**Individual and Society in *Lord of the Flies***

**From:** *Encyclopedia of Themes in Literature*.

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In William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, a group of English schoolboys are stranded on a deserted island when their plane is shot down as they flee Britain. In the beginning of the novel, the boys have a meeting and form a mini-civilization, electing an older boy named Ralph as their leader. As the novel progresses, however, more and more of the boys begin to live as hunters, led by self-proclaimed warrior-dictator Jack, turning their backs on the society they have created on the island. This tug-of-war between individual impulses and the rules and welfare of their society is apparent in nearly all of the schoolboys and through several symbols in the novel.

This struggle is seen most clearly in the novel's protagonist Ralph. Ralph represents society and order in Golding's narrative. He uses the conch shell to call the meeting and is named as the boys' leader, initiating their island democracy. He immediately urges the boys to construct huts on the beach and build a signal fire on the mountain, so they will hopefully be returned to the society of the adults. During the course of the novel, however, Ralph, like the other boys, begins to feel the bloodlust within himself. On his first hunt, he experiences the thrill of violence and even gets swept up in the dancing frenzy after the killing of a sow. It is the murder of Simon at this celebration, though, that returns Ralph to his senses. He again becomes a civilizing influence to the boys, even though most of them have already turned their backs on society to indulge their individual urges.

This indulgence of impulses centers around the character of Jack. He is the boy who suggests the children hunt in the beginning of the novel. In fact, he becomes obsessed with the activity, and his enthusiasm spreads to many of the other boys. He leads the group in the killing of the sow, the resulting tribe-like celebration, and the murder of Simon. Later in the novel, he even breaks away from Ralph's newly formed society, forming his own tribe of hunters. Jack comes to represent the barbaric, self-indulgent turning from society that most of the boys embrace.

Perhaps the most disturbing example of the conflict between the individual and society in the novel is Jack's friend, Roger. In the early pages of the novel, Roger seems like a perfectly normal boy. In the book's fourth chapter, however, a scene foreshadows the character's turn from society. It is in this chapter that we see Henry, one of the "littluns," playing with plankton on the beach. As the tide comes in, the plankton become trapped in the depression of Henry's footprint. The little boy feels exhilarated at being in control of other living things. Unbeknownst to him, Roger watches from the jungle. The older boy begins to throw rocks at the younger, intentionally missing and forming a circle of rocks around him. Roger is, in essence, exerting the same control over Henry that Henry exerts over the plankton. He does not injure the smaller boy because his arm has been conditioned by the society they have been separated from. These societal rules soon fade from Roger's mind, though. Toward the end of the novel, the earlier scene is mirrored when Roger murders Piggy with a boulder. Society's rules no longer hinder his individual nature.

Finally, a few symbols represent this interplay between the individual and society. The conch shell that first appears in the opening chapter symbolizes civilization. The boys use it to conduct their meetings, and only the boy holding the conch can speak. As the novel progresses, the boys' journey away from society is shown in their disregard for the conch and its rules. This culminates in the destruction of the shell at Piggy's death. Likewise, the signal fire points to the boys' desire for the society they have left behind. As the hunters become more engrossed in killing, they forget to keep the fire ablaze and actually miss a chance at rescue. By this point, their desire for violence outweighs their desire for rules and peaceful coexistence.

It appears that Golding is making the statement that humans are not innately moral beings; they naturally hunger for barbarism, violence, and power. In Golding's novel, morality is imposed on the children by their society, and when the society is no longer there to police them, they revert to a more primitive state. It is only at the end of the novel, when faced with the prospect of returning to civilization, that they see where disregarding societal rules has taken them.

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