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APPROACHING *Lord of the Flies*

William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* is a novel that captures both teachers and students. Not only does it provide the teacher with a broad spectrum of ethical and artistic concepts to explore, but the story of shipwrecked boys left to their own devices is one to which students relate with enthusiasm.

The novel's popularity in America began with an overwhelmingly favorable reception among college students. The reason for this may be that Golding had somehow hit a nerve to which twentieth-century young people are connected. Students picking up the book in 1962 would have been children during the Korean conflict; later, they would experience Vietnam as young adults. Students of today may not have lived during war-time, but they have seen graphic illustrations of international hatred and terrorism, topics which Golding explores with thoroughness and elucidates with skill.

In *Lord of the Flies*, Golding traces the flaws of society directly back to the flaws in human nature. Civilization is a veneer that is quickly stripped away when a group of British school boys is set on an island and given the opportunity to start their own working society from scratch. Instead of happy and helpful cohabitation, the boys lapse quickly into a state of savagery and darkness.

Golding's study of the darker side of human nature provides a fascinating look into some universal—and frightening—emotions and characteristics. *Lord of the Flies* reveals itself to be a complex study of human socialization, psychology, and even anthropology. These concepts can be found in the book's illustrations of how the island society develops, how the boys are controlled by the need for power and their fear of the unknown, and how the boys begin to develop a culture based upon their needs and fears. By presenting these issues and then comparing them to the lives of your students, you will engage their interest not only in the novel, but in concepts that will continue to interest them long after the book has been read.

Golding freely uses symbols throughout the novel, a technique which sets *Lord of the Flies* in the tradition of fable, allegory, and parable. *Lord of the Flies* illustrates beautifully the power of figurative language and symbolism, and reveals William Golding to be a master of literary devices. His abilities in the craft of writing reveal how effective the skillful use of irony, parody, and symbolism can be.

BACKGROUND

Author

William Gerald Golding was born in Columb Minor, Cornwall, England on September 19, 1911 to Mildred A. Golding, an activist in the women's rights movement, and Alec A. Golding, the most distinguished member of a long line of schoolmasters.

Golding was educated at Marlborough Grammar School and Brasenose College, Oxford, from which he was graduated in 1934. His parents urged him to study science, but in his sophomore year of college he switched to literature and published his first book, a book of poems, in 1934. The book was not considered a success by critics of the time.

During World War II, Golding enlisted in the Royal Navy, where he served on cruisers, destroyers, and minesweepers for five years. While he was at sea, he renewed an interest in Classical Greek Literature, and apparently witnessed the horrors of war that were to generate his dark view of human nature.

Golding says that he based his tale on a boys' adventure story by R. M. Ballantyne called *The Coral Island* (E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., New York, 1951). The main characters of Ballantyne's book are named Ralph and Jack—as in *Lord of the Flies*—and Peterkin, a character from which Golding created the two characters of Piggy and Simon.

Golding's other works include *The Inheritors*, published in America in 1962; *Pincher Martin*, published in America as *The Two Deaths of Christopher Martin* in 1957; *The Brass Butterfly*, a play first performed in Oxford in 1958; *Free Fall*, written in 1959; *The Spire*, written in 1964; and *The Hot Gates*, written in 1965.

Theme

A major theme of *Lord of the Flies* is the breakdown of socialized behavior. Golding strives to show that the way society evolves depends solely on the ethical nature of each individual, not on the political system upon which the society is based. Golding told his American publisher of *Lord of the Flies* the following about his novel:

The whole book is symbolic in nature except the rescue in the end where adult life appears, dignified and capable, but in reality enmeshed in the same evil as the symbolic life of the children on the island. The officer, having interrupted a man-hunt, prepares to take the children off the island in a cruiser which will presently be hunting its enemy in the same implacable way.

Other themes include the loss of innocence, shown in the story of Ralph's realizations about his society, and manipulation.

BACKGROUND

Fable, Allegory, and Parable

Using the art of storytelling to teach a moral lesson is as old as recorded history. In fact, there is a good possibility that storytelling itself was devised as an instrument for teaching moral lessons. Clearly, it is easier for unwritten history to be remembered and passed down to younger generations if it takes on story form.

Three literary modes that have traditionally served the purpose of teaching a lesson are *fable*, *allegory*, and *parable*. A *fable* is defined by its brevity (the ancient fables of Aesop and the modern fables of James Thurber generally are told in fewer than three-hundred words) and by its prophetic nature (a rule or moral is given stating that certain behaviors lead to certain consequences). *Lord of the Flies* clearly does not fall into that category, because not all the boys left to their own devices on the island behave as Jack does.

Lord of the Flies fits more comfortably into the definition of a *parable*, a saying or narration in which something is expressed in terms of something else. The Oxford Dictionary qualifies the definition of a parable by adding that the saying is usually enigmatic or dark in nature. Because an *allegory* generally does not have this characteristic, viewing *Lord of the Flies* as a parable seems most appropriate.

Setting

The setting of the story is an uninhabited island where a group of British schoolboys has been stranded. The plane which brought them to the island crashed and was washed out to sea; the pilot of the plane apparently was killed during the crash. Consequently, the boys are without adult supervision.

At first, the island appears a safe harbor where all of the boys' physical needs are met. There is endless food in the form of fruit trees. There are bathing facilities in the form of a lagoon. The weather is warm and the need for shelter is not a pressing one, although the older leaders, or "biguns," realize that huts must be built for protection in the event of heavy rains.

Characters

The boys begin by setting up a democratic society, voting for Ralph to be their chief. However, Jack Merridew, the leader of a small choir (in an ironic twist, since structured music is a symbol of "civilized" behavior), soon challenges Ralph for control of the island.

The characters of the boys, as well as the relationships among the characters, are developed with skill. Ralph and Jack begin as friends, marching off with a third boy, Simon, to chart the island and make plans for the boys' future. Piggy, an overweight outcast with recurrent asthma attacks, attaches himself to Ralph and offers logical solutions to the problems the boys face. But Piggy is without authority and, in the beginning, is more an object of derision than someone to be respected. It is not until the boys