

The lord of the flies  
destruction of society  
or cr



ation of a New Society Through Persecution One common interpretation of Lord of the Flies is that it focuses on the breakdown of civilization and the underlying savagery in each individual human being, always ultimately reverting back to an evil nature with a focus on the survival of the individual. Without rules and norms to guide people, communities will fall into disarray. “ Civilization is the shield that mankind uses to cloak itself from its savage, animalistic ways.” (Wheaton). However, their society doesn’t fall apart, they simply are forced to change that community to better suit their environment. The book may in fact be a focus not on the individual or the break down of society, but on the bonding together of a community through collective dispelling of perceived evil through scape goating. The focus should not be on the fact that the boys are inherently evil, but the fact that they are part of a community where scape goating is an elemental form of cleansing. The boys aren’t evil in nature, they are communal in nature. It is not that they are in a situation where each individual gives way to his own evil nature. It is, however, that the community gives way to its shared desire to focus attention on something or someone to blame. Through this blame, the society is held together in a common bond of violence. Rene’ Girard writes, “...By collective persecutions I mean acts of violence committed directly by a mob of murderers...The persecutions in which we are interested generally take place in times of crisis, which weaken normal institutions and favor mob formation. Such spontaneous gatherings of people can exert a decisive influence on institutions and have been so weakened and even replace them entirely.” (12).

This is the exact case in the novel. The boys are thrust into a crisis when they are abandoned on the island. While normal institutions are originally adhered to, they are still weakened and eventually collapse and are completely replaced by Jack and his band of boys. Some may argue that the desire to become violent individuals is inherent in human nature, but it can be argued that it is in communal nature to bind together in their hatred for someone or thing to blame especially in a time of such upheaval. “ Those who make up the crowd are always potential persecutors, for they dream of purging the community of the impure elements that corrupt it.” (Girard 16). Here, the “ savage” boys abandon their weakened ruling system and join together in directing their anger towards Ralph and Piggy to create a new society.

Traditional interpretations state that when the confusion finally leads to a manhunt (for Ralph), the reader realizes that despite the strong sense of British character and civility that has been instilled in the youth throughout their lives, the boys have regressed and shown the underlying savage side existent in all humans. “ Golding senses that institutions and order imposed from without are temporary, but man’s irrationality and urge for destruction are enduring” (Riley 1: 119). However, Girard writes, “ No matter what circumstances trigger great collective persecutions, the experience of those who live through them is the same. The strongest impression is without question an extreme loss of social order evidenced by disappearance of the rules and ‘ differences’ that define cultural divisions.” (12).

This is also true in the novel. Originally, the boys are voting, passing conch shells to speak, and behaving according to the rules of their former society.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-lord-of-the-flies-destruction-of-society-or-cr/>

Ralph says, “ I’ll give the conch to the next person to speak. He can hold it when he’s speaking.... and he won’t be interrupted...We’ll have rules.” (Golding, 33). At one meeting, Ralph says, “...the rules are the only thing we got.” (Golding, 54). Eventually, however, these rules are abandoned. In one scene, Jack and his boys raid Ralph’s small camp.

“ Ralph trotted down the pale beach and jumped on to the platform. The conch still glimmered by the chief’s seat. He gazed for a moment or two, then went back to Piggy. ‘ They didn’t take the conch.’ I know, they didn’t come for the conch...” (Golding, 194). The boys instead come for Piggy’s glasses, the one thing that could create all important fire. They are concerned with the physical necessity of fire, not the abstract ideal of rules and order. The shell is no longer important to the boys because it is the agent of old social order. The boys are no longer part of that society, therefore, the symbols and rituals of that order mean nothing to them. They have become part of a different society. In contrast to Riley’s suggestion, the boys aren’t responding to an irrational urge for destruction, they are responding to the “ rational” urge of society to find and place blame somewhere and in doing so, create a connection that will hold the group together. Both the emotional hatred of the scape goat and the physical attempt to expel it are something shared by all members of the society. “ If a movement must have its Rome, it must also have its devil...the symbol of a common enemy...Men who can unite on nothing else can unite the basis of a foe shared by all.”(Burke, 96). Though the boys are all different ages, in different grades, and have different life experiences, they can all understand hatred and they can all chase the perceived reason for their troubles. Further

evidence of this is found in Girard's writing, " Men feel powerless when confronted with the eclipse of culture; they are disconcerted by the immensity of the disaster but never look into the natural causes...Those who make up the crowd are always potential persecutors, for they dream of purging the community of the impure elements that corrupt it....." (14)The boys aren't responding to some base desire for savage violence, rather they are recognizing that this sacrificial violence is necessary to hold the community together. Scape goating is the foundation of the community. Without it, there would be no society. (class notes January 27, 2000) The boys are powerless in their situation. They don't know what to do and there is dissent among the boys, so they need a way to feel empowered and the way they can do that is by turning Ralph and Piggy into scapegoats.

An argument found in many criticisms of the book is that a main focus of the novel is on the break down of society. What these critics fail to notice however, is that the British order and ideal the boys were raised with is not the only form of society." The breakdown of society happened when everyone started to let their duties go undone. It all started when the choir, " the hunters", would start to go hunting all the time and the fire was just left and it went out. Instead of the huts being built everyone would go and play or swim. The breakdown of society is the neglecting of responsibilities." (See)" No matter what circumstances trigger great collective persecutions, the experience of those who live through them is the same. The strongest impression is without question an extreme loss of social order evidenced by the disappearance of the rules and ' differences' that define cultural divisions." (12).

So in a society of collective persecution, old rules must first be broken. When they are, it appears to those who adhere to them that chaos is insuing. What is actually happening is an essential part of the formation of a new community. The formal rules of England aren't effective out in the wild and so the boys need to adopt rules to better suit them. Roger is seen breaking the tradition rules by throwing stones. " Roger gathered a handful of stones and began to throw them Roger's arm was conditioned by a civilization that knew nothing of him and was in ruins" (Golding, 67). That society is no longer useful, therefore it has fallen apart so that a new society with more relevant rules may be created. Initially, Jack is too anxious to kill a pig because it is against the norms and rules of his society. However, while the rules against any forms of violence may have had their place at home, they are of no use to the boys and will actually hinder them. How are they to eat if they don't kill? Vegetation will only sustain such a large group of boys for so long. Also, there is the threat of poisonous plants. While the boys are familiar with meat and with cooking, they aren't familiar with exotic plants. Therefore it is also safer for them to rely on meat rather than plants. They must kill to survive. Just because a rule is broken doesn't mean chaos is certain to ensue. And simply because the boys disregard some orders doesn't mean that they aren't doing work according to new orders. The hunters need to hunt quite often in order to both feed the many boys and to practice this new skill that is so essential." In a way you could say that the society the boys create on the island gradually changes. In the beginning of the book it is based on democratic values and equality – symbolized by the conch. It takes self discipline from the boys to obey the rules and work for the benefit of everybody. However, this proves difficult. In the course of the novel, the

<https://assignbuster.com/the-lord-of-the-flies-destruction-of-society-or-cr/>

boys form a more autocratic and totalitarian society, where discipline in the form of obedience and subordination is required by the leaders (Jack, Roger, etc.) in order to maintain order.” (Myren) Yes, old roles and rules are being disregarded, but critics miss the fact that new roles and rules are being formed to better suit the boys’ situation. Simply because familiar regulations are no longer being followed doesn’t mean that new rules aren’t being forged and obeyed.

Ralph and Piggy are singled out by the boys because they fit the stereotypes for persecution. “...there are violent crimes which choose as object those people whom it is most criminal to attack...the symbols of supreme authority and in biblical and modern societies the weakest and most defenseless...In addition...there are purely physical criteria. Sickness, madness, genetic deformities, accidental injuries and even disabilities in general....” (Girard 15-18).

Ralph comes to represent the supreme authority of British civilization. Humans tend to glorify someone and then blame them. (class notes February 3, 2000). He holds firm to the ideals of his native society while the other boys have reverted to a community of their own where those rules aren’t recognized. The boys can’t follow Ralph’s out-dated laws and also survive among the new society. Thus, Ralph represents a challenge to the new association and therefore he is quickly identified as a scapegoat. He must be removed in order for the society to thrive. His constant insistence on following old rules with impede the survival of the newer community. Piggy is one of the weak boys because of his numerous disabilities. He is initially described as being “ shorter than the fair boy and very fat.” (Golding, 2). He

<https://assignbuster.com/the-lord-of-the-flies-destruction-of-society-or-cr/>

is constantly referred to in the first few pages as “ the fat boy”. It is also revealed that Piggy has asthma. So he is physically deformed by his weight, his height, and his glasses and he is also disabled by his asthma. The weight, glasses, and asthma also leave him weakened. His heft and troubled breathing limit his ability to move and in turn to keep up with the other boys while his glasses leave him at a severe disadvantage because he can hardly see without them. He hinders the group because he can not keep up with the others and because he can provide no real service to the group. He takes from the work of the others, yet he doesn't do his share of the work. His only contribution is his glasses and they are just as effective when used by any other boy. The possession of those glasses also cause the persecution towards Ralph and Piggy. Jack's boys want to be in control of their situation. They are already in a crisis situation where they are completely powerless, but now Ralph and Piggy refuse to let the boys have the glasses which are necessary for fire and therefore survival. They aren't content with the idea of Ralph sharing the fire. They have no control over the natural causes that brought about their disaster, therefore, they long to control the material things within their world. “ The search for people to blame continues but it demands more rational crimes; it looks for a material more substantial cause.” (Girard 16). The children are already angered by being stranded, but they can do nothing about that. They are also angered when Ralph and Piggy refuse to give up the glasses, therefore, all the anger they feel towards the intangible forces that left them stranded is focused on the material object and situation before them. They can do nothing about being deserted, but they can steal the glasses and attack the dissenters. So rather than feeling helpless, the children feel as if they have control over their immediate



environment. Therefore, both boys are perfect targets for Jack's band to turn against.

Often, critics focus on the violence among the boys as a sign that the group has completely fallen apart, however, this is not true. "As action progresses, readers see no signs of a veer from the boys' self-destructive course" (Jones). The boys, however, are in the act of preserving the group, not self-destructing. "The young boys' barbaric primal instincts come to their apogee during the killing of Piggy, and the hunt for Ralph. These events represent the culmination of the destruction of civilization in the face of savagery because these events are the most primitive in the whole novel... Roger kills Piggy with no regard to anything, for he has no civilization to fear repercussions from.... The hunt of Ralph is the most savage act on the island because it was planned... Ralph was at one time liked by all the boys, which makes the hunt even more savage." (Wheaton).

Piggy and Ralph both must be hated and killed in order for the new community to thrive. They both oppose the new order created by the boys and therefore they posed a threat to the community. If there was no curb to the violence, the community would fall apart. Yes, the boys are violent, but their violence is however geared towards Ralph and Piggy, two boys who threaten the existing community. If the children truly exhibited savage violence, they would turn on each other and all would be destroyed. Instead, they do what is necessary and direct their energy towards only two of the boys. This limits the violence. These scape goats spare the rest of the community from the anger and violence. This also controls any further possible violence by creating a sense of unity among the boys. They are

<https://assignbuster.com/the-lord-of-the-flies-destruction-of-society-or-cr/>

joined together by their common hatred and the collective goal to kill Ralph therefore saving the community from internal violence. The planned hunt for Ralph doesn't prove that the boys are savage, it proves that the chase is needed. The boys have to focus their energy on him to prevent internal disorder. Mankind is inclined to blame those they once worshipped. It may not be the ideal situation for people living under more "civilized" standards, but for these boys in the wild, it is absolutely necessary. (class notes February 1 and 3, 2000). The theory that the novel as a commentary on scape goating is further substantiated by both the era it was written in and the life experiences of the author. "...it is worth just remembering that this book, published in 1954, was written in a world...which had seen within twenty years the systematic destruction of the Jewish race, a world war revealing unnumbered atrocities of what man had done to man." (Gregor). Yet W. W. II, like the killings on the island, was not fueled by individuals, but by the community. Hitler used the scape goating of the Jews to join together the Nazis the same way Jack used the contempt for Ralph and Piggy to band his boys together. "As a whole, and at all times, the efficiency of the truly national leader consists primarily in preventing the division of the attention of a people, and always in concentrating it on a single enemy..." (Hitler quoted in Burke, 97). Is this not what Jack does? He gathers together the boys to punish their enemies who are both different and preventing them from total control. Jack and Adolph Hitler have more in common. "So Hitler suffering under the alienation of poverty and confusion, yearning for some integrative core, came to take parliament as the basic symbol of all that he would move away from." (Burke 102). Jack, too rebels against his parliament when he refuses to adhere to the traditional rules of society. As Hitler

suffered, so too does Jack. Jack is cheated of his rightful position of power. Ralph should never have been voted to power. He was not the strongest and any wisdom he had came not from himself, but from Piggy. It was only because he held the object that represented authority that he was voted chief and therefore the position was taken from Jack. Not only does Jack ignore the conch, the symbol of those regulations, but he also completely destroy it. He completely turns against the old ideals and becomes immersed in the new ones. Golding served in the War in the Royal Navy for five year. He participated in both the Walcheren and D-Day operations. (Epstein 237)“ After serving in W. W. II he realized...that people are capable of amazing evil when they are not held accountable (i. e. Hitler and the Nazis)... It’s a warning that man without accountability is innately evil.” (Cleve, Golding’s Inspiration). However, this interpretation, in the traditional fashion, focuses on the individual rather than society. It was not that the people weren’t held accountable that allowed them to commit such crimes, but rather that these crimes were seen as sacrifices necessary to secure the position of the community. In his scape goating, “ Hitler found a panacea, a ‘ cure for what ails you’, a ‘ snakeoil’, that made such sinister unifying possible within his own nation.” (Burke, 96). The Lord of the Flies mirrors this. It isn’t the lack of adults that allows the boys to kill, but rather the existence of a community that allows them to focus their anger on those threatening the group. The focus for years among literary critics of Lord of the Flies has been that man is innately evil and needs society to conform him. When taken away from that society, humans will abandon their social graces and become savages. However, while the concentration of critics has always been on the ruin of society and break down of the individual, the <https://assignbuster.com/the-lord-of-the-flies-destruction-of-society-or-cr/>

novel may be telling the tale of a new society which is held together through persecution scape goats. The violence that follows isn't a sign of cruelty, but rather necessary to hold the group together. All the boys can join forces to attack Ralph and Piggy. It creates unity among Jack's boys. Ralph and Piggy both fit Rene' Girard's examples of scape goats. Ralph represents foolish rules which no longer have their place. They are impeding the development of the new group. While Piggy represents disability. He is not at all useful to the group. Both boys prevent the new society from taking total control by withholding the glasses needed for fire, therefore, the other children have even more reason to rally against Ralph and Piggy. The violence is not excessive. If the boys were in fact to resort to absolute brutality as suggested by some critics, wouldn't they be killing each other with complete disregard for all else? Yet these boys focus their violence on those who dissent and are potentially dangerous to the group. The violence is necessary to hold the group together and prevent ruin. The community doesn't fall apart, it is reformulated. While it is true that conventional rules are abandoned, new rules are also created. The traditional rules had little place on the island. The boys invent new rules which better suit their predicament. The focus for so many years has been on destruction and evil within the boys, but perhaps it should be not on what is destroyed, but what is created in its place and not on the evil that lies within the boys but on the actions they take to expel scape goats and therefore save their new society.

Bibliography: Works Cited  
Burke, Kenneth. Terms for Order.

Indiana, Indiana UP. Year unknown  
Cleve. The Lord of the Flies Bulletin Board:  
Golding's Aspirations. April 30, 2000  
<http://www.pernet.net>.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-lord-of-the-flies-destruction-of-society-or-cr/>

net/chadly1/lord\_of\_the\_flies/wwwboard/messages/4111. htmlCleve, The Lord of the Flies Bulletin Board: Golding's View of Man in Lord of the Flies [http://www.pernet.net/chadly1/lord\\_of\\_the\\_flies/wwwboard/messages/4161.html](http://www.pernet.net/chadly1/lord_of_the_flies/wwwboard/messages/4161.html)

Epstein, E. L, Notes on Lord of the Flies. New York: Riverside Books, 1997.

Golding, William. Lord of the Flies. New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 1997.

Girard, Rene', The Scapegoat. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986  
Gregor, Ian and Mark Kinkead-Weekes. Introduction: the Lord of the Flies.

New York: Abrahams-Dutton, 1962.

In class notes taken January 27, February 1, 3, and 8; 2000. Sacrificing Ritual in Literature  
Jones, Adrienne. Apocalypse Postponed: The Ending of Lord of the Flies. <http://www.innogize.com/papers/lordoftheflies.html> 1998  
Author unknown. Lord of the Flies. <http://research.studentadvantage.com/cgi-bin/clickthrough.pl?http%3A%2F%2Fcyberessays.com%2FEnglish%2F166.htm>

Myren, Hege. Discipline <http://www.malvik.vgs.no/engelsk/discipline.htm>

Riley, Carolyn, ed. Vol. 1 of Contemporary Literary Criticism. Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1973  
See, Jennifer. The Lord of the Flies Bulletin Board: Breakdown of Society April 25, 2000 [http://www.pernet.net/chadly1/lord\\_of\\_the\\_flies/wwwboard/messages/4097.html](http://www.pernet.net/chadly1/lord_of_the_flies/wwwboard/messages/4097.html)  
Wheaton, Paul. Untitled <http://www.cgocable.net/pwheaton/pessay>.