

Discussion Notes: Lord of the Flies

In my lecture I will emphasize Golding's belief that he has written a story (in the 1950s) containing essential truths about human nature and violence, and about Hitler and Stalin and (probably, in his view, Saddam Hussein). We'll be taking the claim seriously, as a basis for discussion.

- First, talk-through the story with the students, emphasizing the clusters of personality traits of the main characters, and the sequence of the action. Make sure everyone is straight about the basic facts.

- Then, lead them in a discussion of what could be changed, if we ran this "experiment" again, and might produce a different outcome.

- Then, lead them in a discussion of what -- if this "thought experiment" had actually occurred -- we could conclude about the causes of war and what we must do to preserve peace.

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Here's a brief plot synopsis:<sup>1</sup>

Chapter 1 - The Sound of the Shell

A group of British schoolboys survives (with no injuries) a plane crash and they find themselves apparently alone on a tropical ("state of nature") island. We learn that they have

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<sup>1</sup> There are at least 2 movie versions, one of them recent. Caution students against confusing the novel and the movie versions. The novel is better, and the exam questions will require them to work directly with the novel itself.

been put on the plane by parents and are fleeing England during a future atomic war. One sub-group of the boys is a choir, schooled in obedience to an older boy (Jack).

We become familiar with the main characters. Ralph is quickly elected leader, which introduces tension with Jack (who has been leader of his choir.) Ralph offers an immediate compromise, ceding to Jack the leadership of the choir, who will become hunters.

## Chapter 2 - Fire on the Mountain

Organizational meeting on a granite platform above the beach. Efforts by Ralph & Jack to reduce worries and promise a good time are accompanied by one of the small boys frightening the others with a report that a "snake-thing", a "beastie" frightened him in the woods. Ralph stirs-up group enthusiasm for building a bonfire so they can be rescued, with the result that, in the enthusiasm, a huge fire burns out of control and the littlun who said he saw a "snake-thing" is missing - and apparently killed in the fire, although this isn't discussed.

## Chapter 3 - Huts on the Beach

Several weeks have passed. Jack crawls through the underbrush armed with a sharp stick, stalking a pig, who eludes him. Ralph and Simon are erecting huts of palm leaves.

## Chapter 4 - Painted Faces and Long Hair

Roger and Maurice kick over the sand castles of the littluns. Roger stalks one of the littluns and throws stones in his direction. In another part of the jungle Jack paints his face with red and white clay and black charcoal. And leads his hunters (with members drawn from the former choir) off into the jungle. Ralph sights the smoke of a ship on the horizon & discovers, to his horror, that the signal fire, which Jack & his hunters had promised to maintain, has been allowed to go out. Jack & his hunters return, at a moment of triumph, carrying a pig on a stake,

to be confronted publicly by an angry Ralph and Piggy. They berate Jack, who turns on Piggy, knocks him down & breaks one of the lenses in his glasses. Ralph calls a meeting.

#### Chapter 5 - Beast From Water

At the meeting, Jack gives a lengthy description of the group's failures and says there is too much fear on the island. Jack & Piggy agree with Ralph that fears are groundless and a littlun who describes a horrible form that moves in the trees at night is dismissed as having a nightmare. The argument that they have been all over the island and seen no Beast is countered by a littlun (Percival) who says the Beast comes from out in the water. Ralph calls for a vote of whether ghosts exist, the boys vote yes. The meeting to set things straight ends in disarray.

#### Chapter 6 - Beast From Air

While the boys sleep a plane explodes above the island and a dead pilot and his parachute land in a tree near Sam and Eric who are supposed to be watching the signal fire but who have fallen asleep. They waken to see the corpse, tangled in a parachute: not recognizing it for what it is, they are terrified and race off to tell the other boys. The other boys organize to search for the Beast but end-up fruitlessly playing at Castle Rock.

#### Chapter 7 - Shadows and Small Trees

The boys pause in their hunt for the Beast to pursue a boar. Ralph joins in. The boar escapes & the boys surround Robert in a mock attack, prodding him with their spears. As darkness falls, Jack, Ralph, and Roger set off to continue the search. They see the dead parachutist from a distance, "something like a great ape," and flee in terror when it appears to be looking at them.

## Chapter 8 - Gift For the Darkness

A meeting called to discuss the Beast dissolves into argument. At Piggy's suggestion, they build a signal fire on the beach, but soon lose interest and wander off. Jack breaks off and leads a band of boys on a hunt. They surround a big sow and torment her with spears until Jack cuts her throat. They stick her head on a stake. Simon, who has wandered off by himself, comes upon the head, has a mystical conversation, then falls into a faint. Meanwhile, Jack and his band descend to the beach to steal fire for a pig roast.

## Chapter 9 - A View to a Death

Simon awakens and climbs to the top of the mountain. He finds the dead parachutist, examines it, and starts down the mountain to tell the other boys of his discovery. Meanwhile Ralph, Piggy, and Samneric come to the pig roast of Jack's group. Simon, stumbling out of the jungle at dusk, is reacted-to as the Beast and killed, Ralph & Piggy join in. During the night, the parachutist & corpse are blown out to sea - and Simon's body is carried away by the tide.

## Chapter 10 - The Shell and the Glasses

The next morning, Piggy & Ralph are conscious-stricken by the death of Simon & their participation in it. Meanwhile, all of the bigguns (except Piggy, Ralph and the twins (Samneric)) have moved to the rocky tip of the island, under Jack's leadership. While Ralph and Piggy are preparing for sleep, Jack and two followers attack them to steal fire, they also steal Piggy's broken glasses.

## Chapter 11 - Castle Rock

Ralph blows the conch to call an assembly, but to little effect. He and Piggy set-off for Castle Rock to confront Jack. Jack responds to Ralph's criticism by lunging at him with a spear. As

Ralph & Jack begin to fight, Roger loses a boulder, high above, which crashes down and smashes Piggy, flinging his dead body through the air and into the sea. Ralph flees. The twins, Samneric, tied at Jack's orders, are tortured by Jack and Roger until they agree to join the tribe.

### Chapter 12 - Cry of the Hunters

Final hunt for Ralph. Island set ablaze. Ralph (and the other boys) are saved at the last minute by the arrival of a British naval ship. The British officer refers explicitly to The Coral Island and wonders that a bunch of British boys couldn't have put on a better show. Ralph weeps "for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy."

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### Points for Discussion

Assuming this experiment was conducted, what could be generalized from it about basic human nature? Golding believes that, by removing British boys to a "state of nature," and allowing time to elapse, he has demonstrated the slow erosion of "society" and the emergence of what has been underneath - i.e., a basically savage human nature. Let's think about this as scientists: Is it true?

- How much of what occurs on the island is a result of society itself? Arguably, almost everything - the idea of being hunters and of a hunt, including children's games of make-believe, Jack's obsession with killing pigs as a test, the habits of obedience instilled by the Church in the members of the choir - the core of Jack's political coalition.

- How much of what occurs on the island is a result of the fact that these are a bunch of kids? Piaget's research in developmental psychology has shown that it is only at puberty that the capacity for formal relations (going step by step in your head, dealing with abstractions) come "on-line" (as, for example, the ability to do algebra.) This fact would explain why it is only Piggy (who is brighter, hence smarter than his chronological age) who can see ahead to the long-term

necessity of rescue & the priority needed for the signal fire. Ralph and Jack - older - have a capacity to grasp this, but the rest of the boys - a bunch of little kids with short attention spans and no independent ability to sustain abstract thought) just aren't able to sustain a rational, long-term political program. But since this capacity for formal operations doesn't emerge until adolescence, Golding's story may only show that a bunch of little kids can make a hash of it, not that this is inherent in human nature.

- Note the effects of fear and the designed inability to test reality on the unraveling social order, especially, instilling the group regression (especially among the younger children) of a search for, and obedience to, a strong, militarist, and aggressive leader to deal with fear and danger.

[The growing fear, as Golding explores it, is tied directly to the inability to test reality & determine which fears are groundless: not only does the littlun claim that the beast comes from the water, but when there's good visible evidence for what might be a Beast, the dead flier (introduced by Golding with precise timing to strengthen fear - especially to frighten Sam and Eric (two older & credible witnesses) is neatly (for Golding's purposes) blown out to sea during the night, thus depriving the boys of a chance to investigate the nature of reality.]

- How much of what happens is solely the result of Jack's unique personality - & a power struggle between Jack & Ralph that leads to a "revolution" or coup d'etat against Ralph and Piggy? Jack appears to be an authoritarian personality, harsh, critical, scornful of weakness (especially of most of what Piggy represents, physically). Jack is subjected to relative deprivation (of his earlier status as an unquestioned leader, of his choir). His status as leader is further challenged - publicly - by Piggy and Ralph at exactly the moment of his greatest accomplishment (the first pig-kill), a timing set-up by Golding. Only Jack (and his henchman, Roger) are aggressive. The others mostly go-along (so, obedience to authority, not just aggression, is important to understand why Jack succeeds.)

[One way to look at this question is to ask what would happen if we re-ran the experiment without Jack on the island. Would the same results have been obtained? Probably not. (This doesn't refute Golding's analysis if, as may be the case, there are always "Jack's" in society, but it

does focus the critical cause on a distinctive type of personality, rather than human nature in general.]

- Note that Jack's power comes, in part, from the desire for a strong leader (in the face of fear of the Beast), but in part because his political program is more appealing (games & hunts rather than bring fire-tending & hut-building), and in part because of distinctive personalities available to him to recruit to his purposes (in this case, especially, Roger, who has a sadistic tendency & takes it upon himself push-down the boulder, from high above, on Piggy), and in part through the use of terror and torture (e.g. of Samneric) once he has begun to consolidate his totalitarian control.

[An advanced point: issues of guilt & denial in facing the realistic consequences of one's acts: at the earlier stages, the gruesome breakdowns are handled so that they haunt the conscience of the group (at some level) but the physical evidence of what they've done isn't vividly present to sober them. There are no vivid, slowly decaying bodies of the littlun with the mulberry birthmark who is killed in the fire (he's not discovered until very late in the book), or Simon's body (washed to sea).]

[Also advanced: the different clusters of personalities are distinct packages of human potentials. But they may reflect similar packages in society -- i.e., intellectuals (like Piggy); saints and clergymen (like Simon); democratic leaders like Ralph who aren't tough enough to face-down extraordinarily ambitious and violent challengers like Jack; "mass publics" that are prone to fear, deference to authority and the appeals of strength and toughness of leaders like Jack. Etc.]<sup>2</sup>

- How much of what happened might be explained by boredom, by nothing better to do?

- A vegetarian might say it all starts downhill once they taste animal flesh. [What would their biology Prof. say to this theory that animal protein makes people aggressive? Could we try an experiment on campus that would help us to know whether to believe this theory (e.g.,

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<sup>2</sup> I'll be developing, in lecture, Golding's argument that the truths of religion never get through (Simon), but could change everything if they ever do.

compared to other hypotheses that vegetarian diets can make people passive by making them malnourished?]

- Note sequences of disinhibition (Jack starts to kill a pig but pulls back, then kills one; Roger throws stones but misses; later he rolls-down the boulder to kill Piggy, etc.) Note that there's positive reinforcement (or no punishment) at the earlier stages. Also, aggression is progressively rewarded. The boar (initially hunted) doesn't turn on Jack and kill or seriously injure him (teaching him a lesson).

Different experimental variations (see how far they get on their own before suggesting some of these):

- girls instead of boys (we can only draw conclusions about males...);

- a tiger or a boar with tusks (instead of a pig) – an animal that can hurt or kill them;

- a frisbee or football;

- suppose that "Piggy" had been 6' 3" with the physique of a Greek God (not to mention some social and political skill)?;

- a different level of technology (e.g., machine guns; or no knives; or a need to work together to plant crops and survive, etc.)

- no Church conditioning of the choir members to be obedient (esp. to Jack, their choirmaster before the wreck.)

- no dead flier appearing at just the right point to heighten the fear of the Beast;

- remove the ship that passes at just the point when Jack has let the fire go out (an incident that creates a dramatic public confrontation between Jack and Ralph).