Symbol Hunting Golding's *Lord of the Flies*

There is only one total character in the novel, Ralph. The others are facets of his total personality. Hopefully, your students will begin writing on the duplicated sheet of items. The young mind likes to have "answers" that he can write down.

One of the main tenets of current criticism is to look at the structure of a work and to see the interrelating parts. A symbol cannot represent one thing in a certain section of a work and then be changed later to stand for something else. The reader creates a most elaborate and complex system of symbolic meanings.

Introducing the names in the *Lord of the Flies* is very significant. The boy experiencing puberty is Ralph who is physically mature for his twelve years and a few months: "You could see now that he might make a boxer, as far as width and heaviness of shoulders went, but there was a mildness about his mouth and eyes that proclaimed no devil" (p. 8). Remembering that Golding wishes to establish human nature, we see that Piggy is next introduced. His words and actions reflect man's intellect and reasoning powers. He communicates in a way of imitating adults but with grammatically poor English, representing those who have read some truths about reality but have not made these their own through insight and/or experience. It is the job of the intellect to name things and to put labels on everything. This is exactly what Ralph tells Piggy to do, "Now go back, Piggy, and take names. That's your job. So long" (p. 21). This labeling is done in light of tradition and the wisdom of the ages, represented by Piggy's glasses. He rubs his glasses during crises and when making decisions. Piggy has asthma and can do no work, indicating that notional and conceptual knowledge is crippled without the experiential. It is for this reason that Piggy must be killed and washed out into the vastness and openness of the sea to become truly a meaningful facet of the whole person, Ralph. Even the dead flyer is washed out into the sea, the only hope of empty men.

Before puberty a child experiences relatively little conflict with the world or within himself. When Piggy questions, "Aren't there any grownups at all?" (p. 6), Ralph responds by standing on his head. This act, significantly, is done a few times at the beginning of the novel only, as Ralph sees the world through his youthful eyes.

Next on the scene is little innocent Johnny who is boyhood imagination, somewhat stilted, and for the time being satisfied by putting a pink thumb in his mouth. Later in the story Johnny cries over the images of the beastie.

With the intellect and the imagination established, Golding next presents Sam and Eric. Often written as one word, "Samneric" stand for Ralph's will. More than once they are locked in a struggling embrace because Ralph cannot always determine good from evil. They have hair like tow and are chunky and vital, but they are not completely developed as yet (p. 16). One of them reveals Ralph's hiding place and betrays him. Evil does betray the man.
Another important facet of the total personality to be established after intellect, imagination, and will is emotion. Coming down the beach, "marching approximately in step in two parallel lines" (p. 16) are the choristers. They are wearing black cloaks "from throat to ankle" denoting the subdued state of the emotions in the boy before puberty. When they are given permission to uncover, they emerge as powerful drives. This is seen when they begin to run wild to fetch wood for the fire and "their black caps of maintenance were slid over one ear like berets" (p. 34). Jack Merridew (Merry Andrew) depicts pride as the leader of the emotions. Maurice, next in size, "broad and grinning all the time" is joy. Roger is hate, often acting as lust, "a furtive boy whom no one knew, who kept to himself with an inner intensity of avoidance and secrecy" (p. 18). Everyone gets to know Roger since he later shows the others how to use their spears. It is Roger who kills Piggy. Bill, Robert, Harold, and Henry represent other emotions with an astonishing consistency of action and word.

There is one special member of this group whom Jack dislikes intensely because he is shy and "always throwing a faint." This is Simon, pure and simple love. On one of the first adventures, Ralph picks Simon to go with Jack and himself to investigate the island. Ralph remarks, "If Simon walks in the middle of us, then we could talk over his head." It is Simon who discovers at this time the candle bushes which symbolize church rituals. Jack slashes at one of them with his knife, and an aromatic scent spills over the three boys. Jack then remarks, "Green candles. ... We can't eat them. Come on" (p. 27). Pride rebels here against the immaterial. If it isn't useful, it is valueless.

A little later we become aware of a boy with a mulberry-colored birthmark "warped out of the perpendicular by the fierce light of publicity, and he bored into the grass with one toe" (p. 31). In all his novels, Golding seems to be preoccupied with the idea of original sin. The blemished-one is Ralph's knowledge of original sin, since Piggy is very concerned about the stained boy. This boy is the first one who wants to know what Ralph is going to do about the snake-thing. With one hand on the shell, Piggy interprets what the boy with the mulberry-colored birthmark whispers, "He says the beastie came in the dark" (p. 31).

Another facet of Ralph's personality is Percival Wemys Madison, The Vicarage, Harcourt St. Anthony, Hants, telephone, telephone. ... He is memory. Percival and Phil, the emotion of fear, are the two who tell the others about the beast from the sea. At the end of the novel, Percival is greatly changed:

"I'm, I'm--"

"But there was no more to come. Percival Wemys Madison sought in his head for an incantation that had faded clean away" (p. 247). Ralph's memory has a different hierarchy of values after the experience of puberty.

The others in the novel, not given labels, are known by the generic title of "littluns." Human nature is too complicated to be able to label all its facets.

Early in the story Ralph points out and Piggy grabs a conch which becomes the symbol of order and authority. Ralph is the only one who is supposed to blow into the
shell to create a loud blast calling all facets of the
personality to attention. These assemblies, resulting from
the call, are times of decision. "That's why Ralph made a
meeting. So we can decide what to do" (p. 18), echoes
Piggy. At another assembly, Jack remarks, "We'll have
rules! ... Lots of rules! Then when anyone breaks 'em--." 
Since there is a close connection between authority and
tradition, Piggy (intellect) shrieks in terror as Jack (pride)
snatches the glasses from his face, "Mind out! Give 'em
back! I can hardly see! You'll break the conch!" (p. 36),
meaning that without tradition the mind is darkened,
and one would have to start all over again investigating
everything. Without tradition and authority, control and
direction are impossible. Paradoxically, Piggy "sees"
more after losing his glasses.

Later in the novel, Ralph asks Piggy what makes
things break up. To this, Piggy, rubbing his glasses,
replies, "I suppose it's Jack." Piggy tells Ralph that Jack
hates reason (Piggy) but respects the person (Ralph), and
if Ralph were to stand out of the way, Jack would hurt
the next thing and that is reason (p. 129).

Human nature is established, and the crisis is
puberty. Consider that Golding is speaking of Ralph's
experience as happening during one night while the boy
is in a semi-dream world existence. The island would be
the boy's bed. The mountain where the vision is clear
would be his head, the bridge over to Castle Rock would
be his neck, and the fortress of Castle Rock itself would
be his body. The creepers would be his blankets.
When his father, the naval officer, enters Ralph's
bedroom at the end of the novel and sees the blankets
ajar and Ralph's "filthy body, matted hair, and unwiped
nose" (p. 186), he asks Ralph, "Who's boss here?" Ralph,
replies loudly, "I am." That statement then becomes the
most important one in the entire novel. The bulk of the
novel expresses the conflict one must go through before
the total personality can emerge, with a certain loss of
innocence, but still be boss.

Throughout the story, spears, logs, and sticks
become Jack's preoccupation as the leader of the hunters.
These hunters, the emotions, are searching for pigs,
material goods. Wanting to possess and to dominate, to
kill and yet to have, the hunters allow the goods to
become the end. While others concern themselves about
rescue, Jack and his hunters have fun hunting for pigs
with their spears. Jack dismisses the thought of a snake-
thing because pride could merely destroy it. "There isn't a
snake-thing. But if there was a snake we'd hunt it and
kill it. We're going to hunt pigs to get meat for everybody.
And we'll look for the snake too--" (p. 32).

It is fitting that Sam and Eric are the first to find a
large log which can be used for the fire. Fire throughout
the novel represents the drives of man toward good and
evil. "The twins, Sam 'n Eric, were the first to get a likely
log but they could do nothing till Ralph, Jack, Simon,
Roger, and Maurice found room for a hand-hold. Then
they inched the grotesque dead thing up the rock and
topped it over on top" (p. 35). Golding has chosen
carefully the names of those who help in this experience:
Samneric (good and evil), Ralph (the person), Jack
(pride), Simon (love), Roger (lust), and Maurice (joy). The
author concluded this paragraph: "Once more, amid the
breeze, the shouting, the slanting sunlight on the high
mountain, was shed that glamour, that strange invisible light of friendship, adventure, and content” (p. 35).

When Jack breaks away from Ralph, Piggy, Samneric, and Simon, he and the passions find security in Castle Rock. It is from this strong fort that Jack runs his activities and seeks the pleasure of pursuit for apparent goods. There was sufficient fruit on the island to satisfy all, but this wasn’t enough for Jack. He continues the destructive hunt. Even Ralph is tempted to give up the idea of rescue and go hunting, but Piggy keeps reminding him about salvation.

Simon, who remains faithful to Ralph, plays a very important part in the novel. It is he who feeds the "littluns" the choicest fruit which they cannot reach. And after the children have followed him and have had their fill, Simon suffers the arrow of the sun until the sweat runs from his pores (p. 123). He goes down on his knees three times in saving decaying man from his entanglements to tell the truth (of the dead flyer who has fallen from the sky) to the others (p. 136). But Simon is killed by those whom he wished to save, and he too is washed out into the openness of the sea. Whereas Simon is sacrificed for the group (society), Piggy is sacrificed to make Ralph whole. Of course, then we ask if the following passage is not the symbol of the resurrection of the body: "Somewhere over the darkened curve of the world the sun and moon were pulling, and the film of water on the earth planet was held, bulging slightly on one side while the solid core turned. The great wave of the tide moved farther along the island and the water lifted. Softly, surrounded by a fringe of inquisitive bright creatures, itself a silver shape beneath the steadfast constellation, Simon's dead body moved out toward the open sea" (p. 142).

Before he is killed, however, Simon has his bout with the devil, the lord of the flies, the one who would like to lie about what Ralph is experiencing in puberty. Through his deceit, Beelzebub (god of insects) tries to take control. He does not want Ralph to be master of himself. Simon knows what it could be, but it is the devil who colors all red, not green. In this light, the statement, "Passions beat about Simon on the mountaintop with awful wings," makes sense. Butterflies (the symbol of beauty; in Greek: life, spirit, and breath) have frequently been present when Simon has communicated with nature, but they desert the place where the head of the pig is forced onto the stick sharpened at both ends. One end is jammed into a crack of mother earth; the other holds the head of the lord of lies. The mouth of the beast is dark, a blackness that Simon experiences spreading (p. 133). The heart of darkness wants no part of love or true meaning. So the Lord of the Flies says, "I'm warning you. I'm going to get angry. D'you see? You're not wanted. Understand? We are going to have fun on this island! So don't try it on, my poor misguided boy, or else--" (p. 133). The way that the devil is to get ultimate control is through man's total pursuit of pleasure through materialism. Jack tries to make Simon eat of the meat of materialism, but Simon gives of his portion to Piggy, helping him experience both good and the sharing of things. "Simon, sitting between the twins and Piggy, wiped his mouth and shoved his piece of meat over the rocks to Piggy, who grabbed it. The twins giggled and Simon lowered his face in shame" (p. 68). Also, when
Piggy loses his glasses, Simon finds them. Thus does love try to help reason.

Several other symbols have been well worked into the story. When the boys are investigating the "beast" on the mountain, they see a creature which moves as the wind blows it--the dead, hollow, decaying flyer. It is fallen man in a state of helplessness, moving as if alive. This figure has to be cleansed and washed by the rains of baptism before moving out to the sea.

Another symbol is Ralph's "shutter coming down," a flickering in his brain when he momentarily wonders about going with the others to hunt with spears. Should he go with the others to have fun, or should he be concerned about being saved? The symbol of salvation is smoke.

As the novel progresses, the forces divide, and decisions are to be made. Simon tells Ralph that things will be all right no matter what Ralph has to go through. Simon says, "You'll get back to where you came from" (p. 103). Ralph is discovering himself and asks Simon, "How do you know?" Simon replies, "I just think you'll get back all right."

Towards the end of the story, Ralph is hunted by all the forces which Jack controls. In his escape from the hunters, Ralph comes upon the skull of the pig which is mounted on the stick. He knocks off the head and wrenches the stick from the earth. "Ralph drew his feet up and crouched. The stake was in his hands, the stake sharpened at both ends, the stake that vibrated so wildly, that grew long, short, light, heavy, light again" (p. 183).

Piggy had been killed, and the conch smashed into a thousand pieces. Samneric had been tied up and then made to join the tribe. Bill (hope) is changed, Robert (desire) is satisfied with meat, and Ralph himself is hungry. Sam gives Ralph some meat. "If there were light-" remarks Ralph.

Roger is carrying death in his hands, so Ralph tries to think. He had never gone against reason (Piggy); made fun of, yes, but never violated. And yet, "he was beginning to dread the curtain that might waver in his brain, blacking out the sense of danger making a simpleton of him" (p. 181).

Finally, Ralph experiences what he doesn't totally understand or want. The security of boyhood is gone, and he tries to cry for mercy while warding off what comes. Through the entire semi-dreamworld state. He is no longer a boy. His experience has been one of awesome mystery. He now sees the power of the passions of man and realizes how all drives must be directed if one is to emerge as a full personality.