

*Lord of the Flies*, Nobel Prize-winner William Golding's 1954 dystopian novel, allegorizes the story of schoolboys marooned on an island to investigate mankind's inherent savagery. The novel greatly influenced writers of horror and post-apocalyptic fiction.

### Summary

In the midst of a raging war, a plane evacuating a group of schoolboys from Britain is shot down over a deserted tropical island. Two of the boys, Ralph and Piggy, discover a conch shell on the beach, and Piggy realizes it could be used as a horn to summon the other boys. Once assembled, the boys set about electing a leader and devising a way to be rescued. They choose Ralph as their leader, and Ralph appoints another boy, Jack, to be in charge of the boys who will hunt food for the entire group.

Ralph, Jack, and another boy, Simon, set off on an expedition to explore the island. When they return, Ralph declares that they must light a signal fire to attract the attention of passing ships. The boys succeed in igniting some dead wood by focusing sunlight through the lenses of Piggy's eyeglasses. However, the boys pay more attention to playing than to monitoring the fire, and the flames quickly engulf the forest. A large swath of dead wood burns out of control, and one of the youngest boys in the group disappears, presumably having burned to death.

At first, the boys enjoy their life without grown-ups and spend much of their time splashing in the water and playing games. Ralph, however, complains that they should be maintaining the signal fire and building huts for shelter. The hunters fail in their attempt to catch a wild pig, but their leader, Jack, becomes increasingly preoccupied with the act of hunting.

When a ship passes by on the horizon one day, Ralph and Piggy notice, to their horror, that the signal fire—which had been the hunters' responsibility to maintain—has burned out. Furious, Ralph accosts Jack, but the hunter has just returned with his first kill, and all the hunters seem gripped with a strange frenzy, reenacting the chase in a kind of wild dance. Piggy criticizes Jack, who hits Piggy across the face. Ralph blows the conch shell and reprimands the boys in a speech intended to restore order. At the meeting, it quickly becomes clear that some of the boys have started to become afraid. The littlest boys, known as "littluns," have been troubled by nightmares from the beginning, and more and more boys now believe that there is some sort of beast or monster lurking on the island. The older boys try to convince the others at the meeting to think rationally, asking where such a monster could possibly hide during the daytime. One of the littluns suggests that it hides in the sea—a proposition that terrifies the entire group.

Not long after the meeting, some military planes engage in a battle high above the island. The boys, asleep below, do not notice the flashing lights and explosions in the clouds. A

parachutist drifts to earth on the signal-fire mountain, dead. Sam and Eric, the twins responsible for watching the fire at night, are asleep and do not see the parachutist land. When the twins wake up, they see the enormous silhouette of his parachute and hear the strange flapping noises it makes. Thinking the island beast is at hand, they rush back to the camp in terror and report that the beast has attacked them.

The boys organize a hunting expedition to search for the monster. Jack and Ralph, who are increasingly at odds, travel up the mountain. They see the silhouette of the parachute from a distance and think that it looks like a huge, deformed ape. The group holds a meeting at which Jack and Ralph tell the others of the sighting. Jack says that Ralph is a coward and that he should be removed from office, but the other boys refuse to vote Ralph out of power. Jack angrily runs away down the beach, calling all the hunters to join him. Ralph rallies the remaining boys to build a new signal fire, this time on the beach rather than on the mountain. They obey, but before they have finished the task, most of them have slipped away to join Jack.

Jack declares himself the leader of the new tribe of hunters and organizes a hunt and a violent, ritual slaughter of a sow to solemnize the occasion. The hunters then decapitate the sow and place its head on a sharpened stake in the jungle as an offering to the beast. Later, encountering the bloody, fly-covered head, Simon has a terrible vision, during which it seems to him that the head is speaking. The voice, which he imagines as belonging to the Lord of the Flies, says that Simon will never escape him, for he exists within all men. Simon faints. When he wakes up, he goes to the mountain, where he sees the dead parachutist. Understanding then that the beast does not exist externally but rather within each individual boy, Simon travels to the beach to tell the others what he has seen. But the others are in the midst of a chaotic revelry—even Ralph and Piggy have joined Jack's feast—and when they see Simon's shadowy figure emerge from the jungle, they fall upon him and kill him with their bare hands and teeth.

The following morning, Ralph and Piggy discuss what they have done. Jack's hunters attack them and their few followers and steal Piggy's glasses in the process. Ralph's group travels to Jack's stronghold in an attempt to make Jack see reason, but Jack orders Sam and Eric tied up and fights with Ralph. In the ensuing battle, one boy, Roger, rolls a boulder down the mountain, killing Piggy and shattering the conch shell. Ralph barely manages to escape a torrent of spears.

Ralph hides for the rest of the night and the following day, while the others hunt him like an animal. Jack has the other boys ignite the forest in order to smoke Ralph out of his hiding place. Ralph stays in the forest, where he discovers and destroys the sow's head, but

eventually, he is forced out onto the beach, where he knows the other boys will soon arrive to kill him. Ralph collapses in exhaustion, but when he looks up, he sees a British naval officer standing over him. The officer's ship noticed the fire raging in the jungle. The other boys reach the beach and stop in their tracks at the sight of the officer. Amazed at the spectacle of this group of bloodthirsty, savage children, the officer asks Ralph to explain. Ralph is overwhelmed by the knowledge that he is safe but, thinking about what has happened on the island, he begins to weep. The other boys begin to sob as well. The officer turns his back so that the boys may regain their composure.

## Characters

### Ralph

The novel's protagonist, the twelve-year-old English boy who is elected leader of the group of boys marooned on the island. Ralph attempts to coordinate the boys' efforts to build a miniature civilization on the island until they can be rescued. Ralph represents human beings' civilizing instinct, as opposed to the savage instinct that Jack embodies.

### Jack

The novel's antagonist, one of the older boys stranded on the island. Jack becomes the leader of the hunters but longs for total power and becomes increasingly wild, barbaric, and cruel as the novel progresses. Jack, adept at manipulating the other boys, represents the instinct of savagery within human beings, as opposed to the civilizing instinct Ralph represents.

### Simon

A shy, sensitive boy in the group. Simon, in some ways the only naturally "good" character on the island, behaves kindly toward the younger boys and is willing to work for the good of their community. Moreover, because his motivation is rooted in his deep feeling of connectedness to nature, Simon is the only character whose sense of morality does not seem to have been imposed by society. Simon represents a kind of natural goodness, as opposed to the unbridled evil of Jack and the imposed morality of civilization represented by Ralph and Piggy.

### Piggy

Ralph's "lieutenant." A whiny, intellectual boy, Piggy's inventiveness frequently leads to innovation, such as the makeshift sundial that the boys use to tell time. Piggy represents the scientific, rational side of civilization.

### Roger

Jack's "lieutenant." A sadistic, cruel older boy who brutalizes the littluns and eventually murders Piggy by rolling a boulder onto him.

## Sam and Eric

A pair of twins closely allied with Ralph. Sam and Eric are always together, and the other boys often treat them as a single entity, calling them “Samneric.” The easily excitable Sam and Eric are part of the group known as the “bigguns.” At the end of the novel, they fall victim to Jack’s manipulation and coercion.

## The Lord of the Flies

The name given to the sow’s head that Jack’s gang impales on a stake and erects in the forest as an offering to the “beast.” The Lord of the Flies comes to symbolize the primordial instincts of power and cruelty that take control of Jack’s tribe.

## Themes

### **Civilization vs. Savagery**

The central concern of *Lord of the Flies* is the conflict between two competing impulses that exist within all human beings: the instinct to live by rules, act peacefully, follow moral commands, and value the good of the group against the instinct to gratify one’s immediate desires, act violently to obtain supremacy over others, and enforce one’s will. This conflict might be expressed in a number of ways: civilization vs. savagery, order vs. chaos, reason vs. impulse, law vs. anarchy, or the broader heading of good vs. evil. Throughout the novel, Golding associates the instinct of civilization with good and the instinct of savagery with evil.

The conflict between the two instincts is the driving force of the novel, explored through the dissolution of the young English boys’ civilized, moral, disciplined behavior as they accustom themselves to a wild, brutal, barbaric life in the jungle. *Lord of the Flies* is an allegorical novel, which means that Golding conveys many of his main ideas and themes through symbolic characters and objects. He represents the conflict between civilization and savagery in the conflict between the novel’s two main characters: Ralph, the protagonist, who represents order and leadership; and Jack, the antagonist, who represents savagery and the desire for power.

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As the novel progresses, Golding shows how different people feel the influences of the instincts of civilization and savagery to different degrees. Piggy, for instance, has no savage feelings, while Roger seems barely capable of comprehending the rules of civilization.

Generally, however, Golding implies that the instinct of savagery is far more primal and

fundamental to the human psyche than the instinct of civilization. Golding sees moral behavior, in many cases, as something that civilization forces upon the individual rather than a natural expression of human individuality. When left to their own devices, Golding implies, people naturally revert to cruelty, savagery, and barbarism. This idea of innate human evil is central to *Lord of the Flies*, and finds expression in several important symbols, most notably the beast and the sow's head on the stake. Among all the characters, only Simon seems to possess anything like a natural, innate goodness.

### **Loss of Innocence**

As the boys on the island progress from well-behaved, orderly children longing for rescue to cruel, bloodthirsty hunters who have no desire to return to civilization, they naturally lose the sense of innocence that they possessed at the beginning of the novel. The painted savages in Chapter 12 who have hunted, tortured, and killed animals and human beings are a far cry from the guileless children swimming in the lagoon in Chapter 3. But Golding does not portray this loss of innocence as something that is done to the children; rather, it results naturally from their increasing openness to the innate evil and savagery that has always existed within them. Golding implies that civilization can mitigate but never wipe out the innate evil that exists within all human beings. The forest glade in which Simon sits in Chapter 3 symbolizes this loss of innocence. At first, it is a place of natural beauty and peace, but when Simon returns later in the novel, he discovers the bloody sow's head impaled upon a stake in the middle of the clearing. The bloody offering to the beast has disrupted the paradise that existed before—a powerful symbol of innate human evil disrupting childhood innocence.

### **Struggle to build civilization**

The struggle to build civilization forms the main conflict of *Lord of the Flies*. Ralph and Piggy believe that structure, rules, and maintaining a signal fire are the greatest priorities, while Jack believes hunting, violence, and fun should be prioritized over safety, protection, and planning for the future. While initially the boys, including Jack, agree to abide by Ralph's rules and democratic decision-making, the slow and thoughtful process of building an orderly society proves too difficult for many of the boys. They don't want to help build the shelters, maintain the signal fire, or take care of the littluns. The immediate fun and visceral rewards of hunting, chanting, and dancing around the fire are more attractive than the work of building a sustainable society. Near the end of the novel, even Ralph is tempted by Jack's authoritarian regime, regularly forgetting why the fire and rescue is so important.

### **Man's inherent evil**

The fact that the main characters in *Lord of the Flies* are young boys suggests the potential for evil is inherent even in small children. Jack, for example, is initially keen for rules and civility, but becomes obsessed with hunting, frightened and empowered by the promise of violence. Jack's desire to control and subjugate proves more powerful than his desire for empathy, intellect, and civilization, and Jack becomes a brutal and leader. Even Ralph and

Piggy, who both strive to maintain their sense of humanity, ultimately join in on the mass murder of Simon, momentarily surrendering to the thrill of violence and mass hysteria. While Piggy tries to ignore their participation, Ralph is devastated when he realizes that he is no better than Jack or Roger, and that he has a darkness inside as well.