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"Lord of the Flies": The Educational Value of Golding's Text

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Since its publication in 1954, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* has retained remarkable popular success. Golding's story of a group of British schoolboys deserted on a foreign island, and stripped of their civilized selves remains a page-turner. While the content of the novel is chillingly realistic, honest and even disturbing and grotesque at times, both its literary and human value remain undoubtedly momentous. Golding creates an accurate portrayal of human nature through his eager attention to literary device and technique. Furthermore, his authorial talent has continued to elicit keen interest in scholars and readers alike. However, despite the renowned success of *Lord of the Flies*, controversy remains over the appropriateness of the novel in the high school classroom. Images of graphic violence, group antagonisms and crude language resonate throughout the novel and continue to spark controversy among parents, teachers, administrators and students.

Unlike the typical young adult novel, *Lord of the Flies* doesn't attempt to be excessively sentimental in portraying the lives of the adolescent boys. Rather, it serves as a classic example of uses of allegory, symbolism and plot techniques. Furthermore, it introduces students to the affairs of leadership, ethical behavior, resourcefulness and innocence vs. experience. Moreover, *Lord of the Flies* is a fascinating literary work which undoubtedly elicits productive discussion. For both its literary and humanistic value, the novel has significant merit in secondary education environments.

The curriculum of high school English classes predominately involves the analyses and dissection of celebrated literary works. Discussion of such works revolves around the meaning behind a text and the message relayed by the author. More commonly in high school classrooms, teachers educate students about literary devices demonstrated in classic writings. Additionally, students are taught how these devices serve to enhance the meaning of a particular text or how

they uniquely characterize the author. Such basic devices as irony, symbolism, foreshadowing and personification are illustrated in most required readings of high school students. Golding's *Lord of the Flies* possesses these techniques and more; thus, it continues to inhabit many secondary English classrooms. Finally, a novel is successful in the classroom if it elicits enthusiasm in students by sparking discussion and debate. The controversial issues in *Lord of the Flies* are legitimate; however, more significant is the fact that they catalyze student reaction and conversation about literature and life.

The literary success of *Lord of the Flies* has been attributed to its content as well as Golding's presentation of the material. In fact, William Golding won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1983 for the body of his work.¹ Accordingly, the majority of scholars agree that the novel possesses unique literary value in that Golding demonstrates exceptional employment of symbolism and plot and character devices. Additionally, the novel is one of the most renowned allegorical novels as the author incorporates underlying humanistic meaning in the development of characters and objects, setting and action. Chief symbolic elements in the novel include *the conch shell*, *Piggy's glasses*, *the beast* and *the lord of the flies*. Each of these objects serves to relay a significant message to the boys about their experience on the island and about their innate nature as human beings. Furthermore, Golding creates several main characters—*Ralph*, *Jack*, *Piggy*, *Simon*—who each possess a specific, detailed personality meant to represent aspects of civilization, such as science and religion, diplomacy and oppression. This paper will take a careful look at the content of *Lord of the Flies* often questioned by censorship advocates. Next, an exploration of the import behind Golding's symbolic objects and characters will reveal the

¹See Young Adult Library Services Association. *Frequently Challenged Books for Young Adults*. Chicago: American Library Association, 1996, pg. 68.

specifics of the literary and human value of the novel. Finally, insight from case studies will further demonstrate the appropriateness and effectiveness of the novel in high school English curriculums while also revealing student responses in regard to Golding's work and the worldly issues informed by it.

A History of Censorship

Despite the educational merit of the novel, high schools have challenged its incorporation into English curriculums and summer reading lists. In 1964, approximately ten years after the publication of *Lord of the Flies*, a survey was released showing but 13% of private high schools using the book and less than 5% of public schools.² These statistics can be largely attributed to the religious overtones and moral messages of the novel, which are welcome and often infused into the academic curriculum of private Catholic schools. In 1984, an entire school district in Texas challenged the novel for excessive violence and bad language. Additionally, in 1994, Waterloo schools in Iowa found the novel full of "profanity, lurid passages about sex, and statements defamatory to minorities, God, women and the disabled" (68).

Conversely, author Richard H. Lederer, in his paper entitled "Student Reactions to Lord of the Flies," asserts his praise for the novel in the classroom and demonstrates how students respond to the material. Lederer's essay is a collective piece with opinions and insights from tenth-grade students at St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire. He states: "The insights that students apparently can have into the various aspects of *Lord of the Flies* recommend the book for widespread reading in the country's English classes" (576). In an attempt to persuade high school teachers to incorporate the novel into their curriculums, Lederer effectively conveys the student knowledge gained from Golding's work, which is to be presented later in this paper.

²See Richard Lederer, "Student Reactions to 'Lord of the Flies'". *The English Journal*. 53.8 (1964): pg. 575.

An understanding of the controversial topics in the novel is essential to an argument against its classroom censorship. Three main components of the text content—discrimination based on race and disability, graphic images of violence and animalism, and debasing, profane language—have outraged and offended parents and students. Dawn Sova, author of *Banned Books: Literature Suppressed on Social Grounds*, describes how one parent found the treatment of Piggy to be especially disturbing given that he is discriminated because of his disabilities.³ A thorough look at each of these questionable elements in detailed passages will demonstrate the controversy regarding the novel.

Controversy over Content

Much of the disturbing passages from *Lord of the Flies* involve graphic images of violence. As the boys stay on the island lengthens, Golding gradually exposes the innate, savage nature of human beings. Thus, Golding has the boys resort to hunting and killing animals. Jack, the aggressive leaders of the tribe named “the hunters,” suggests hunting the wild pigs native to island. The following passage details the boys attack on the boar.

“Jack was on top of the sow, stabbing downward with his knife. Roger found a lodgment for his point and began to push till he was leaning with his whole weight. The spear moved forward inch by inched and the terrified squealing became a high-pitched scream.

Then Jack found the throat and the hot blood spouted over his hands” (132).

This image is particularly horrific because the reader cannot help but visualize the knife stabbing into the pig’s flesh and the blood spewing from its suffering body. Upon killing the pig, the boys position its bloody head on a sharpened stick as a sacrifice; it gradually collects flies, creating a

³ See Dawn Sova, *Banned Books: Books Suppressed on Social Grounds*. New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2006, pg. 220.

disturbing image in the mind of the reader. The killing of the wild boars introduces another controversial theme of the novel—human as animal.

The tribe of school boys becomes a pack of animals preying on their inferior kind. Golding accomplishes this characterization through descriptions of animalization and barbarism. For example, following their group effort to collect wood for the first fire, Golding remarks: “the boys lay, panting like dogs” (37). Additionally, Jack is described as crouching on all fours, like a dog, when he climbs through the forest in search of prey to hunt. “for a minute, he became less a hunter than a furtive thing, ape-like among the tangle of trees (44). Lastly, similar to the cultural traditions of some native tribes, the boys create masks out of charcoal and clay, and let their hair grow long and untamed. These physical transformations compel the boys and bring about fierceness and brutality in each of them. Moreover, when they conceal their human features they also begin to shed their basic human values of respect.

The discriminatory nature of many of the characters is also a concern for protestors of *Lord of the Flies*. Group antagonism, ridicule and making-fun are just a few of the reoccurring subjects. Upon arriving on the island, the boys almost immediately and instinctively establish a hierarchical system based on size. Groups form between the bigger, choir boys and the smaller, younger ones. Golding describes the classification of boys of certain statures: “the smaller boys were known now by the generic title of “littluns.” The decrease in size, from Ralph down, was gradual...nevertheless no one had any difficulty in recognizing “biguns” at one end and “littluns” at the other” (64). Thus, the “biguns” inherit power and control as a result of their size; however, they begin to abuse this power by bullying and manipulating the “littluns.” The bigger boys begin to tease the smaller ones for their size disadvantage. They interrupt their game

playing and cause them to feel frustrated and frightened. The following passage demonstrates the consequences of one of the “littluns” neglect and ridicule.

“The littlun Percival had early crawled into a shelter and stayed there for two days, talking, singing, and crying, till they thought him batty and were faintly amused. Ever since then he had been peaked, red-eyed, and miserable; a littlun who played little and cried often” (54).

Percival’s stay on the island becomes horrific and daunting as a direct result of ridicule from the bigger, older boys. Similar circumstances exist between Piggy, “the fat boy” with asthma and glasses, and some of the others boys. He is teased primarily because of his weight and disabilities. Golding describes his relationship to the other boys: “Piggy was an outsider, not only by accent, which did not matter, but by fat, ass-mar, and specs, and a certain disinclination for manual labor” (60).

In addition to the persistent bullying, some of the language in *Lord of the Flies* has also created controversy over the appropriateness of the novel in the classroom. While on the island, the boys often exercise the phrase “shut up,” demeaning one another each time with these harsh words. For instance, when Piggy tries to speak with the conch shell in hand, Jack interrupts and callously and fiercely yells “you shut up!” (37). The debasing remarks between the boys are a concern for many parents because they demonstrate the hurtful, verbal abuse prevalent in school settings. Additionally, the boys develop an almost ritualistic chant as they hunt for prey: “kill the beast, cut his throat, spill his blood” (111). Their language is foul and destructive; it evokes their heartless, cold nature and persistent desire to kill.

Much of the vulgar language in the novel is also classified as sexually explicit and therefore, inappropriate for inexperienced students. After Jack violently stabs the pig and

empties its entrails with Roger's help, the boys notice the spear in the dead animal's behind. They all chuckle at the sight as Roger withdraws his weapon and eagerly remarks: "right up her ass!" (133). The boys display their knowledge of male sex organs while also demonstrating the negative, taboo associated with them. Jack steadfastly defies order by recruiting his army of hunters and tyrannically stating "bollocks to the rule!" (87) The term *bollocks* is an Old English word meaning "testicles,"⁴ which Jack uses to elicit attention from the boys and embarrassment from Ralph due to his inability to effectively control things.

Educational Merit of the Novel

The bullying demonstrated in the novel, such as name-calling and shameful mocking, is widespread in academic establishments. Thus, this subject is a main motive for censorship advocates of *Lord of the Flies*. Questions arise as to whether the novel will trigger feelings of loneliness or rejection in student readers, or if students will be offended or even influenced by the group antagonisms that exist between the schoolboys. Alternatively, however, students take more away from the novel than the perverse language, violence and intentional antagonism. In fact, Professor of Language Arts and Reading Barbara G. Samuels suggests that "Golding's story offers such a good model of novel structure, character development, and symbolism that it is almost necessary in the English classroom" (195). Literary components, such as abundant symbolism, and underlying moral lessons, such as responsibility for one's behavior, are essentially perfect components of a text to be read by students. *Lord of the Flies* generously possesses both of these aspects within its style and content. Additionally, while this paper focuses on the symbolism and moral lessons to be understood from Golding's work, scholars, teachers and readers alike cannot deny the descriptive language employed in *Lord of the Flies*.

⁴ somewhere

Golding's attention to detail and diction in describing the landscape and events of the island is exceptional and alluring. Perhaps these careful decisions on Golding's part only help to enhance the remarkable symbolism and lessons within the text.

Meaning Behind the Island's Secrets

Critic Howard S. Babb remarks of *Lord of the Flies*: "the whole book is symbolic in nature" (7). In his collection of critical essays entitled *The Novels of William Golding*, Babb sets out to affirm the stylistic techniques and humanistic themes explored in six of Golding's novels. Specifically, in his first essay on *Lord of the Flies*, Babb accentuates Golding's method of writing as radically conditioned by meaning (7). In other words, the symbolism behind objects, characters and action is what constitutes much of the novel's literary merit and exceptionality. An exploration of the novel's symbolic elements will demonstrate the appropriateness of the material in the English classroom.

Beginning with the pretty, pink-speckled sea shell, Golding establishes an assembly of objects with underlying significance within the story world. Piggy and Ralph first discover the conch shell resting in some ferny weeds. Conch refers to a large type of sea shell typically belonging to a snail or shellfish.⁵ Piggy is the first boy to hold the conch; and once he does, it immediately becomes a highly-valued, remarkable possession. A delicately embossed object, rendered untouchable.

In addition to its aesthetic appeal, the conch also holds power in its echoing sound. An intense, harsh note resonates when Ralph takes a deep breath and blows into the shell's hollowness. Appropriately, Golding titles the first chapter "the Sound of the Shell" because of

⁵ "Conch." *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th Edition* (2009): 1. *Academic Search Complete*. EBSCO.

the conch's ability to literally "shake" the island. Golding writes: "immediately the thing sounded...under the palms, spread through the intricacies of the forest and echoed back from the pink granite of the mountain. Clouds of birds rose from the treetops...small animals scuttered" (11). The entire island is disrupted by the conch's powerful sound, including the remaining schoolboys, who immediately begin to find their way to the source of the echo.

In the tiny, chaos-stricken world of the island, the conch shell provides the boys with temporary authority and order. It summons everyone for a group meeting and awards a voice to the boy holding it. Ralph establishes order based on the system at the British prep school, where the conch replaces the teacher in charge. "We can't have everybody talking at once. We'll have to have 'Hands up' like at school...Then I'll give him the conch" (28). The system of control appears to be effective, until the boys gradually begin to bend the rules—in which case, Golding aptly destroys the fragile symbol of order, unleashing chaos.

Jack and his tribe of hunters decide to expel the rule of the conch shell and create their own system of survival. As the tribe increases in size, there are only a few boys left who standby the order of the conch shell. In an effort to assemble a group meeting to rejoin forces, Piggy and Ralph, with conch shell in hand, travel to the hunters' lair named "Castle Rock." Amongst the threatening shadow of hunters with painted faces and long hair, the value of the cream and pink-speckled conch diminishes. Furthermore, Ralph and Piggy are outnumbered, and Jack's tyrannical nature is unwavering. The boys yell and shout at one another, desperately trying to have their voices heard. Then, in an instant, all is silent as "the conch exploded into a thousand white fragments and ceased to exist" (179). The destruction of the conch demonstrates a loss of hope for any lasting order or decency amongst the boys; consequently, irrevocable chaos ensues when "the beast" within each boy is unleashed.

The boys' stay on the uninhabited, tropical island would not be complete without a mysterious, threatening creature. However, Golding distorts this typical image of danger in the symbolism of "the beastie." The first mention of the snake-like, tree dwelling being comes from a "littlun" who claims to have seen it on the first night. While the older boys dismiss the possibility of such a thing, there remains an eerie feeling amongst the group which persists throughout the action. Furthermore, this feeling grows stronger as the boys become more uncivilized.

Golding is quick to feed the characters' imagination of the beast, which lends significance to his portrayal of man as beast. First, a confident "littlun" Phil proclaims his sighting of the beast in the middle of the night. He awakes after a threatening nightmare, emerges from his hut and witnesses "something big and horrid moving in the trees" (80). Phil's account is quickly explained away; however, as Simon admits that he often wanders through the jungle in the night. Ironically enough, it is Simon who suggests that the beast does not exist externally, but rather, inside each of the boys. Golding stresses Simon's suggestion with Sam and Eric's discovery of what they believe to be "the beast." The twins rush to Ralph with their story of a furry, winged creature hiding among the trees. Ralph and Simon are skeptical, while Jack and his hunters jump at the opportunity to hunt and kill an enemy. While the boys are left in the dark, the reader is informed in great detail of this creature's true identity—a dead parachutist caught swaying between branches; a human being.

Personas of Golding's Boys: the leader, the tyrant, the geek and the seer

The symbolism in *Lord of the Flies* is effective in teaching students about literary device and method as well as about basic aspects of civilization. Through four of the novel's key personalities—Ralph, Jack, Piggy and Simon—Golding portrays different elements of society

often in opposition with one another. First, Ralph and Jack represent two classes of leadership—democracy and dictatorship. Secondly, Simon’s spiritual awareness and Piggy’s logical rationale elicit the cultural aspects of religion and science. Exploring the characterization of the boys teaches students about effective and destructive ways of governing, and about resourcefulness, ethical behavior and fair play.

Upon reading *Lord of the Flies*, students are first introduced to Ralph, an energetic twelve-year old who Golding first identifies as “the fair boy” (1). At first he is at ease on the island, relieved to be released from the domineering authorities of his British prep school. Upon sounding the conch shell, Ralph becomes a natural born leader who strives for order and communal welfare. “There was a stillness about Ralph as he sat that marked him out: there was his size, and attractive appearance, and most obscurely, yet most powerfully, there was the conch” (17). Additionally, he is a leader chosen and supported by the people. Even Jack and his tribe of hunters stand by Ralph’s rules, temporarily.

Initially, Ralph proves to be a productive democratic leader when he establishes a system in which each boy is given the chance to speak his mind, even the insecure, frightened “littluns.” Ralph listens to the younger boys’ worries about “the beast” and tries to alleviate their fears and nightmares. In addition, he warns them several times not to eat the native fruit of the island because it is dirty and may cause illness. Ralph also demonstrates keen interest in the welfare of the rest of the boys. He develops a system for building three huts on the beach for shelter, for starting a signal fire at the top of the mountain, and for going to the bathroom in a designated area. However, despite Ralph’s tactfulness, the boys gradually lose respect for him, which eventually results in his largest downfall.

When his followers considerably decline in number, Ralph must finally submit to Jack's demands to hunt for food and capture and kill "the beast." At first, Ralph is uneasy surrounded by the hunters, mangy-haired and equipped with spears. However, he eventually becomes caught up in the frenzy of the hunt: "Ralph was full of fright and apprehension and pride...[He] too was fighting to get near, to get a handful of that brown, vulnerable flesh. The desire to squeeze and hurt was over-mastering" (111). The boys engage in a ritualistic chant while reenacting the slaughter of the wild boar. Ralph's final retreat into savagery, however, is demonstrated in his participation in the death of Simon. He experiences ultimate loss of hope, power and civility, but worst, he exhibits his own potential for evil and insanity. Golding concludes the novel with a final image of Ralph running from the animalistic hunters and sobbing before a naval officer who has finally come to rescue the boys.

In effect, *Lord of the Flies* portrays a democratic organization which fails as a result of the basic instincts of human nature. It portrays a leader who must eventually retreat into savagery like his enemy and his followers. Ralph's attempt at democracy proves ultimately ineffective due to the increasingly selfish, uncivilized and fearful nature of the boys. These aspects prove to be more suitable for Jack's dictatorship, founded on fear and barbarism; in effect, Jack's government prospers on the island.

Jack Merridew is introduced as tall and scrawny with red hair and freckles. He is "ugly without silliness" (14), the antithesis of the athletic and endearing Ralph. Upon first meeting Jack, the reader is exposed to his controlling nature. As leader of the choir, he is condescending, shouting orders and demanding obedience from the boys. He also wears a heavy cloak reminiscent of a king. Additionally, he is the most destructive and violent of them, heedlessly slashing evergreen bushes and jabbing tree trunks with his large sheath-knife. Jack eventually

risers to domination as a result of his priority to hunt and kill animals for food. The rest of the boys cannot deny their growing hunger; thus, they join Jack and establish a tribe of killing machines.

A confrontation between opposing leaders Ralph and Jack demonstrates the core values of both societies. Ralph agrees that being rescued and maintaining the signal fire should be priority. Jack, however, is absorbed by the freedom and opportunities of the deserted island: “Jack had to think for a moment before he could remember what rescue was. ‘Rescue? Yes, of course! All the same, I’d like to catch a pig first’—he snatched up his spear and dashed it into the ground. The opaque, mad look came into his eyes again” (48). Ralph delegates Jack leader of the hunters; however, this decision results in animosity between the boys. The power-hungry Jack is consumed by his position as leader of the pack, stopping short of barbarism to be in control.

As a tyrant, Jack dismisses the “littluns” worries, calling them cry babies and glorifying the existence of the beast. He also frightens the boys with his swearing and offensive remarks; he often yells “shut up” and tells Piggy “who cares what you believe—Fatty!” (85). Additionally, Jack has no regard for the opinions or ideas of the other boys, including Ralph. His sole concern is leading the procession of bloodthirsty hunters into battle. Jack’s arrogance and disregard for the wellbeing of the group leads to a “survival of the fittest” lifestyle unsuitable for Simon, Piggy, and eventually Ralph. Furthermore, his lawless dictatorship has wreaked havoc on the once paradise island and transformed it into a state in the midst of civil war.

In sharp contrast to both Ralph and Jack, Piggy’s character is representative of intellect, science and reason. Babb fittingly suggests that “in the affairs of society Piggy becomes Ralph’s guide, calling him back again and again to the thread of some argument about signal fires or

rescue which Ralph has lost under pressure” (22). He possesses civilized values which are evident throughout the novel: He explains to Ralph what the conch shell is and the sound it makes; he does a head count of all the school boys, recording their names for safety reasons; he suggests creating a makeshift sundial to tell time; and he philosophizes about life and the human psyche. Additionally, while most of the boys become mangy-haired and camouflaged, Piggy is the only boy on the island whose hair never seems to grow—an aspect Golding attributes to Piggy’s attachment to civilization. Despite his braininess, however; Piggy remains disliked primarily because the boys cannot understand the science behind his rambling but more so because he is the lazy, glasses-wearing “fat boy.” Additionally, the boys are more interested in teasing Piggy because of his disabilities than listening to his suggestions. However, Piggy manages to salvage momentary respect from the boys when they must borrow his glasses to ignite the signal fires.

Within the story world, Piggy’s glasses become an iconic object for his character. Glasses are associated with learning and reading; likewise Piggy is one of the more civilized and learned of the boys. He represents knowledge and education, both highly esteemed of persons in society. Furthermore, Piggy’s glasses become one of the few worldly elements on the island. Without his specs, the boys would not have the signal fire, which in turn, allowed them warmth, cooked food and a chance for rescue. Along with the conch shell, Golding damages Piggy’s glasses to further demonstrate the boys’ degeneration into savagery. In the chapter “Painted Faces and Long Hair,” Jack slaps Piggy, shattering one of the lenses and sending Piggy into a crying, worried scramble. Later on, Piggy is left blinded when the hunters’ invade Ralph and the other boys’ camp in the middle of the night. Jack beats up Ralph and trots off with Piggy’s broken glasses dangling from his hand. From this point on, the hunters demonstrate ultimate

control and deterioration into savagery because they possess the power to make fire without interference from Ralph, Piggy or Simon.

While most of the boys embrace the freedom and exploration the island offers, Piggy is petrified by the lack of adults and familiar figures of authority. He often accuses the other boys of “acting like a crowd of kids” (33), immature and without common sense. In effect, he becomes an adult that latches onto the conch and fails to teach the rest of the boys proper and rational behavior. Furthermore, both the conch and Piggy meet death by the same source—a rock that Roger playfully rolls down the mountain. Babb praises Golding’s symbolic plot decision to coincide the destruction of the conch with Piggy’s death: “...as appropriate as it is that, with the death of Piggy, rationality should disappear from the island” (22). Thus, in a civilization lacking organization and logic, Piggy and the conch shell, together the embodiment of moral order, meet a harsh and untimely death.

Like Piggy, Simon experiences an unfortunate fate due to his eccentricity. He is a shy and mysterious character with strange thoughts and experiences. Golding introduces Simon as a skinny choirboy with black, coarse hair who faints during the first assembly. Upon recovering, however, Simon is granted leadership status as Ralph and Jack choose him to complete their trio of island explorers. During the boys’ exploration, readers learn of Simon’s strangeness and tendency to wander about alone. Ralph often refers to him as batty, queer and funny. In effect, Simon becomes a figure representative of spirituality and moral goodness, which the other boys find bizarre, but not unnerving. In fact, author Kristen Olsen in her book *Understanding Lord of the Flies*, makes a good point in suggesting that in a modern world, a Simon, a Jesus or a Buddha is more likely to be crazy than praised or respected (18).

On the uncharted, uncivilized island, Simon may be considered a cultured philanthropist whose simple acts of kindness demonstrate the boys' short-lived moral order. Simon is one of the few boys left who aides Ralph in building the huts on the beach. Furthermore, he is a source of comfort for many of the boys, such as Ralph, who he reassures a safe return home, and the "littluns," who he helps gather fruit from the trees. Simon's philanthropy also comes in the form of a warning, which suggests that the beast is actually an inherent trait possessive of each boy. Moreover, Simon's paranormal encounter with nature affirms his belief as true.

In-tuned with nature and fascinated by the secrets of the island, Simon remains calm, thoughtful and curious. He indulges in the sunny, secluded retreat he discovers in the middle of the jungle. The sounds of the birds and the bees and the deep sea breaking delight him and bring peace to his mind. As the savagery on the island intensifies with the hunters' vicious killing of a pig, Simon escapes to his hideaway, only he feels threatened and uncomfortable rather than calm. "That other time the air had seemed to vibrate with heat; but now it threatened. He shifted restlessly but there was no avoiding the sun" (130). The juxtaposition of these actions ends with Simon's exposure to the hunters' sacrifice for the beast—a sow's head impaled on a stick, dripping with blood and covered with flies. The image becomes the "lord of the flies," a talking, grinning pig's head that assures Simon: "You knew, didn't you? I'm part of you? Close, close, close! I'm the reason why it's no go? Why things are the way they are?" (140). Overwhelmed by the menacing figure swarming with flies, Simon faints in the heat bath. After waking, he wanders through the creepers and discovers the true identity of "the beastie"—the fallen parachutist tangled in the trees. Intent on informing the remaining boys, Simon rushes to the signal fire where Ralph, Jack and the others are feasting. However, as critic James R. Baker aptly concludes: "In his martyrdom Simon meets the faint of all saints. The truth he brings

would set us [or the boys] free from the repetitious nightmare of history, but we are, by nature, incapable of perceiving the truth” (13). As a perceptive seer and benevolent, gracious child, Simon is an outcast in the society of increasingly uncivilized boys. Consequently, he is ill-fated; the boys, including Ralph and Piggy, engage in an impulsive, ferocious attack on Simon, who they mistake for “the beast” from afar. Both his body and the dead parachutist’s float innocently out to sea—forever lost, along with the liberating truth of the island.

Lord of the Flies in Action

The truth, of course, is a harsh reality which only Ralph and Simon come to know and experience. From the start, Simon knew that each boy had the potential for wrongdoing—that each boy was metaphorically “the beast.” Likewise, Ralph, though naïve and helpless, leaves the island with a final epiphany: “Ralph wept for innocence, the darkness of man’s heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy” (200). This truth is an enlightening and complex one which is the primary motive behind the authorial work of Golding’s first novel. In effect, Golding expresses a wise message to the people—especially the young men and women who unknowingly reflect the novels’ characters—that “the shape of society must depend on the ethical nature of the individual and not on any political system however apparently logical or respectable” (Baker 5). Thus, in teaching *Lord of the Flies* in the classroom, educators attempt to relay William Golding’s ideas about human nature and ethics so as to inform students of the grave conditions and concerns of the Earth and its inhabitants. Moreover, students learn that together, human qualities like resourcefulness, patience, acceptance, demonstrativeness and self-control can make for a safer, more successful society.

Student’s Humanistic Understanding

Author Kristen Olsen suggests that “few novels as brief as William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* raise as many fascinating questions. Are human beings evil? How does evil arise? What is the nature of isolation?” (Intro). Olsen’s list of inquiries continues as she introduces her book *Understanding Lord of the Flies*. In this student casebook of issues, sources and historical documents, Olsen provides detailed methods for students and teachers addressing Golding’s novel. Additionally, she presents a list of topics for written or oral student presentations that conclude each chapter. In effect, like teacher Richard Lederer, Olsen confirms the humanistic merit of the novel in the English classroom by drawing out the key attributes of historical and modern day society. In other words, students like Lederer’s tenth-graders find the novel almost naturalistic or relatable because the story world is an extreme microcosm of their ancestor’s and their own.

“The book was a very good adventure story in which boys were involved, not adults. We were, therefore, able to understand many of their motivations because we have passed that age” (Lederer 575). This student’s response suggests that the bullying, game-playing, aggressive name-calling and cliques that occur between Golding’s boys are mirrored by children in the real world. The boys in *Lord of the Flies* range from ages six to twelve; thus, they are elementary and middle school students. Concepts such as good and bad, right and wrong, and virtue and justice are more firmly established in adolescents than in children. The traditions of violence, power and humiliation are undeniably evident in school systems, however; this single student’s response implies an ethical understanding that students reach upon entering high school.

Lederer’s students demonstrate this ethical understanding when introduced to the group antagonisms geared toward Piggy, Simon and many of the “littluns.” They recognized Piggy’s tie to civilization, the rarity of his intellect and his ability to advise Ralph. Furthermore, students

noted that “Simon was an outcast...[he] faced an evil world and tried to make it good;” and Roger “took his only pleasure in the agonies of others; he was a true sadist” (Lederer 577). Students demonstrate a clear distinction between good and bad characters and just and virtuous acts; they recognize that Simon and Piggy received untimely and unjust deaths and that Roger’s treatment of the “littluns” was cruel and unfair. Furthermore, one student remarked on Golding’s decision to attribute a British background to the characters: “Why did Golding choose these particular boys? He chose them because these boys are healthy, innocent, decent boys from a solid background of the British upper-middle class. They are as civilized as one could possibly think” (Lederer 576). The student goes on to display his knowledge of the stigma associated with the traditional British way of life—strict, obedient, uncorrupted and pure—and how Golding’s boys far from meet that standard. Most revealing of this student’s insight, however, is his or her exploration as to *why* the boys from a well-to-do environment become nothing short of animalistic savages. Most teachers and scholars would agree that the response to this student inquiry is best presented in William Golding’s perception of human nature. Thus, classroom discussion of *Lord of the Flies* reveals to students a specific view of the author—that the potential for evil is an inherent quality in all humans that is unleashed in the absence of the rules and customs of civilization.

In light of Golding’s four main personas—Ralph, Jack, Piggy, and Simon—student analyses are insightful and well-understood. Professor Samuels suggests that “students easily understand that the actions of the novel and the techniques of characterization represent the larger message that Golding is trying to impart: a view of the human soul” (195). Thus, students recognize that Piggy is the voice of reason, and that Ralph and Jack represent opposing governing systems. High school student Cassie Zakatchenko makes an interesting and

thoughtful suggestion that characters are described based on comparison with power. Along with Lederer's students, Cassie notes that both Piggy and Simon desire respect and acknowledgement, but instead are deemed outcasts and unfairly neglected. Furthermore, one pupil's Venn diagram exhibits an ability to describe Ralph and Jack with effective vocabulary as well as distinguish their key oppositional traits. In the words of the student, Ralph is a leader and peacemaker who sets priorities and goals, and does what he thinks is right. However, he lacks self-confidence; while Jack is a rebellious kid with a big-ego and priority to hunt and have fun. The student acknowledges that the boys have very few characteristics in common: they both want to survive; they both want respect and attention; and they both attract followers.⁶ Finally, one of Lederer's student's insights about Simon is particularly exceptional and well-developed. This pupil describes Simon as the gentle being "misunderstood by everyone and finally killed by those he sought to save." He or she thoughtfully suggests that Simon's death is a "mystic scene, perhaps the most beautiful in the story," and that he is like a Greek hero, borne up to Olympus by his goddess mother.⁷ Lederer briefly interrupts this student's composition by inserting the passage of Simon's death from the novel. Upon reading the passage again, this student's response becomes enlightening and reminiscent of scholar James R. Baker's own claim that *Lord of the Flies* is wildly infused with references to Greek mythology.

Both Cassie's response and the Venn diagram were obtained from teacher Jim Burke's book *The English Teacher's Companion: A Complete Guide to Classroom, Curriculum and the Profession*. In chapter four of the third edition, Burke addresses *Lord of the Flies* by providing a detailed lesson plan for teachers incorporating the novel into English classes. Burke's lesson plan for teaching the novel in high school proves effective in relaying to students the significance

⁶ See Jim Burke, *The English Teacher's Companion*. 3rd ed. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2007, pg. 65.

⁷ See Richard Lederer, "Student Reactions to 'Lord of the Flies'". *The English Journal*. 53.8 (1964): pg. 577.

of Golding's four very different boys. He has students take up the personality of one of the boys and write a journal in the first-person throughout reading the novel. Additionally, pupils are to track their characters' continuum of change, remarking on how each boy's unique experience on the island has altered them. Teachers may also ask students to form discussion groups where they define evil and decide from a list of actions which ones fit the criteria for their definition. In discussion groups, students should also evaluate the different needs people have in general. How important is food, money, shelter, companionship, or power to an individual? Along with Burke, Professor Samuels also encourages a response-centered classroom in which students study characters' names, discuss the concepts of friendship and going against the grain, and question the attacks on *Lord of the Flies* by censors (204). Overall, Professor Samuels suggests that the goal of such classroom activities, in conjunction with *Lord of the Flies*, is to help students to better understand the needs and responsibilities of a well-functioning and just world as well as "move them a step closer to being productive citizens of a free and democratic society" (213). Therefore, *Lord of the Flies* is perhaps the quintessential informative and instructive novel in high school classrooms where future citizens of the world are harbored.

Students Literary Understanding

Golding's ability to preach good reason and virtue lies in his authorial talent. In other words, students may develop their textual intelligence by focusing on how *Lord of the Flies* achieves the affect it does. The allegorical nature of the novel is so carefully constructed and presented that readers are able to endlessly go beyond the superficial action and dialogue. High school English teacher and author Kristen Olsen has remarked on her numerous readings of the novel and the revelations which have evolved from each new read:

“At every reading, I found something new. Sometimes, the questions and ideas arose so fast that some of them slipped away before I could get them down on paper. The text employs such simple, ancient symbols...that thousands of years of cultural history can be read into them. A reader could spend an entire year tracking down illusions, interpretations, and sources” (xii).

Thus, Golding’s first novel must be continuously stimulating and worthy of discussion. This paper discussed two aspects of the novel—the symbolism behind objects, such as the conch shell, as well as representations of the four key characters. The students at St. Paul’s School as well as others demonstrate their textual intelligence regarding these two components and more.

Lederer’s students recognize the conch shell as a symbol of civilization and authority that gradually loses its worth as a result of the boys’ descent into savagery. Additionally, they remarked on the eventual destruction of Piggy’s glasses which reflected the boys’ loss of reason and civility. One student wrote: “As the boys became more savage and disorganized, the conch lost its power. The color of the shell faded, and when the conch and Piggy’s fire-giving specs were shattered together, Jack became the supreme power” (578). The student’s remark regarding the color of the conch and the simultaneous obliteration of both it and the glasses show an attention to detail practiced by literary scholars, teachers and critics. As a descriptive and skillfully developed novel, *Lord of the Flies* is able to elicit this kind of insightful response following class readings. Students also described the fire and the huts as two more symbols of civilization, which Jack either didn’t use or abused, demonstrating his animalistic, uncivilized character. “When Jack formed his own camp, he used fire only to cook meat and all his savages lived in caves” (578). Perhaps the most significant student responses about symbolism, however, are in regard to the boys’ creation of the “beastie.”

One of Lederer's pupils makes a clever statement about the first boy, a "littlun," to mention the existence of the unknown creature. He or she wrote: "the boy with the mulberry mark on his face put a similar *blemish* on the island society by talking of a snakething that crawled among the trees" (578). The student continues by discussing the boys' wild and overpowering imaginations; he or she recognized the symbol of fear represented by the beast and suggested that that fright was a fear of freedom, of the lack of an advanced civilization. The proposal that the quiet, small boy—distinguished by his mulberry-colored birthmark—marks the island with imperfection is a wise and insightful one not suggested in this paper, but rather, by a high school student.

Cassie Zakatchenko, a student who remarked on the characters' comparison with power, also contributes to the discussion of meaning behind the boys' appearances. She suggests that Ralph and Jack's hair colors hint as to how each leader will behave later in the story. Ralph has fair hair and Jack has red hair; therefore, Ralph must be a fair, understanding person and Jack must be adventurous and unique. Both these suggestions are legitimate given the unfolding of events in *Lord of the Flies*.

Cassie also contributes to novice literary discussion of a story by detailing the basic elements of the novel. She suggests that the themes central to the story are power, respect and companionship, and that one of the most important concept is that the boys are deserted; they are essentially on their own, without their experienced teachers and parents, and consequently, must learn to take care of themselves so that they can survive. Furthermore, Cassie discusses the fictional style of *Lord of the Flies* in an educated fashion. She notes that the story is linear—it starts and continues in the order of events—and that an interesting and most important aspect is

that the reader does not know the future events.⁸ The island and the culture is just as much a mystery to readers as it is to Golding's boys. Moreover, Cassie describes Golding as an omniscient narrator and an outside observer noting on the culture, surroundings and actions of the boys.

A final allegorical element which pupils remark on is the "lord of the flies" itself—the bloodied pig's head jabbed by a spear and suffocated by flies. Richard Lederer's students describe the image that appears to Simon as "the great evil behind the boys' fear. It is the terrible inner self which has been trained and suppressed; but when the superficial signs of civilization disappear, its malignant influence takes control of man" (578). This response demonstrates an understanding of the distinction between the tangible "beast"—the dead parachutist—and the metaphorical "beast." Students recognize that Golding is relaying a message regarding humans' fear of each other. Moreover, Cassie's analysis of the title of *Lord of the Flies* verifies student textual intelligence. She suggests that the title can be translated to "leader of the boys;" the leaders, or lords, are Ralph and Jack while the boys, in effect, are many insignificant flies festering one another.⁹

A Closing Argument

Perhaps the most effective example of student knowledge gained from Golding's novel deals with the complex and enlightening truth verified in the final pages. Let us not forget that *Lord of the Flies* takes place in the midst of war—that the boys are marooned on the island because the fighter plane meant to rescue them, in fact, does the opposite. A naval officer appears in front of Ralph and his pack of enemies and disappointed, turns his head at the sight of them. However, as many critics have deftly suggested, and as Lederer's class of high school

⁸ Jim Burke, *The English Teacher's Companion*. 3rd ed. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2007, pg. 62.

⁹ See Jim Burke, *The English Teacher's Companion*. 3rd ed. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2007, pg. 62.

readers have constructed, the naval officer is, in fact, a mirror image of the boys. The concluding paragraph of Lederer's essay highlights his pupils' final perspective of the story:

“Ralph was about to be killed when suddenly a naval officer appeared and reprimanded the boys for disgracing their society. We see the boys through the eyes of the officer: they are no longer bloodthirsty savages—they are dirty, tired little boys. They will be loaded onto a ship and will no longer destroy each other. Instead, they will watch the grownups” (579).

The student's insight is an agreeable conclusion among scholars. As Baker suggests, Golding mirrors the history of the world. *Lord of the Flies* was published not ten years after World War II, and for centuries and centuries, countless nations and peoples have been warring and imposing values and restrictions upon one another. Military conflict and global warfare are growing issues which have contributed to the inability of these nations and peoples to practice and sustain civility. Baker writes of the naval officer: “the beast-man comes to the shore, for he bears in his nature the bitter promise that things will remain as they are—and as they have been since his first appearance ages and ages ago” (17). Thus, the antagonisms, the starvation, and the discomforts of the island will remain, despite the boys' departure from the island.

If high school students have not yet come to the disheartening realization that the world will always be engaged in some debate or conflict, then perhaps reading *Lord of the Flies* will, if nothing more, emphasize this truth. On a more promising note, however; the controversial issues and the story of adventure on a lush, mysterious island will hopefully continue to stimulate discussion in interested young scholars. As high school English teachers, Constance Reimer and Marcia Brock, have investigated, the concept of censorship and taboo topics are of great interest to learners. A classroom assignment asked ninth through eleventh graders to read one of several

commonly banned books, such as *The Chocolate War*, *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Lord of the Flies*, and comment on the appropriateness of the content as well as record their feelings during the read. Following the exercise, Reimer and Brock found that their students were more likely to encourage their colleagues to read such books. Student groups deliberated and debated, and the teachers remarked how “the books came alive for many students, especially during the discussion of *Lord of the Flies*. Several students said, ‘Now I am going to read *that* book’” (71). Thus, the engaged and response-centered classroom shaped by Golding’s novel made for a more exciting and effective English class.

Therefore, just as Golding has conveyed his perspective on human nature and ethics, students begin to do the same through careful study, analyses and thinking. While they form their own thoughtful opinions and suggestions, other young scholars do the same; thus, disagreements ensue. Some people believe that evil is innate in all humans, while others cannot begin to fathom the idea. Some pupils, teachers, scholars and parents find the treatment of Piggy or the “littluns,” or the obscenities, or the graphic violence inappropriate for high school readers while others find the material enriching and enlightening. High school teacher Jim Burke supports the latter as he believes that *Lord of the Flies* serves as a rite of passage into the careful study of literature as well as into students’ own society (73). This paper concurs with teachers and authors Burke, Lederer, Olsen and Samuels on the remarkable allegorical and stylistic nature of Golding’s work, and suggests that *Lord of the Flies* can adequately benefit and instruct students.

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