

Symbolism in william golding's 'lord of the flies'

[Art & Culture](#), [Symbolism](#)



Symbolism in William Golding's 'Lord of the Flies' Definition: A symbol is something that is itself as well as something else. In literature it means literal or objective sense coupled with abstract meaning. Symbolism refers to serious and extensive use of symbols in a work of literature. Symbolism in Lord of the Flies: The novel is rich in symbolism. A host of different interpretations of the novel's symbolism – political, psychological and religious – exists. We will look at some of the prominent symbols employed by Golding and try harmonizing the different interpretations.

Since symbolism is an evocative device to communicate the theme of a literary piece, we must first agree on the theme of Lord of the Flies. Theme: Evil inherent in man seems to be the central idea of the novel. It may recall the Christian notion of the 'original sin' or the idea of the failure of civilization as seen during the Nazi Holocaust or a general pessimistic view of human nature. It may be all the three combined. A group of boys aged 6 to 12 find themselves alone on an island, without adult supervision.

At first they try to organize themselves on the pattern of the civilized world they have known. The attempt fails and most of them regress into savagery and animal existence. The novel was deliberately patterned on the children's classic 'The Coral Island' by R. M. Ballantyne. Only, it turns Ballantyne's theme on its head. Whereas Ballantyne made the children's isolation on the island a pleasant interlude in a continued life of civilized existence, Golding shows how thin the veneer of civilization really is and how the animal nature of man breaks through in just a few weeks.

It is not so much moral judgment as recognition of the essential tragedy of mankind – its intellectual and spiritual nature losing out to its animal nature again and again. Important Symbols: 1. The Scar: The novel starts with the mention of a scar in the jungle. We learn (or rather, surmise) later that it is a swath cut by the falling 'passenger tube' in which the children were travelling. The word scar appears in the text without this preliminary information and serves to create atmosphere. The metaphor prepares us for the horrible things to come.

In itself it is also the symbol of man's disruptive influence on his world. 2. The Conch: It makes its appearance as an accidental find of Ralph and Piggy on the beach. It soon assumes importance as Ralph, on Piggy's advice, blows it to gather the survivors. Ralph is elected leader of the group mainly because he was the one in possession of the conch. From here onwards the conch becomes a symbol of law and order. At meetings the speaker has to hold it in his hands. It gives him the privilege of being heard uninterrupted.

Order starts breaking down in the fifth chapter when Jack speaks without holding it. Later, breakdown of order is signalled by Jack snatching it from Ralph in the eighth chapter. In the tenth chapter Jack raids the shelter occupied by Ralph and Piggy to rob Piggy of his glasses. But he does not bother to take the conch away. It is no longer important. In the eleventh chapter the conch is destroyed, symbolizing the complete rout of order at the hands of chaos. 3. The Man with the Megaphone (Grown-ups): When Piggy meets Ralph, his first question is, "Where is the man with the megaphone?" A few pages later the question is repeated by Jack, "Where is

the man with the trumpet? " This, we can assume, was the man in charge of the boys in the aeroplane. He stands for authority and control which has suddenly been removed by the crash. A grown-up appears again only at the end in the form of the naval officer who saves the life of Ralph without realizing the fact and brings an end to the chaos. But conversely, the adult is the cause of the boys being there in the first place. The war raging outside is nothing but the conflict on the island on a much grander scale.

The appearance of the naval officer at close suggests that civilization has been given another chance, despite the bleak outlook. 4. Beast from Air: In the sixth chapter another adult appears on the scene – a dead parachutist. He has apparently evacuated himself from a warplane that has been hit. The man crashes to his death at the top of the hill on the island. He, with his parachute, is taken to be a mysterious supernatural beast by the boys among whom the talk of a snake-like beast of the jungle is already rampant. The dead parachutist is not, however, just an extension of the ghost metaphor.

He also represents the historical past intruding on the scene and influencing it in a profound manner. For the boys the historical past is the war they left behind. For humanity it would be the past of man as an insidious influence in his present. 5. The Beast – Lord of the Flies: The title of the novel is itself symbolic. The phrase is a literal translation of the Hebrew 'Beelzebub', one of the demons named after a Philistine god. Later the term was often used in Christianity as a name for the Devil. The metaphor is one of regression (in its original sense of paganism) and evil (in its later meaning of the Devil).

In the novel one of the younger boys, who is referred to as 'the boy with the birthmark on his face', tells the others about having seen a snake-like beast on the trees. Though Ralph tries to allay their fears as unfounded, the belief in the beast persists. It is strengthened by the unexplained disappearance of the boy with the birthmark. It is reinforced by the 'beast from air' mentioned above, so much so that even Ralph and Piggy start entertaining the possibility of a beast. Jack, half believing himself, uses the fear cleverly to keep his followers under control.

He makes the ritual sacrifice of a wild sow to the beast and lets the head of the animal hang on a stick, ostensibly to appease the beast. Only Simon does not believe in the existence of a beast. In his wanderings in the forest he comes across the head of the sow and the entrails of the animal which have attracted a lot of flies by now. He has a hallucination in which the head appears to him as lord of the flies and speaks to him. The symbolism of the beast is also stated in this imaginary conversation in so many words, as follows: "You knew, didn't you? I am part of you?...

I am the reason why it's no go? Why things are what they are?" The beast is within man, not without. It is the darkness in men's hearts. It is their primitive nature, hidden behind a thin layer of civilization. 6. The Signal Fire and the Shelters on the Beach: The signal fire and the shelters symbolize ordered society, civilization and hope. They are contrasted with the barbaric and blood-thirsty hunts. The signal fire is Ralph's idea. He believes that the children will be rescued soon and therefore there should be a smoke signal going all the time for a passing ship to spot.

Piggy, who is more of a realist, realizes that those who were expected to know about the children are all dead and it may be a long time before rescue comes. So he suggests the building of shelters. Though both symbols together stand for civilization against barbarism, there is this subtle difference between them, arising as they do from their originators' differing perceptions of the situation. 7. The Hunts and Mock Hunts: Together with painted faces and long hair the hunts and mock hunts symbolize regression into primitive savagery.

The hunters not only seem to have lost all hope of returning to civilization, but they seem to actually enjoy the prospect and neglect to keep the signal fire burning. The hunts can be interpreted as symbolizing the boys' primal urges or even anarchy. Soon after the hunts start, they cease to be a necessary activity aimed at gathering food. The lust for blood becomes more important. Ceremonies and chants invented by the hunters similarly denote regression. The mock hunts of Chapters 4 and 7 are manifestations of regression too.

The mock hunts serve another purpose. In Chapter 4 the mock hunt is a mild affair, performed largely for fun. In the seventh chapter it turns into a violent affair in which the boy playing the hunted animal suffers injuries. Thus the mock hunts define the regression of the hunters as civilized humans. The scene in Chapter 7 also shows the good and sensible Ralph feeling the excitement of the mock hunt, thus showing how evil can take hold of any human, unless resisted. 8. Painted Faces and Long Hair: This is the heading of Chapter 4.

The degeneration of the boys' way of life is symbolized by clay-and-charcoal masks and long hair. When concealed by masks, the hunters, especially Ralph, seem to have new personalities as they forget the taboos of society that once restrained them from giving in to their natural urges. When Jack first paints his face to his satisfaction, he suddenly becomes a new, savage person. "He began to dance and his laughter became a bloodthirsty snarling. He capered toward Bill, and the mask was a thing of its own, behind which Jack hid, liberated from shame and self-consciousness".

The feeling of liberation that results from wearing the masks allows many of the boys to participate in the barbaric pig hunts, the savage ceremonies and the mock hunts. 9. The Island: Those who incline towards a religious interpretation of the novel's symbolism maintain that the island is the symbol for the Garden of Eden, which is touched by original sin on contact with the human race. This interpretation may have some merit. But the symbolism can be equally validly interpreted as the state of nature to which the civilized children have been returned.

It provides the setting for the opening up of their fundamental urges. 10. The Characters: The principal characters – Ralph, Piggy, Simon, Jack and Roger – symbolize certain attitudes and qualities. Ralph and Piggy are on the side of law and order. Jack and Roger represent primitive urges and tyranny. Simon is a mystic who has a clearer view of reality than the intellectual Piggy, the sensible Jack or the manipulative Jack. But we have to be careful not to over-emphasize the point. Otherwise the realistic and believable quality of the characters will be compromised.

The symbolism lies more in how the characters grow or regress rather than in their basic make-up. Jack's character is the most significant from this point of view. From the leader of a choir group he regresses into the leader of a violent and primitive group which calls itself a 'tribe'. The above list of symbols is by no means exhaustive. The novel is replete with metaphors and symbols. Lord of the Flies is called a twentieth century allegory. It is also one of the most carefully crafted novels of the century. In consequence the careful reader can find a symbol on almost every page. s