

Grieving the gradual loss

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Throughout the classic novels of *To Kill A Mockingbird* and *Lord of the Flies*, many themes and motifs are explored through the experiences of their iconic characters. Both accounts tell of the hardships of adolescence and social injustice, but two characters that face similar challenges throughout their journeys are Jem Finch from *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Ralph from *Lord of the Flies*. These young men are subjected to events that are mature beyond their years that have a drastic impact on their individual lives, despite the radical difference in setting between these books, and cause both boys to ultimately lose their frail childhood innocence.

Jem and Ralph are clearly collateral characters that are similar not only in age and appearance, but in their experiences of the world and its cruelties, causing them both to eventually “weep for mankind”. Jem’s story takes place in the deep south of Maycomb, Alabama during the height of the Great Depression while racism is a raging fire throughout the country. A world away, Ralph has been deposited into uninhabited jungle with a group of English boys like himself, left to fend for themselves. Both boys must act as role models for the younger children who look up to them; Scout and Dill in Jem’s case and the “littluns” in Ralph’s case. They do their best to set good examples and be responsible for their younger counterparts, but in reality, they are still children themselves. They must grow up quickly and learn to become leaders to children not much younger than themselves, which is when they first begin to lose their precious innocence.

In order to gain respect from their followers, the boys want the young to think of them as fearless, courageous leaders, such as when Scout says, “Jem wanted Dill to know once and for all that he wasn’t afraid of anything.”

(Lee, 17), showing that Jem wants Dill and Scout to know he is a valid leader because he claims to fear nothing. Ralph acts similarly when trying to collect the boys on the island, but he doesn't have to try as hard to command attention. The boys come to him, as seen when, "The small boy squatted in front of Ralph, looking up brightly and vertically" (Golding, 18), indicating that once Ralph has blown the conch, the other boys recognize his powerful air and look to him as a leader. The boys's leadership throughout both books is tested, but that is the least of their worries, as they both have battles to fight that will put their strengths to the test. In the start of the books, Jem and Ralph's differences are more distinct as Ralph is expected to be the sole example and father figure for the boys on the island, while Jem has Atticus to guide him and is not the lone mentor to Scout and Dill.

Jem is also excited about learning to shoot and is showing the boyhood interest of killing things, like when Scout finds Jem "plugging away at a tin can" (Lee, 121), but Ralph shows very little interest in joining Jack and his hunters. Ralph seems more sensible than Jem, as he knows that basic survival is more important than hunting and having fun. Their surroundings are substantially contrasting, but ultimately, the racism and hatred found in Jem's home of Maycomb can be seen as indistinguishable from the savagery and inhumanity of Ralph's new jungle abode. These challenging habitats cause their childhood to disappear little by little as time goes on, ultimately making both boys lapse into maturity long before they should. By about the middle of each book, Jem and Ralph are shown to be not only maturing mentally and emotionally, but growing physically older. Ralph's hair has grown long and is incessantly falling into his eyes (Golding, 64) and Scout

tells of Jem's eyebrows becoming heavier and his body becoming slimmer and taller (Lee, 301).

Their physical changes help complement their emotional growth, and shows that they are becoming more like adults on the outside as well as on the inside. They lose their childhood ways along with their childhood physique, which makes them look the part of lionheart leader and distances them even further from the children they must protect from the wicked world. The gradual loss of innocence throughout *To Kill A Mockingbird* and *Lord of the Flies* is an ongoing theme in both novels, but each novel has its own defining point where it is evident that all has been lost and there is no turning back for Ralph, nor Jem. Ralph's turning point is the finale of the book, showing the profound inhumanity of man as the other boys kill Piggy, destroy the conch and chase Ralph down yelling, " Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!" (Golding, 186). Ralph has no choice but to fight back against the boys he once knew who are no longer innocent children but bloodthirsty savages who have lost all civil morals (Golding, 183-202).

His previously faithful followers have now turned against him and are seeing him stripped down from a powerful leader to a vulnerable prey, which furthermore proves that they are all still humans. Jem's innocence is lost as he witnesses the savagery of the racist judicial system and society that he is being brought up in, and the discovery that his father, who he always known to be the voice of reason, can be discredited by his peers and lose a case (Lee, 284). His younger counterparts see him at his weakest when he mourns the loss of the Tom Robinson case, which shows Scout that her big brother is human, just as Atticus and every other role model in her life is.

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Both Jem and Ralph are shown the very worst of the human soul in these tragic events, and in the end, they have no other choice but to break down and weep for mankind over the horrific circumstances. The overall emotion felt by both Jem and Ralph is described in some of the final words of *Lord of the Flies*, saying, “..

. Ralph wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of a man’s heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy.” (Golding, 202). The boys know that this has been the end of their childhood purity, and they have seen how dark the hearts of humans can be, which causes them to be overcome by emotion and weep for their loss. Jem also cries when the Tom Robinson case is lost (Lee, 284), for the same reasons as Ralph, and it can be seen that the two are paralleled in their feelings towards forced maturity.

It has become evident that the world they grew up believing in as perfect and kind is quite the opposite, and so are the idealistic role models they had the same impressions of. *Lord of the Flies* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* are both Bildungsromans, showing the mandatory maturing of young characters that quickly submerges them into the cruel world of adulthood and strips them of their innocence. The parallels between Ralph and Jem show that this loss of innocence can happen to any type of person living in any situation, and that it is usually an inevitable part of life. The heavy material of these classic novels proves to give applicable points to all situations of life, and it also serves as a blunt interpretation of what can be expected as one makes their quest through the darkest parts of everyday life, whether it be in a savage jungle, or the hate-filled deep south of 1930’s. Sources Golding, William. *Lord of The Flies*.

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