann” or “new man” (Rich 2016, 5)—an etymology that metaphorically reframes Neanderthals as intrinsic to human legacy rather than evolutionary dead ends. Golding underscores the potential of this child to embody “the good qualities of the emergent humanity” (Golding and Baker 1982, 140), redefining progress in terms of ethical integration rather than mere technological superiority.

Intriguingly, this literary solution resonates with scientific questions about interspecies relationships. Even Nobel laureate Svante Pääbo has puzzled over why gene flow occurred from non-dominant Neanderthals into more dominant modern humans rather than the reverse, given that gene flow typically moves from socially dominant groups to non-dominant ones (Pääbo 2014, 193). Indeed, Pääbo’s confirmation of Neanderthal DNA in modern humans provides scientific grounding for this symbolic adoption narrative, suggesting that the “bridge between species” Golding envisioned has biological as well as ethical dimensions—a prescient insight that anticipates our contemporary understanding of human evolution as a complex narrative of interbreeding rather than simple replacement. The Neanderthal infant adopted by *Homo sapiens* can thus be seen as both a literary redemptive symbol and a creative explanation for this scientific anomaly, suggesting a framework for understanding the complex dynamics between strength and weakness, progress and regression.

Conclusion

The Inheritors transcends traditional literary boundaries, offering a profound critique of human progress, development, and ethical responsibility. Golding challenges the linear view of evolution, portraying technological advancement as both a survival tool and a potential source of destruction. By contrasting Neanderthal empathy with *Homo sapiens*’ technological rationality, the novel invites a reconsideration of progress and the moral responsibilities accompanying technological power. Rather than positioning technological advancement and ethical consciousness as opposites, Golding suggests they must exist in creative tension. This is exemplified by the Neanderthal child adopted by Vivani, symbolising not only biological continuity but a new evolutionary possibility that integrates technology with profound empathy.

Golding’s Neanderthals, with their embodied cognition and collective empathy, represent an alternative mode of consciousness, characterised by deep connections with their environment and one another. Their metaphorical thinking, as revealed through Black’s linguistic analysis, highlights a relational approach to meaning-making that prioritises understanding over manipulation. In contrast, the new man demonstrates technological prowess but also moral limitations—while abstract thought and tool innovation enable survival, they also foster detachment, leading to violence, fear, and exploitation. This contrast suggests that technological advances must be balanced with moral awareness to foster true progress.

The implications of Golding's vision extend far beyond literary analysis. As we face unprecedented technological challenges—from artificial intelligence to ecological crises—his prehistoric meditation offers a crucial ethical framework. Golding suggests that technological adaptation requires corresponding ethical evolution, reminding us that genuine progress should be measured not just by instrumental capability but by our capacity for moral imagination. This challenges contemporary techno-optimism, which often equates innovation with improvement. When technological advancement outpaces moral development, it mirrors what Golding portrays in the new people: enhanced survival capabilities coupled with existential anxiety and alienation. The novel raises key concerns in posthumanist ethics, questioning whether enhancing cognitive or physical capabilities truly constitutes genuine human advancement.

Golding's vision invites future research into how the embodied wisdom—particularly the deep empathetic consciousness he attributes to Neanderthals—might be integrated within technological development, rather than sacrificed. Recent studies in neuroscience and embodied cognition suggest that empathy may be more fundamental to human cognitive architecture than previously recognised, potentially validating Golding's insight into its evolutionary significance. *The Inheritors* ultimately reminds us that technological adaptation and ethical development are not separate endeavours but complementary dimensions of human evolution. In a world increasingly mediated by technology, Golding's allegory serves as a timely reminder that genuine progress requires uniting *Homo sapiens*' innovative capacity with the empathetic awareness once attributed to our evolutionary cousins. Only through this integration can we create a future that is not merely technologically advanced but ethically enlightened—a vision of progress worthy of our evolutionary inheritance.

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