

The Symbolism of the Conch

For centuries philosophers have debated the question of whether man is innately evil. William Golding poses this question in his realistic novel *Lord of the Flies*. Set on a tropical island during World War II, the novel begins when schoolboys from Great Britain are being flown to safety and their plane is shot down. No adults survive, and the boys are left to govern themselves and get rescued. William Golding uses symbolism in the form of the conch to represent the concept of society. The boys' evolving relationship with the conch illustrates Golding's theme that humans, when removed from the pressures of civilized authority, will become evil.

In the beginning, the boys view the conch as an important symbol that unites them and gives them the power to deal with their difficult situation. When the conch is first found and blown, it brings everyone together: "Ralph found his breath and blew a series of short blasts. Piggy exclaimed, 'There's one!'" Here Piggy observes one boy emerging from the jungle but soon boys conform all around. Each comes for his own reason: some for plain curiosity, other for the prospect of rescue. They all form the first assembly thanks to the conch. The first job of this assembly is to unite even further and choose a leader or chief. Once again the conch plays an important part. It is Ralph who is chosen to be chief, and the main reason for this is because he holds the conch. When it is put to a vote, the boys exclaim, "Him with the shell. Ralph! Ralph! Let him be chief with the trumpet-thing" (Golding 21). Because Ralph possesses the conch, a symbol of power and authority, he is chosen chief. Thus, at first the conch is an important object bringing civilizing influences to the boys as they work together to make the best of a bad situation.

Gradually, however, the conch becomes less important to the boys, signifying their gradual turn to evil. When the boys first start a fire on top of the mountain, Piggy holds the conch and attempts to speak. But Jack rebukes him by saying, "The conch doesn't count on top of the mountain, so you shut up". Boys like Jack begin to place limitations on the conch and lose respect for it and one another. Then one day at an assembly, Jack places even less importance on the conch excluding more of the boys and thus diminishing the democratic order and authority that the conch provides. He says, "We don't need the conch any more. We know who ought to say things...It's time some people knew they've got to keep quiet and leave deciding things to the rest of us" (Golding 92). Jack's assertion here clearly connects the demise of the conch to a change in the social order. Jack is slowly becoming a power-hungry dictator, and we see the orderly influence of the conch replaced by man's evil impulses.

In the end, the conch loses significance to all but Piggy, and most of the boys turn into evil savages. Piggy tells Ralph to call an assembly, and Ralph only laughs. Finally, after Piggy's glasses are stolen, he tells Ralph, "Blow the conch, blow as loud as you can." The forest reechoed; and birds lifted, crying out of the treetops, as on that first morning ages ago" (Golding 154). Piggy believes that the authority of the conch will once again bring the boys together, but only four boys meet in this assembly. The rest have joined Jack's savage tribe. The goal of their last assembly is to get Piggy's glasses back from Jack. Therefore, the assembly moves to Castle Rock where Roger, the torturer and executioner of Jack's group, rolls a boulder off the mountain and puts an end to the conch and its one true supporter:

The rock struck Piggy a glancing blow from chin to knee; the conch exploded into a thousand white fragments and ceased to exist. Piggy, saying nothing, with no time for even a grunt, traveled through the air sideways from the rock, turning over as he went...Piggy fell forty feet and landed on his back across the square red rock in the sea. His head opened and stuff came out and turned red. (Golding 164-165)

It is fitting here that the destruction of the conch accompanies the boys' first intentional act of murder on the island. Thus their final descent into evil is complete. Now, with the authority of the conch destroyed, Jack's group is given license to become total savages. The next day, they would hunt Ralph to kill him, thus leaving behind the civilizing influences of the conch forever.

Golding uses the conch shell to show the slow slide of the boys into savagery, thereby exemplifying the theme that humans have the capability to turn evil. At first, the conch brings everyone together; then, as its power erodes, the group breaks into two. Finally, the destruction of the conch signals the plunge into total savagery. By following the role of the conch in the story, we see how Golding uses it to unify the central events of the story around his theme of inevitable evil. Golding is an artist, not a philosopher, but through his art he answers the question debated for centuries by philosophers: Is man innately evil? According to *Lord of the Flies*, he is.