

# CliffsNotes.com® At a Glance for LORD OF THE FLIES

In *Lord of the Flies*, William Golding gives us a glimpse of the savagery that underlies even the most civilized human beings.

In the opening, the reader learns about a group of British schoolboys who are stranded without adults on a tropical island. They elect a leader, Ralph, who urges the boys to build shelters and maintain a signal fire in hopes of being rescued. Ralph is assisted by a boy called Piggy. Piggy is the smartest boy in the group, but he is ridiculed for his weight and his asthma. Ralph's antagonist, Jack, commands a group of former choirboys who would rather hunt the wild pigs that populate the island than tend the fire.

One night while the boys sleep, a dead pilot parachutes down from the sky, and the boys mistake the pilot's body for a mythical beast they believe roams the island. As an offering to the beast, Jack impales the head of a slaughtered sow on a stick. Later Simon, a kind of mystic who suffers from fainting spells, begins to hallucinate: the sow's head, which Simon thinks of as the Lord of the Flies (meaning Satan), seems to tell him that the beast is not an animal on the loose but the uncivilized part of each boy's psyche. Simon attempts to tell the other boys what he has learned but the other boys kill Simon while they are involved in a frenetic tribal dance.

Jack's group of boys steals Piggy's glasses, and when Ralph and his own small group approach Jack's group, one of Jack's hunters releases a boulder that kills Piggy. After killing Piggy, Jack's boys start a fire to smoke Ralph out of the jungle. A passing ship sees the smoke, however, and a British naval officer arrives just in time to save Ralph and restore order.

**Written by:** William Golding

**Type of Work:** novel

**Genres:** social commentary, allegory

**First Published:** 1954

**Setting:** Deserted tropical island

**Main Characters:** Ralph; Jack; Piggy; Simon; Samneric; Roger

**Major Thematic Topics:** evil; outlets for violence; human nature; speech; silence

**Motifs:** savagery versus civilization

**Major Symbols:** main characters; Piggy's glasses; the beast; fire; conch shell; Lord of the Flies

**Movie Versions:** *Lord of the Flies* (1963); *Lord of the Flies* (1990)

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## The three most important aspects of *Lord of the Flies*:

- The major theme of *Lord of the Flies* is that humans are essentially barbaric if not downright evil. The stranded boys begin by establishing a society similar to the one they left behind in England, but soon their society has degenerated into rival clans ruled by fear and violence; before the book is over, three boys have been killed.
- The novel is an *allegory*, which is a story in which characters, settings, and events stand for things larger than themselves. For example, the island represents the world; Ralph and Jack symbolize different approaches to leadership.
- William Golding wrote *Lord of the Flies* following World War II, during which the Nazis exterminated six million Jews and the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japan. In this context, the novel's profound pessimism is understandable.