

Major themes in Lord of the Flies

By Harold Bloom

War and human nature

At the beginning of the novel, the boys are being evacuated from England by plane, presumably to keep them safe from the Cold War, which is in the future. The term "Reds" is mentioned (possibly giving the notion that the war was against the Soviets). However, there was quite a large amount of tension between the Soviet Union and the UK, or more particularly, Stalin and Churchill, during World War II, so "Reds" could simply show the British boys' scorn for the Soviets. The island becomes a microcosm of the self-destructive society that sent them away. Their failure to create stability and decency mimics the larger failure of the grownups to do the same, and there is real ambiguity as to whether or not the children's rescue by the naval cruiser at the end of the novel represents any real end to their danger.

Ralph and the conch

Ralph may represent democracy as he is leader by a democratic vote, and attempts to please the majority. He can also be interpreted as a representation of the ego, which governs the id and is associated with practicality.

The conch shell becomes a powerful symbol of civilization and order in the novel. Piggy tries desperately to protect it and when he dies, it is also destroyed. The shell effectively governs the boys' meetings, for the boy who holds the shell holds the right to speak. As the island civilization erodes and the boys descend into savagery, the conch loses its power and influence among them. Its appearance, or its gradual loss of color from exposure to the air, may also parallel their descent. The other boys ignore Ralph and throw stones at him when he attempts to blow the conch in Jack's camp. The boulder that Roger rolls onto Piggy also crushes the conch, signifying the end of the civilized instinct among almost all the boys on the island. When Piggy and the conch are destroyed, Jack jumps up and yells "...There is no tribe for you anymore. The conch is gone-I am chief!" This is the point at which Jack finally wrestles all control from Ralph, and without the powerful symbol of the conch to protect him, he must run from Jack's hunters who now have no inhibitions against killing him.

Piggy

Piggy may represent rational thinking as he is logical, but unpopular; eventually Ralph realises how much he depended on him and his logic, admitting "I can't think. Not like Piggy." He is arguably the most rational boy in the group, and as such his glasses may represent intuition and intelligence (they can also represent science, as can Piggy). This symbolism is evident from the start of the novel, when the boys use the lenses from Piggy's glasses to focus the sunlight and start a fire.

When Jack's hunters raid Ralph's camp and steal the glasses, the savages subsequently

take the power to make fire, leaving Ralph's group helpless. The physical state of the glasses may also represent the state of the social order on the island, for as their condition deteriorates, so does the order and organization of the boys. Piggy's fatness and asthma, which mark him as an outcast, can also be viewed as emblematic of how the superego, and, thus, civilized thinking, are ill-suited for this environment and are rejected as useless. The power of his glasses to make fire is also a reference to how the products of science can be useful, but the science itself isn't. Piggy might also represent Socrates, because, as in Plato's Apology, his high intelligence and plain speaking only create more problems for him, and lead to his eventual death.

Piggy's hair didn't grow as the others did throughout the story, and though it isn't said whether or not he cut it, but it is assumed he didn't. This represents that as the boys fell deeper into savagery they became more wild; long haired, dirty, temperamental, etc... While Piggy did not, the only thing that can challenge this is that he took part in the murder of Simon.

Piggy is the most feminine character in the story, and is almost a mother figure for the "littluns". Piggy is physically weak but mentally strong. Piggy discovers the conch, and he and the conch end their existence together. Throughout the story Piggy blames those who do not act proper of "acting like a crowd of kids" and always asks "what would the adults think?" to further enforce his point. In addition, like Piggy, the Sow ('Pig.' 'Piggy!') is a sort of mother figure; when she dies, so does most of the power of the conch. The pig is pink and rosy; Piggy is a rosy white; and the conch is also rosy and white.

Piggy's glasses may also represent civilization, as they are used by the boys to light the signal fires, which were the only hope for a return to civilization that they had on the island. When the first lens on Piggy's glasses is broken, it is a symbol that civilization on the island is breaking and falling apart. When the glasses are stolen by Jack's hunters, it is a sign that civilization is completely falling apart.

Jack and the choirboys

Jack, the tallest and strongest of the boys, may represent totalitarianism as he does not appreciate the results of the election, eventually using his strength, his aggressiveness, and his choirboy "militia" to seize power in a coup and rule alone, making himself chief and the other boys his tribe. Most obviously, he demonstrates Lord Acton's idea that "absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Jack may represent the opposition of democracy, dictatorship, or even the opposition of civilization itself--sheer atavistic savagery. Everyone must coordinate their actions by arbitrary rules, and he shows an obvious disrespect for the conch and its associations. In Jack's tribe, where fear and superstition go unchecked, the beast comes to seem more and more real until its existence is an article of faith. Jack, who gains authority from this atmosphere of dread by saying he'll protect the others from the beast, also succumbs to

the fear himself.

Jack may also represent the id in contrast to Ralph as the Ego and Piggy as the Superego, respectively. The logic behind this is that Jack seeks to immediately satisfy the needs and act on instinct, fulfilling the description of the Id, while Ralph upholds the social norms of the Superego. Examples of this are both positive and negative. The positive is his commitment to democracy and teamwork, while the negative is his conventional mockery of social oddities, such as Piggy's thick specs, his obesity, and his "ass-mar", as he calls it in his lower class accent (reference to 'home counties').

Roger

Roger may represent pure evil (and can be the Devil himself), even more so than Jack, as he is Jack's toady, abetting all his worst instincts, and is sadistic. Early in the book, Roger throws rocks at a smaller boy, Henry, and only misses on purpose because "Round the squatting child was the protection of parents and school and policemen and the law." During the sow-hunt, he pushes his spear up the sow's anus, although the particular location is probably unintentional ("Roger found a lodgment for his point and began to push till he was leaning with his whole weight"). After nearly all of the boys on the island have joined Jack's tribe, Roger goes on to kill Piggy with a large boulder and tortures Samneric until they join Jack's tribe. He also plans Ralph's killing when they have captured him: Samneric tell Ralph that Roger sharpened a stick at both ends, much like the stick that the sow's head is impaled on, but do not elaborate further.

Simon

Simon may represent natural goodness because he is the only character on the island that continues being good even when the other boys forget about the rules of society. Some see similarities between him and Jesus, based on the religious references around Simon: his name (that of one of the disciples), his skill with carpentry and his killing at the hands of a team Simon is also seen on the island giving the little ones fruit from the tree that they cannot reach. Simon is the only one who can get the fruit for them, and indeed the only boy who would stop to help. Through him they get the fruit, much like through Christ, Christians receive salvation they cannot achieve on their own. Also, Simon's private sanctuary is a place with a high dome roof and candle-like flowers, suggests a cathedral, further establishing him as a spiritual, visionary character. His climb up and down the mountain to discover what the beast is is also long and arduous, much like Christ's carrying of the cross on the Via Dolorosa. Also, Simon freeing the parachutist can symbolize Jesus freeing mankind or man. Also, when he dies the strange attendant creatures that glow, "with their fiery eyes and trailing vapors, settle around him and could have settled around his head forming a halo.

With his superior insight, he sees most clearly that the children's civility is dying. This is made clear when he says "maybe it's only us" in reference to the beast. This demonstrates his intuitive knowledge that the fear and chaos come from the minds of the children and not from any outside agent.

Simon has been viewed as a Cassandra figure, able to predict the future but condemned to be disbelieved. Another interpretation is that he represents the poets and writers, much like Benjamin the Donkey in *Animal Farm*. Simon has a sense of many things which he cannot communicate to the others, and he is in touch with the darker side of humanity. Both film versions omit the monologue of the Beast, addressed to Simon.

Sam and Eric / Samneric (the twins)

Sam and Eric, referred to in the first half as "Sam 'n' Eric" and the second half of the novel as "Samneric", may represent the masses, as they are impressionable and tend not to think for themselves. Their allegorical representation in WWII could be nations forced into war by the Axis such as Belgium. They represent a mob mentality. Physically, Golding describes them as "barely having enough skin" to cover both: they are "stretched". They also are a representation of unity, due to the fact that every activity they participate in, they do together.

Other boys

The "littluns" are perhaps a representation of the masses or the plebeians who are easily swayed to support one group or another but who are needed by a leader to rule over.

Percival

Percival, the youngest of the "littluns", may represent innocence, emotion, and children. He is known as the character who frequently expresses emotions. He uses his address, Percival Wemys Madison, The Vicarage, Harcourt ..., as an incantation that comforts and reminds him of civilization. However, by the end of the novel he cannot even remember his own name. This shows how far the children have descended into savagery — so far that they have no recollection of the civilized world.

The beast

The "beast" may represent brutality, propaganda, and irrational fears, as it causes panic and ultimately allies the boys around Jack. The fact that there is no beast suggests that it is a representation of the evil in human nature. The *Lord of the Flies* (which is translated from Hebrew "Beelzebub", or "Ba'alzevuv". "*Lord of the Flies*" is said to be a mistranslation from a mistransliterated word, but it does sound pungent and evil, like that of a reference to the devil. A devil whose name implies a devotion to decay, destruction, demoralization, hysteria and panic is particularly fitting for this book.) and the "beast" represent the evil lurking within everyone's hearts, which, while not physical, is no less real. It may also be considered to be the religious belief of the island society, as it is not

seen but its existence is rarely doubted, it is credited to what cannot be explained, and it is given offerings in an attempt to persuade it to spare the lives of the islanders. In this way, it is representative of what one might call "dark worship" — the worship of things that are inherently bad.

Simon's conversation with the Beast in the realm of his own mind is one of the most fascinating parts of the story, because the Beast tells him that it is immortal and finds all human action funny, leading one to wonder if there is some intelligence inside human evil — a reference to the devil, linking back to its name.

The author is believed to have written the novel shortly after World War II as a reflection on true human nature. Simon implies that he thinks the true beast is really human nature. The beast's actions seem to match Simon's theory. The beast and the children's fear of it is what eventually splits the one tribe into two competing tribes. The beast is only seen by the littl'uns (the most pure of the children). It leads to the death of three of the children (one death is implied) and the attempted murder of another. Taking into account the world events occurring when the novel was written, similarities can be drawn to World War II. The 'beast' of human nature (Hitler's holocaust, Japan's greed) divides the tribe (the world) into two parts. The idea the author tries to convey is that this 'beast' of human nature during World War II is not simply a one-time occurrence, but rather a fundamental flaw in human nature that is bound to be repeated until the world goes into total chaos, which is represented on the island when the jungle is being burned to the ground as a result of the manhunt for Ralph.

The killing of the sow

The sow is a mother: "sunk in deep maternal bliss lay the largest of the lot...the great bladder of her belly was fringed with a row of piglets that slept or burrowed and squeaked." The killing of the sow is done through bestiality and murder, referring to its driving force of sexuality, especially among the half-grown and prepubescent boys.

They remove the head of the sow and place it onto a stick that is jammed into the ground as a gift for the Beast, which seems to be lurking on the island. This shows their own irrational fears and blind terrors of the island and beast release the forces of death and the "devil" on the island.

The most symbolic incident of this is that of Simon and the sow head. To Simon, the head seems to be saying "Everything was a bad business... The half shut eyes that were dim with the infinite cynicism of adult life." Simon fought against what the head was saying. "Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill!" said the head. For a moment or two the forest and all the other dimly appreciated places echoes with laughter. "You knew, didn't you? I'm part of you? Close, close, close! I'm the reason why it's no go? Why things are the way they are?"

The pig's head tries to tell Simon that he cannot avoid the recognition of human capacities for evil and the superficial nature of human moral systems. It is the acknowledgment of the end of innocence.

Flies

The pig's head (The Lord of the Flies) may represent Satan, while the flies may represent devils and iniquitous and nefarious human beings. Simon represents Christ. Simon's confrontation with the Lord of the Flies may represent the Temptation of Jesus.

The flies which represent mortal evil choose the pig over Simon. This represents the way a number of humans choose to be evil instead of good and how doing evil bears more satisfactory fruit than doing good.

Names

The names of Ralph, Piggy, Simon, Jack, and Roger all have symbolic meaning. Ralph's name is derived from the Old English word for "wolf council," symbolizing Ralph's role as a leader who forms meetings and councils on the island. Piggy's name is meant to symbolise how he is vulnerable, just as the pigs on the island are. Piggy's name is also a reference to the Lord of the Flies, which is a pig's head. The pig's head holds its brain, therefore its intelligence. It is ironic, seeing as how the other boys mistreat him, while at the same time all of the brilliant ideas such as fire-making, shelters, and looking after the littluns, originated from him. The derogative nickname also shows the hostility towards him from the other boys. Jack's name is derived from the Hebrew name Jacob or Yakov, which literally means "supplanter" or "one who takes over", just as Jack took the role of leadership by force from Ralph. Simon's name, derived from the Hebrew name "Shim'on" means "one who listens" or "one who observes", symbolizing Simon's quiet, attentive behaviour. "Roger" means "famous with the spear."

The signal fire

The signal fire becomes a measure of the boys' connection to civilization. In the early parts of the novel, the fact that the boys maintain the fire is perhaps a sign that they want to be rescued and return to society. When the fire burns low or goes out, it seems that the boys have lost sight of their desire to be rescued and have accepted their savage lives on the island. The signal fire thus functions as a kind of barometer of the strength of the civilized instinct remaining on the island. Ironically, at the end of the novel, a fire finally summons a ship to the island, but not the signal fire. Instead, it is the fire of savagery — the forest fire Jack's "tribe" start as part of his quest to hunt and kill Ralph. The forest fire could also represent humanity's destruction of the environment to accomplish shortsighted goals. Even if they had not been rescued, they had burned down the fruit trees and probably killed most of the wild game, and thus would have eventually perished due to their actions. Another interpretation of the fact that the "savage" fire saved the boys on the island may be that the "Allied forces" liberation of Europe from the clutches of the Nazi regime which was due to the fact that Germany attacked Russia in "Operation

Barbarossa" and that the allies of Germany, namely Japan, attacked the US naval base at Pearl Harbor is an analogy to the boys' condition on the island. Had those attacks never occurred, the U.S and the U.S.S.R would have never joined the war and without their contribution, Europe's fate may have been sealed. In the same manner, Ralph's fate would have been to die at the hands of Jack's hunters, were it not for the fire and its smoke, which though intended to kill Ralph, ended up signaling the British cruiser and rescuing the boys, including him.

The platform

The platform may represent Parliament or Congress, for meetings and assemblies are held here. It is where the rules are created and where Ralph is elected by the boys to be their chief. There are many ties between the platform, as a place for speaking and debate, and the conch, which gives one the right to speak.

The glasses

As mentioned in the section on Piggy, the glasses are important in symbolizing the descent of the boys from civilization into savagery. In the beginning, they're clean and unbroken in the hands of their rightful owner. As the book continues, the glasses go through several phases. At the start, no one would have thought of taking them. No one wanted them. Then when it was realized what they could do, they were taken and tossed about among the boys, kept from the helpless Piggy until Ralph returned them. This could show that Piggy's rationality is lost at first when they are all shocked by the initial crash. When sense starts to return to the children, they go crazy with it, making suggestions like "televisions and submarines." Then they lose it again, returning the weight of thought to Piggy's shoulders. Later on, the glasses are broken in the fight that initially severed Ralph and Jack's friendship. The leaders, both desperate to be in charge, could have been shown to misuse knowledge in swaying their people, and to hurt each other. In this way, the memories of civilization could have been "broken." The children could remember some happiness, but they were also possibly reminded of the war ravaging their home. They could've been reminded that that did not exist on the island then. It was wild, but it was free. Then Jack leaves, taking half of the leadership with him. The glasses only have one broken lens. Thus, half of the sanity could be said have been lost to savagery. Afterwards, when Ralph and Piggy are bathing, Ralph splashes water at the glasses. He started to refute the knowledge, to give in to wildness. Piggy screams at him, and he pauses, but then continues to splash, doubting the only thing keeping them separate from the animals.

Despite that, the glasses start and end the novel with one similarity: they are held always with respect as the starters of the life-giving fire. Without some form of civilization, meat would be eaten raw, boys would sleep in the rain, and everything would fall into cannibalistic madness. Even in its most primitive form - broken glasses - logic is crucial in human survival.