

## The Significance of the Conch in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*

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### ABSTRACT

This research investigates the significance of the conch shell in the novel *Lord of the Flies* written by William Golding. The focus of this research is to examine the meaning of the conch shell as one of the most important symbols and to observe the dynamic of the main characters in relation to power. The research applies textual formalism approach to uncover the meaning of the symbol. Furthermore, this research is also supported with sociological approach to relate the literary work with the reality of the social condition during that era and to get a better understanding of the characterization of the main characters in the novel. The main data used in this research is the novel *Lord of the Flies*. To support this analysis, additional data is taken from various sources such as books and academic journals. The result of this analysis shows that conch is symbol of democratic power and order. Furthermore, the conch leads us to understand that we must have rules and authority to maintain a safe environment. Without them, utter chaos is inevitable.

**Keywords:** *authority, order, symbol, textual formalism.*

### INTRODUCTION

William Golding was an educator and celebrated English novelist known for his novel entitled *Lord of the Flies*, which was published in 1954. The idea of the novel was drawn from his experience as a Royal Navy who fights in the Second World War. His work has been described as pessimistic, spiritual, and allegorical. He uses his novel to picture a man's struggle between his civilized self and his hidden, darker nature.

The novel that established the former schoolmaster's reputation was subject of multiple rejections before it was accepted by Faber and Faber. While his novel has been compared to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Richard Hughes *High Wind in Jamaica*, Golding's novel was actually his

"response" to R.M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island: A Tale of the Pacific Ocean* (Niemeyer, 1961, p. 12). These two books share the same plot line and even the same character names (two of the lead characters are named Ralph and Jack in both books) Thirty years after the publication of his acclaimed first novel *Lord of the Flies*, William Golding was awarded a Nobel Prize in Literature, in 1983, "for his novels which, with the perspicuity of realistic narrative art and the diversity and universality of myth, illuminate the human condition in the world of today." (The Nobel Prize in Literature, 1983).

*Lord of The Flies* is a novel which has been widely regarded as a classic. Up until today, the novel greatly influenced writers of horrors and postapocalyptic fiction and has read by millions worldwide and has been required reading in schools

and universities. In addition to that, the novel has impact on popular culture, spawning a variety of parodies, tributes, and re-imagining. The novel chronicles the story of English schoolboys who are stranded in an unnamed and uninhabited island near the Pacific Ocean after their plane, which supposed to evacuate them from nuclear warfare, crashes. These schoolboys, as the lone survivors, and without the presence of adult, are trying to be civilized. Thus they establish their own society, elect their leader, and begin to divide the task such as hunting and fire watching. But things go south when there is a power struggle between the boys. The situation is getting more unpleasant by the rumour of the sighting of a monster in the island.

The theme of the novel also pique one's interest. Among others, the one that is very striking is about the decline of civilization. As mentioned previously, Golding took the inspiration for *Lord of the Flies* based on his experience witnessing the horror of World War II and his pessimistic view of the world and society. He sensed that the state of the world and its people were not getting any better after the great war. In the novel, it is shown through the characters of the novel, who are well-educated British schoolchildren aged 6-12 year old, yet, despite of their ages, are capable of being ruthless.

Furthermore, the decline of the civilization which Golding presents through British schoolchildren has its own correlation with the title of the novel *Lord of The Flies*. While, *Lord of the Flies* itself is a literal translation of the word 'Beelzebub' which is a devil who is capable of flying. Throughout the novel, the children grow dirtier and dirtier, an outward reflection of their inner state, like flies who cover something rotten. As savage and evil they can be, the most evil of all is a boy named Jack, the leader of choirboys turn tribe of hunters. Jack, as a leader of the choirboys, has always been feuding with Ralph, the leader who won the election fair and square. Ralph tries to establish some rules and order in the island and Jack tries to disturb the peace and order on the island by creating a terror. Thus, power struggle between the two happening. The conflict between them bears the resemblance of the ideological battle during the Cold War. Ralph is the representation of democratic

leader, whereas Jack bears the trait of totalitarian leader.

William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* is full of numerous symbols. The literary definition of a symbol is a person, place or object that represents more than what it is physically. The author uses a variety of these to assist the reader in relating aspects of the narrative to places or ideas in today's world, as well as infusing the story with greater depth and meaning. Throughout the novel, Golding effectively implements three distinct politically related symbols; the conch, Jack and Ralph.

Conch as a symbol becomes the primary interest for the writer as it is constantly found throughout the novel. Conch, or a large white shell is a symbol of a civilized society that they establish in the island as a reminiscent of the British social order; a civil society founded on discourse and consensus. The leader of the boys, Ralph, uses the instrument to summon the boys to gather for meetings. He also stresses that whoever held the conch has every right to speak in front of others. An idea which they soon implement.

The present research attempts to investigate the significance of the conch as a symbol by analysing its meaning in order to get an idea of what the author of the novel wants to communicate through the meaning of the main symbol, which is conch, that appears frequently on *Lord of the Flies*, then of civilization by analyzing the significance of the conch in *Lord of the Flies* and the effect of the destruction of the shell to the boys and the society they built on the island.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The popularity of the novel *Lord of the Flies* has attracted a number of studies. For example, Amalia (2014) focused on proving that the absence of society restraints can cause the falling of civilization instinct and leading people to act according to their primitive instincts. She employed Sigmund Freud's theory of Id, Ego, and Superego to examine the psychological problems of the three characters in the novel, they are: Ralph, Piggy, and Jack, who committed to savagery and created conflict of civilization. The findings thus clarified that parental

guidance, is needed to produce the instinctual drives and mentally stable and healthy men.

Another study by Wilson (2014) investigated the biblical parallels and reflections in the novel as many critics have drawn strong parallels between the characters in the novel and biblical characters and their stories. His research gave the result that the novel, *Lord of the Flies* is full of symbols and metaphor, and Golding in his novel intended Simon, the character, to be a Christ-like figure and Simon's place in the story is a parallel to how the society treated Jesus as told in the bible. Other than that, the natural setting of the island of the story is also the parallel of Garden of Eden.

Dagar (2013) examined the origin of the dream of beast that haunts the boys on the island and how the nightmare corresponds to what are categorized as "traumatic dreams." She found that the trauma of the war, which incited the destructive instinct of the boys. Beside that, the writer also found that the causes of the nightmare are their hunting activity and brutal murder of one of the boys.

Another study by George and Raju (2012) entitled *Personal Accountability of Evil in William Golding's Lord of the Flies* analyzed the dichotomy between good and evil. In their close analysis, they brought out the topic that some individuals within the society or in the political system perpetrate evil, instead of the political system or the society, which we often blame.

Next, Yuda (2011) focused on the novel's characterizations of Jack, Ralph and Piggy, their main personality features and their personality development as the novel progresses. Four of Freud's theory were employed to analyze the literary work: the unconscious mind; id, ego, superego; dynamic personality development; and Freudian defense mechanism. From his research he concluded that in wilderness, the main characters with dominant id feature gain more influence and domination than the others, meanwhile characters with other features will slowly lose their influence as the novel progresses. In his analysis, it is also implied that without the boundary of civilization, people will committed to savagery.

Lastly, Bruns (2008) also analyzed the same work, but with a different focus. Bruns (2008)

examined the symbols found in the novel and how they are tied to its social power relations. The uses of symbols are crucial in the novel, as it is more powerful than it first seems. In his analysis he found that there are number of symbols in the novel which are tied to a social power relation like the conch and Piggy's spectacle as a symbol of democratic power system, Jack's tribe as a symbol, of dictatorial government, and the fire which he interpreted as a symbol for both power systems.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper employs Textual Formalism approach in analyzing the significance of conch in the novel *Lord of the Flies*. We adopted this particular approach because it is suitable for observing the significance of conch in the novel to the narrative. In 20th century, formalism dominated the literary world and continued to influence academic quarters. As its name suggest, textual formalism focuses on the formal element found in the literary works. As the emphasis of the theory is on the formal elements of the text itself, one must less consider another external input which includes cultural and societal influence. The understanding of formalist approach is also in line with Lois Tyson's argument in her book *Critical Theory of Today* (2006):

"Although the author's intention or the reader's response is sometimes mentioned in New Critical readings of literary texts, neither one is the focus of analysis. For the only way we can know if a given author's intention or a given reader's interpretation actually represents the text's meanings is to carefully examine, or "closely read," all the evidence provided by the language of the text itself: its images, symbols, metaphors, rhyme, meter, point of view, setting, characterization, plot, and so forth, which, because they form, or shape, the literary work are called its formal elements." (Tyson, 2006, p. 149)

From the preceding quotation, Textual Formalism examines the individual part of the text including the characters, the tone, the settings, the symbols, the point of views, and other intrinsic

elements of the text which makes a single text. The goal of analyzing formal element in a text is to help to enrich our reading of literary text and to appreciate complex operations of formal elements and how those elements function to create meaning.

In order to help answer the research questions, Sociological approach is also applied to this study. The goal of the approach is to understand the relationship between literary work with society. This form of literary criticism was first introduced by Kenneth Burke in 20th century. Sociological criticism is influenced by new criticism. According to Kennedy and Gioia (2005), when examining a text using the sociological approach, one must take cultural, economic, and political context into account.

The statement above implies that a literary work is also a part of society because it depicts social life of a certain society. The sociological approach is employed to explain a certain occurrence in a particular time and give insight as how to general public felt about something. Furthermore, the approach is also look at economy, political condition, including its system of government and who holds the power. Also, by understanding the author's life can help the researcher to analyze and understand the literary work better.

William Golding's life experience influences the idea of his novel *Lord of the Flies*. His work greatly inspired by his stint as a army fought in the World War II, where he served in Royal Navy as a rocket launcher and participated in Battle of Normandy. He is deeply concerned with the effect of the war on individuals and for social relationship.

*Lord of the Flies* is not a product of Golding's imagination, but rather a product of reflection of society during its time. Although Golding never openly states what year his book is taking place, it is obviously assumed that the story is taking place at the dawn of World War II. For example, when the boys first arrived at the island where they stranded at, they actually about to get evacuated from a nuclear war, furthermore, the novel is obviously set against the background of nuclear war when the character expressing his anxiety of nuclear war, which reflects the threat of atomic bomb in 1950s. Furthermore, Golding, could not stay away from

portraying the dangers of the dictators, who threatened the peace of the world. In the novel, the conflict that resembles to that of Cold War is depicted through the character of Ralph and Jack, which represents democracy and dictatorship respectively.

From the explanation above, the writer tries to explain that the novel *Lord of the Flies* shows reality of the society and how the writer responds to it. Furthermore, a work of art cannot be separated from its social, political and cultural background. The society in which the author lives, the author's word views and experience during his/her life, and to whom the author wants to convey the message of his works play an important role in the creative process of making the works. Therefore, by analyzing a work and its relation to the reality is an important thing as the main point of the discussion, the writer believes the application of the sociological approach will be most appropriate to use in the research.

## METHODS

The method of collecting the data employed in this study is library research. The data are taken from credible books in the library, websites, and journal articles, which are related to the topic of the research. The primary data of the research is the novel *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. We collected and described relevant scenes that contribute to the significance of conch in the novel. In addition to the analysis on the literary work, secondary data obtained from the experts are employed to support the analysis.

The data analysis of the research was done through observation of the intrinsic elements of the novel which include the main characters of the novel—Ralph, piggy, and Jack, and the historical background related to the setting of time of the novel. We did a close reading on the characters' actions, thoughts, after that we took notes on their important roles in the story. Subsequently, the data from the novel were related with the secondary data from different sources in order to answer the research questions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One of the most important symbol in the novel is the conch shell. On the beginning of the novel, two of the stranded boys, Ralph and Piggy meet for the very first time. As they wander through their new place, they realized that they live on an island. When they carry on their walking, they discover a large-pink coloured conch shell. Piggy, who has seen the shell before and has heard what is it capable of doing.

“He has seen this shell before and he has heard that it can be used as an instrument to make a loud sound.” (Golding, 2006, p. 15)

Golding also implies that the shell is something exquisite and invaluable by Piggy telling Ralph that the shell is expensive that someone must pay a great amount of money for it. The conch being expensive and multifunctional, gives Piggy a brilliant idea to give it more value than just being a sound machine or wall ornament. When the conch is finally blown for the first time, one by one starts to appear before they eventually gather, including a boy named Jack and his choirboys, who resembles a military man as he leads his choirboy in military style. Jack Merridew's demeanor immediately intimidates Piggy, but not Ralph.

“Piggy asked no names. He was intimidated by this uniformed superiority and the off-hand authority of Merridew's voice. “He shrank to the other side of Ralph and busied himself with his glasses” (Golding, pp. 20-21)

When they meet for the first time Ralph is already taking initiative by asking everyone's name. Jack, on the other hand, is having fun ridiculing Piggy for talking too much and because he is named Piggy and the fact that he is fat. In the assembly, Ralph also taking initiative to get rescued, suggests that they should elect a chief. When the boys decide that they should have a leader, Jack is convinced it should be him.

“I ought to be chief,” said Jack with simple arrogance, “because I am chapter chorister and I can sing C sharp. “ (Golding, p. 22)

As the head of choir, Jack is tyrannical. Having said that, he assumes the rest of the boys will listen to him too. One of his boys, Roger, who is usually quiet, suggests a vote for leader and dampen Jack's self-appointing plan. Unlike Jack who is trying to declare himself fit as a leader, Ralph is elected democratically through voting among the boys in the island. In spite of Piggy's obvious intelligence and Jack's discipline and willingness to lead, none of the boys can think of a good reason for Ralph to be leader: He is attractive and charismatic, possesses a stillness. The statement by Golding about Ralph appearance is an overt stereotype of leaders from the West, such as American presidents or Great Britain prime ministers, especially from the perspective of an Englishman. In the real world, we often find, how they present themselves in public is one of the main factor why he or she is elected to be a leader.. In the case of Ralph, aside from being charismatic and attractive, most importantly he is holding the conch. The beautiful conch appeals the eyes of the boys, more importantly, Ralph' demeanor while holding the shell suggests that he would be a leader with poise.

“The being that had blown that, had sat waiting for them on the platform with delicate thing balanced on his knees, was set apart. “(Golding 16)

“(Ralph) has fair hair, broad shoulders, and a mildness about his mouth and eyes that proclaimed no devil .” (Golding, p. 10)

The practice which is commonly done in democratic society is applied on the island where the boys stranded at. The boys use the conch to establish a society similar to that of British social order: a civil society that built on discourse and consensus. When the shell is used to summon the boys for meeting, the idea of democracy is immediately embraced. As a leader who has a leadership similar to those of democratic leader, he believes everyone has equal rights by giving them chance to express their opinion and delegating task to each of the boy. After Ralph being elected as a leader, sees Jack being humiliated by the boys because they favour Ralph more than Jack. Ralph knows Jack is humiliated and dissatisfied with the result of the election, as a compensation, he lets Jack



lead his own hunting group with choirboys as its member. The hunting task is given to him because of his bravery and military-style demeanour. Hoping that he will be able to provide food for the rest of the island's inhabitants.

"...Ralph looked at him, eager to offer something.

"The choir belongs to you, of course" "They could be the army-" "Or hunters-" "They could be-- "

"Jack's in charge of the choir. They can be -- what do you want them to be?" "Hunters." (Golding, p. 23)

The idea of a conch as a symbol of order can be seen when Ralph, the leader with power knows it is in his and other boys' interest to maintain some order. During the assembly, he realizes that there are no grownups looking after them, thus Ralph suggests that they should have rules in order to keep things under control on the island. "We'll have rules!" he cried excitedly. "Lots of rules! Then when anyone breaks em--" (Golding, p. 33) Furthermore, Ralph as a leader with conch, sets some rules, which includes storing water they collect from streams in coconut shell and use rocks for lavatory as he forbids his boys from urinating in fruit trees area. These rules are made to keep the boys on the island behaves just like human instead of animals. He firmly believes that rules is "the only thing we've got" (Golding 91). However, as good as the idea of having some rules to maintain order on the island may seem, it never occurs any of them to implement a system of discipline to keep them in check. If one is asked the perfect diction to describe the civilization of the island it would be "tenuous." Even before the collapse of their society there are a few significant challenges and failures of the rules Ralph make to maintain order. For instance, The Littleuns, a group of youngest children, which nobody bothers to learn their names, they look up to their leader, Ralph, because he is bigger and older than them. However, when they given task to be performed, they do not do it. It is assumed that they have zero value as they spend their days just to play and eat.

"They ate most of the day, picking fruit where they could reach it and not particular about ripeness and quality... apart from food and

sleep, they found time for play, aimless and trivial, in the white sand by the bright water," (Golding, p. 53)

Secondly, as previously mentioned before, the boys agree to about the location where they supposed to relieve themselves. They agree that they will use the rocky area of the island, so as to not contaminate the drinking water. Although the rule is made for everybody's benefit and health, they demonstrate no act of being discipline and demonstrate no shame of what their selfish, thoughtless and disgusting action that can imperil anybody on the island.

Although part of the failure to maintain order on the island is on Ralph as the leader who fails to create a form of punishment to the other boys, it is partly due to the other boy's ignorance. They are selfish. They are busy enjoying their freedom through playing all day as there are no grownups watching them. Their ignorance go as far as neglecting the fire that they lit to attract the passing ship so that they can get out from the island.

The conch starts to lose its power and maintain order on the island when fear about the sighting of beast grips the rest of the boy on the island. At the beginning of the story, Ralph still can manage the boys well. They understand the need of order and purposive action even though sometimes they do not want to be bothered. By, this time, the idea of civilization begins to wear off. Jack, who, from the beginning, is after Ralph's position, manipulates the boys to rise into power. He plays with their emotions. Two emotions that he is focusing at are fear and excitement. When Ralph is stressing the importance of keeping the fire, Jack is stressing that the beast is real and they need to focus on hunting and less with the fire. He makes the boys hysterical and Ralph loses control at assembly as he planned. The same manner the real totalitarian leaders from past or present use.

"Quiet," shout Jack. You, listen. The beast is sitting up there, whatever it is-- [...] Hunting, said Jack. He remembered his age-old tremors in forest. Yes, the beast is a hunter " (Golding, p. 126)

Not everyone on the island wants to be a civilized person. From the beginning, Jack and his boys, the hunter, exhibit sign of savagery. They are

assigned to be a hunter, but it is not because they want to provide food, rather because they like to kill. What follows after are war paints and chants. When the hunter separates themselves from Ralph's civilized society, their behavior grows primitives. With Ralph's boys joining Jack's hunter group, Jack immediately has more chance to satisfy his savagery desire.

Before the conch is destroyed, it is "lay at Ralph's feet fragile and white" (Golding, p. 179) showing how little power the conch has, because there is no more boys who follow Ralph, only Piggy. Jack's promise to the other boys of protecting them from the beast is more enticing. Jack establishes himself on the opposite end of the island, Ralph and Piggy is trying to bring it to him and show him that the conch still has its power, but Jack asserts them that it does not count on the end of the island.

The shell is finally destroyed during an event in which Piggy and Jack go to the Castle Rock, the place where Jack and his tribe live. A boy named Roger drops a rock from the top of the hill killing Piggy and the conch. He drops the boulder onto Piggy because he realizes nobody on the island will contain his cruelty. Before he perpetrates his act on Piggy, he tries to throw pebble at another boy, but his arms are held by "taboo of the old life; and he is still understands the boundaries set by parents and school and policemen and law. (Golding, p. 62) It is not a coincidence that the rock killed both Piggy and the conch. Piggy has been the voice of reason for Ralph. He thinks like an adult, which makes him a link to both society and nature. Piggy is a firm believer of the conch that it can still bring influence to the Jack's tribe

"The rock struck Piggy a glancing blow from chin to knee; the conch exploded into a thousand white fragments and ceased to exist (Golding 186)."

The conch is destroyed. No more order on the island. Conch' power is diminished, and so does the control over one another diminished.

## CONCLUSION

The present study has shown that the conch plays a very significant role in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. It is used as a symbol of power and order. When it is first discovered, the conch is used to call the assembly. Furthermore, when the assembly is held for the first time, they elect their leader and Ralph gets elected because he is holding the conch. Once the boys realize that there are no older people present on the island, they start to implement a civilized society in which they lived before. They try to set everything in order, such as taking turns while expressing opinion on the assembly by using the conch so one gets interrupted. Subsequently, the conch is also representing democratic power, which is proved by the conch power to encourage free speech and civil process, which even the little boys can easily embrace. Yet, in practice, the concept is more difficult to realize as the rules they agreed on are impossible to enforce as there are no consequences for those who violates it. In order to understand the interaction of the characters to power, this study also revealed the trait of the important characters. Ralph is a representation of democratic leader as he is always appearing productive by trying to implement free speech and giving everyone on the island equal power and he is always thinking about their future by stressing the importance of being rescued, while Jack is his antithesis who resembles that of the World War II authoritarian leaders that always seeks for power and hunting.

The power on the island shifts because the society that Ralph is trying to establish has failed. Ralph offers them a chance to be rescued and civilized, yet as leader he fails to establish the necessary set of rules and consequences, which brings about the other boys negligence of the tasks that they have been assigned. Ralph's failure is cleverly used by Jack to rise into power who rules his group with fear and terror. He lures the other boys with meat into joining him and his choirboys

and also using terror of a beast. When the boys begin to favour Jack' side, they become a pack of bloodthirsty hunters.

Golding's experience during the war and the era that follows is represented through the leaders in the novel, Ralph and Jack. They are represented by different ways or running things and their personalities and their struggle to gain power through different forms of power. As for the conch, it is a tool that Ralph believes that it can effectively govern the boys meeting, whoever holds the shell during the assembly has rights to speak. As the civilization in the island erodes, the shell loses its power and influence. What Golding is trying to convey through the meaning of the conch is that we have to have rules, order, and authority to maintain our society. The structure and order of government have power to protect and sustain when each individual in the society plays the role that has been assigned. Without rules and authority, the civilization can erode into a state of disorder, as told by Golding when the boys left to their own without discipline. He proves that it is essential for mankind to have a form of government with authority figure enforcing the rule so each of us have sense of right and wrong. Utter chaos becomes inevitable when society is not governed.

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