

The relationship between symbolism and theme in lord of the flies

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



In real life, common objects that are used everyday are often taken for granted and even unusual sights, as well as ideas, are often unrecognized. However, this is seldom the case with similar objects and ideas that literary characters encounter. Many authors use seemingly ordinary, trivial objects in addition to unique elements to symbolize ideas or concepts that help to reveal the theme of their works. In William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, the boys who are stranded on the island without supervision come in contact with many such elements. Through the use of symbols such as the beast, the pig's head, and even Piggy's specs, Golding demonstrates that humans, when liberated from society's rules and taboos, allow their natural capacity for evil to dominate their existence. One of the most important and most obvious symbols in *Lord of the Flies* is the object that gives the novel its name, the pig's head. Golding's description of the slaughtered animal's head on a spear is very graphic and even frightening. The pig's head is depicted as "dim-eyed, grinning faintly, blood blackening between the teeth," and the "obscene thing" is covered with a "black blob of flies" that "tickled under his nostrils" (William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, New York, Putnam Publishing Group, 1954, p. 137, 138). As a result of this detailed, striking image, the reader becomes aware of the great evil and darkness represented by the *Lord of the Flies*, and when Simon begins to converse with the seemingly inanimate, devil-like object, the source of that wickedness is revealed. Even though the conversation may be entirely a hallucination, Simon learns that the beast, which has long since frightened the other boys on the island, is not an external force. In fact, the head of the slain pig tells him, "Fancy thinking the beast was something you could hunt and kill! Ö You knew, didn't

you? I'm part of you?" (p. 143). That is to say, the evil, epitomized by the pig's head, that is causing the boys' island society to decline is that which is inherently present within man. At the end of this scene, the immense evil represented by this powerful symbol can once again be seen as Simon faints after looking into the wide mouth of the pig and seeing "blackness within, a blackness that spread" (p. 144). Another of the most important symbols used to present the theme of the novel is the beast. In the imaginations of many of the boys, the beast is a tangible source of evil on the island. However, in reality, it represents the evil naturally present within everyone, which is causing life on the island to deteriorate. Simon begins to realize this even before his encounter with the Lord of the Flies, and during one argument over the existence of a beast, he attempts to share his insight with the others. Timidly, Simon tells them, "Maybe, Ö maybe there is a beast Ö What I mean is Ö maybe it's only us" (p. 89). In response to Simon's statement, the other boys, who had once conducted their meetings with some sense of order, immediately begin to argue more fiercely. The crowd gives a "wild whoop" when Jack rebukes Ralph, saying "Bollocks to the rules! We're strong ó we hunt! If there's a beast, we'll hunt it down! We'll close in and beat and beat and beat!" (p. 91). Clearly, the boys' fear of the beast and their ironic desire to kill it shows that the hold which society's rules once had over them has been loosened during the time they have spent without supervision on the island. The evil within the boys has more effect on their existence as they spend more time on the island, isolated from the rest of society, and this decline is portrayed by Piggy's specs. Throughout the novel, Piggy represents the civilization and the rules from which the boys have

been separated, and interestingly, as Piggy loses his ability to see, so do the other boys lose their vision of that civilization. When the story begins, Piggy can see clearly with both lenses of his spectacles intact, and the boys are still fairly civilized. For example, at one of their first meetings, the boys decide that they “ can’t have everybody talking at once” and that they “ have to have ‘Hands up’ like at school” (p. 33). However, after some time passes, the hunters become more concerned with slaughtering a pig than with being rescued and returning to civilization. When they return from a successful hunt in the jungle chanting “ Kill the pig. Cut her throat. Spill her blood,” Ralph and Piggy attempt to explain to the hunters that having meat for their meals is not as important as keeping the signal fire burning (p. 69). In an ensuing scuffle, Jack knocks Piggy specs from his face, smashing one of the lenses against the mountain rocks and greatly impairing his vision. Finally, after Jack forms his own tribe of savages, he and two of his followers ambush Ralph, Piggy, and Samneric, and in the midst of “ a vicious snarling in the mouth of the shelter and the plunge and thump of living things,” Piggy’s specs are stolen, leaving him virtually blind (p. 167). Meanwhile, Jack returns to Castle Rock, “ trotting steadily, exulting in his achievement,” as he has practically abandoned all ties to civilized life (p. 168). The story’s setting presents two more symbols that assist in showing the decline of civility on the island. A majority of the island is taken up by the jungle, which is used by many authors as an archetype to represent death and decay. In fact, since the jungle is the lair of the beast, it, too, symbolizes the darkness naturally present within humans that is capable of ruling their lives. This evil eventually spreads to almost every boy on the island, just as in the jungle, “

darkness poured out, submerging the ways between the trees till they were dim and strange as the bottom of the sea" (p. 57). At one end of the island, where the plane carrying the boys most likely crashed, there is a " long scar smashed into the jungle" (p. 1). While Golding does not include a large amount of description about the scar, the image of " broken trunks" with " jagged edges" is sufficient to give the reader an idea of the destruction caused to the island (p. 1, 2). Symbolically, this scar represents the destruction that man is naturally capable of causing and can be related to the harm the boys ultimately cause to one another, including the deaths of three boys, before they are rescued. The degeneration of the boys' way of life is also very evident through the symbolic masks. When concealed by masks of clay paint, 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. For example, 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" (p. 64). Certainly, Jack would not have acted in such a way if he had been in his home society, but behind the mask of paint, Jack feels free to act like a savage. It is also noteworthy, that the first mask that Jack creates is red, white, and black. These colors archetypically symbolize violence, terror, and evil, respectively, and in this novel, Golding uses these colors to illustrate those characteristics that are inherently present in humans. The feeling of liberation that results from wearing the masks allows many of the boys to participate in the barbaric,

inhumane pig hunts. Those hunts can be interpreted as symbolizing the boys' primal urges or even anarchy. In fact, many of the boys become so engulfed in their quest for the blood of a pig that they seem to forget about their hopes of returning to civilization and neglect to keep the signal fire burning. When Ralph tries to explain how important the signal fire is, Jack and the other hunters are still occupied with thoughts of the successful, gruesome hunt in which they just participated. " 'There was lashings of blood,' said Jack, laughing and shuddering, 'you should have seen it!'" (p. 69). Also, during a later celebration over another successful hunt, the boys become carried away while reenacting the slaughter. However, the boys have become so much like savages that they are unable to control themselves, and for a moment, they mistake Simon for the beast. " The sticks fell and the mouth of the circle crunched and screamed. The beast was on its knees in the center, its arm folded over its face" (p. 152). As a result of their uncontrolled urges, the boys soon kill one of their own. Finally, one of the most memorable symbols that is used to show the violence and darkness which comes to rule life on the island is the rock, which Roger releases to kill Piggy. As an archetype in literature, a rock can symbolize strength and power, and since this rock is red, it also represents violence. It is Roger who feels strong and powerful as he stands on the ledge above Piggy. " High overhead, Roger, with a sense of delirium abandonment, leaned all his weight on the lever" (p. 180). When the rock lands below, it not only strikes Piggy, but it also shatters the conch shell. Up to that point, Piggy and the conch had been two of the few representations of civilization and common sense on the island. However, when the rock causes both of these to cease

to exist, all order on the island is brought to an end, and the boys, who express no regrets over the death of Piggy, have fully become savages. In conclusion, Lord of the Flies is a story that portrays the dark, deteriorating life that results from mankind's inherent capacity for evil, which is allowed to control humans when they are freed from the rules of society. Throughout the novel, Golding uses many different objects as symbols to illustrate this theme. Some of those objects would be insignificant in real life and would most likely be taken for granted. However, in Lord of the Flies, each of the previously mentioned symbols is vital to the story's theme.