The Modern Allegories of William Golding

Of Golding’s nine novels, *Lord of the Flies* is most clearly an allegory. It has been criticized as both too explicit and too ambiguous. Walter Allen’s skepticism is typical: "The difficulty begins when one smells allegory." More accurately, Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* combines the best features of realistic and allegorical fiction; the novel allows for "the simultaneous operation of the factual and the fabular." The tension between realistic novel and allegorical fable is established in the setting for the action in *Lord of the Flies*: the isolated island provides an appropriate stage for the survival story of the deserted boys, but also suggests a universal, timeless backdrop for symbolic action. Golding creates a microcosm, a procedure common "to the great allegorists and satirists," and then "examines the problem of how to maintain moderate liberal values and to pursue distant ends against pressure from extremists and against the lower instincts." The protagonist’s ironic "rescue" by a naval officer, who is himself engrossed in the savage business of international warfare, reveals that the chaotic island-world is but a small version of a war-torn adult world. The novel does not imply that children, without the disciplined control of adults, will turn into savages; on the contrary, it dramatizes the real nature of all humans. The nightmare world, which quickly develops on the island, parallels the destruction of the outside world through atomic warfare. The dead parachutist, whom the boys mistake for the Beast, is a symbolic reminder of the human history of self-destruction; the parachutist is literally and figuratively a "fallen man."

At first, the island world is compared to Eden: the boys "accepted the pleasure of morning, the bright sun, the whelming sea and sweet air, as a time when play was good and life so full that hope was not necessary and therefore forgotten." But this setting is simultaneously sinister and hostile. The boys are scratched by thorns and entrapped by creepers. "The ground beneath them was a bank covered with coarse grass, torn everywhere by the upheavals of fallen trees, scattered with decaying coconuts and palm saplings. Behind this was the darkness of the forest proper and the open scar" (p. 6). Eventually the island becomes a burning hell: "Smoke was seeping through the branches in white and yellow wisps, the patch of blue sky overhead turned to the color of a storm cloud, and then the smoke bellowed around him" [Ralph, the protagonist] (p. 233). The island is a microcosm from the adult world; indeed, "you realize after a time that the book is nothing less than a history of mankind itself."

The personified agents in *Lord of the Flies* are developed in all the four ways discussed in the first chapter. First, the analogy through nomenclature is the most obvious method by which the characters take on additional dimensions. Golding’s novel represents an ironic treatment of R. M. Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island*, a children’s classic that presents the romantic adventures of a group of English schoolboys marooned on an Edenlike South Sea island. By mustering their wits and
their British courage, the boys defeat the evil forces on
the island: pirates and native savages. Not only is
Golding's island literally a coral island (p. 12) where the
boys "dream pleasantly" and romantically, but there are
specific references to Ballantyne: "It's like in a book.' At
once there was a clamor. 'Treasure Island--' 'Swallows
and Amazons--' 'Coral Island--'" (p. 37). At the conclusion
of the novel, the dull-witted naval officer who comes to
Ralph's rescue makes an explicit comparison: "Jolly good
show. Like the Coral Island" (p. 242). Golding uses the
same names for his main characters as Ballantyne did.
Ralph, Jack, and Peterkin Gay of The Coral Island become
Golding's Ralph, Jack, and Simon ("Simon called Peter,
you see. It was worked out very carefully in every
possible way, this novel")8. Golding's characters,
however, represent ironic versions of the earlier literary
work, and their very names, inviting comparison to
Ballantyne, add ironic impact to the characterization.

The change of Peterkin's name to Simon better
supports that character's function as a "saint" figure in
Golding's novel. Obviously Piggy's name contributes to
the symbolism: Piggy will become identified with a
hunted pig, and eventually will be killed too, as the boys'
savage hunt turns to human rather than animal victims.
When Piggy falls to his death, his arms and legs twitch
"like a pig's after it has been killed" (p. 217). Jack's name
is a variant of John, the disciple of Christ, and indeed
Jack is an ironic distortion of the religious connotations of
his name, in the same manner as is Christopher Martin,
the egocentric protagonist of Golding's third novel.
Second, the characters in Lord of the Flies become
allegorical agents through the correspondence of a state
of nature with a state of mind. The more the boys stay on
the island, the more they become aware of its sinister and
actively hostile elements. The description of the pleasant
Coral Island fantasy world quickly dissolves into images
of darkness, hostility, danger. The boys accept "the
pleasures of morning, the bright sun" and the
unrestricted play, but by afternoon the overpowering
sunlight becomes "a blow that they ducked" (p. 65).
Though dusk partly relieves the situation, the boys are
then menaced by the dark: "When the sun sank, darkness
dropped on the island like an extinguisher and soon the
shelters were full of restlessness, under the remote stars"
(p. 66).

The boys' attitude of childish abandon and
romantic adventure changes to a much more sober one
when the possibility of a beast is introduced. At that
point the island is transformed into a dark haven for
unspeakable terrors. The boys' increasing apprehension
about their immediate physical safety parallels the
gradual awareness that is taking shape in the minds of
Simon, Piggy, and particularly Ralph, concerning the real
evil of the island. The boys mistakenly project their own
bestiality on an imaginary animal roaming the island, but
Simon hesitantly speculates, "maybe it's only us" (p. 103).
The others do not understand. They look into the
blackened jungle for signs of the beast's movement. The
darkness is "full of claws, full of the awful unknown and
menace" (p. 116). Simon's inner vision, however, tells him
that it is the human being who is "at once heroic and
sick" (p. 121). When Simon confronts the Lord of the
Flies, the pig's head on a stick, it tells him (but really he
tells himself), "Fancy thinking the Beast was something
you could hunt and kill! ... You knew, didn't you? I'm part of you?” (p. 172). The hostile island and its dark mysteries are only a symbolic backdrop reinforcing the images of savagery, bestiality, and destruction that describe, and reveal, the boys themselves.

A third method by which the characters assume allegorical significance is through the implicit comparison of an action with an extrafictional event. James Baker was the first to point out similarities between Euripides' *The Bacchae* and Golding's novel. The mistaken slaying of Simon recalls Pentheus's murder at the hands of the crazed bacchantes of Dionysus. Pentheus's pride and his inability to recognize Dionysus's powers lead to his downfall: "This same lesson in humility is meted out to the schoolboys of *Lord of the Flies*. In their innocent pride they attempt to impose a rational order or pattern upon the vital chaos of their own nature. ... The penalties (as in the play) are bloodshed, guilt, utter defeat of reason.”

Both the novel and the play contain a beast-god cult, a hunt sequence, and the dismemberment of the scapegoat figure. Though Simon is the clearest equivalent for Pentheus, Piggy and finally Ralph are cast in similar roles. Piggy is destroyed, though not dismembered, by Jack's forces. Ralph is chased by frenzied hunters but is "saved" (by a deus ex machina process similar to that of the end of Euripides' play) from the prospect of beheading. Ralph fittingly becomes Golding's version of Agave. The boy, like Pentheus’s mother, mistakenly takes part in a killing and then must live sorrowfully with the knowledge of his, and all humanity’s, capacity for blind destruction.

The actions that help establish parallels to religious events emphasize biblical analogues. Ralph's first blowing of the conch, proclaiming survival after the crash on the island, recalls the angel Gabriel's announcing good news. Inasmuch as the boys' "survival" is quite tentative, however, the implied comparison to Gabriel is ironic. Simon's fasting, helping the little boys, meditating in the wilderness, going up on the mountain—all these actions solidify the Christ parallel. The recurring pattern of falls—the falling parachutist, Piggy's fall to his death, the destruction of the conch in the same fall, Ralph's tumbling panic at the end of the novel—emphasizes the fall of humankind motif.

The extrafictional events pertaining to classical mythology or to Christ's passion enlarge the surface action with additional symbolic meanings.

The fourth and final technique for intensifying allegorical agents concerns the manifestation in an action of a state of mind. In *Lord of the Flies* a series of hunts, for either pigs or humans, symbolically demonstrates the boys' gradual deterioration into savages. Moral order is corrupted and the end result is chaos. William Mueller has established convincingly that "the book is a carefully structured work of art whose organization—in terms of a series of hunts—serves to reveal with progressive clarity man's essential core.” Mueller identifies six "hunts," but there are at least nine separate instances where this symbolic act occurs: (1) the first piglet, "caught in a curtain of creepers," escapes when Jack is mentally unable to kill the helpless creature (p. 32); (2) a second pig eludes the hunters, much to Jack's disgust (p. 55); (3) Jack is successful the next time, and the hunters conceive
the ritual chant of "Kill the Pig. Cut her throat. Spill her blood" (p. 78); later Maurice briefly pretends to be the pig (p. 86); (4) during a mock ceremony that gets out of hand, Robert plays the role of the pig, in a scene that sinisterly foreshadows the transition from nonhuman to human prey (pp. 135-36); (5) after another successful hunt, the boys smear themselves with animal blood, and Maurice plays the pig while Robert ritually pokes him with a spear, to the delight of Jack's hunters (pp. 161-63); (6) Jack and Roger play hunter and pig respectively, as Piggy and Ralph "find themselves eager to take a place in this demented but partly secure society" (p. 181); (7) Simon is mistaken for the beast and is torn to pieces; (8) Piggy is killed by Roger, who acts "with a sense of delirious abandonment" (p. 216); (9) and finally Ralph is the object of the last murderous hunt.

The two fundamental patterns by which allegorical action is resolved are those of "progress" and "battle." The journey motif is first established by the plot circumstances of the opening chapter. A group of boys has been taken by airplane from a war threatened England to a safer territory, but in the process their plane is attacked and they have been dropped to safety on a deserted island. Their thwarted flight is mentioned in the opening exposition. Though their physical, outer journey has ended, they soon begin a more recondite "journey." Through their quest for the beast, they (or at least Simon and Ralph) discover the real beast, humanity's own predilection for evil.

The structure of Lord of the Flies provides for a gradual revelation of insight, as Ralph sees his friends slowly turn into beasts themselves. The significance of the final scene, in which the naval officer reestablishes an adult perspective, is not what James Gindin once contended: "a means of cutting down or softening the implications built up within the structure of the boys' society on the island."12 The officer's presence does not reaffirm that "adult sanity really exists," nor is it merely a gimmick that "palliates the force and the unity of the original metaphor."13 On the contrary, it provides the final ironic comment: Ralph is "saved" by a soldier of war, a soldier who cannot see that the boys have symbolically reenacted the plight of all persons who call themselves civilized and yet continue to destroy their fellow humans in the same breath.

The irony of this last scene is consistent with Golding's sarcastic treatment of Ballantyne, and it also emphasizes the universality of Ralph's experience. There is no distinction between child and adult here. The boys' ordeal is a metaphor for the human predicament. Ralph's progress toward self-knowledge culminates in his tears: "Ralph wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy" (p. 242). Because Piggy represents the failure of reason, the use of "wise" offers a further irony.

The battle motif is developed in both physical confrontations and rhetorical "combat." Initially, the pig hunts are ritualized tests of strength and manhood, but when the hunters eventually seek human prey (Simon, Piggy, and finally Ralph) the conflict is between the savage and the civilized; blind emotion and prudent rationality; inhumanity and humanity; evil and good. This conflict is further established in the chapter entitled
"The Shell and the Glasses," when Jack's hunters attack Ralph's boys and steal Piggy's glasses. Jack carries the broken spectacles—which have become symbolic of intellect, rationality, and civilization—as ritual proof of his manhood and his power over his enemies: "He was a chief now in truth; and he made stabbing motions with his spear" (p. 201). In the "Castle Rock" chapter, Ralph opposes Jack in what is called a "crisis" situation: "They met with a jolt and bounced apart. Jack swung with his fist at Ralph and caught him on the ear. Ralph hit Jack in the stomach and made him grunt. Then they were facing each other again, panting and furious, but unnerved by each other's ferocity. They became aware of the noise that was the background to this fight, the steady shrill cheering of the tribe behind them" (p. 215).

More subtle forms of "battle"—debate and dialogue—are dramatized in the verbal exchanges between Jack and Ralph. Golding emphasizes their polarity: "The walked along, two continents of experience and feeling, unable to communicate" (p. 62). Later when Jack paints his face and flaunts his bloody knife, the conflict is heightened: "The two boys faced each other. There was the brilliant world of hunting, tactics, fierce exhilaration, skill; and there was the world of longing and baffled commonsense" (p. 81). When Ralph does not move, Jack and the others have to build their fire in a less ideal place: "By the time the pile [of firewood] was built, they were on different sides of a high barrier" (p. 83). Different sides of the wood, different continents, different worlds—all these scenes intensify the symbolic as well as physical conflict. Here we encounter "a structural principle that becomes Golding's hallmark: a polarity expressed in terms of a moral tension. Thus, there is the rational (the firewatchers) pitted against the irrational (the hunters)." 14

In both chapter 2, "Beast from Water," and chapter 8, "Gift for the Darkness," the exchange of views about whether there is a beast or not "becomes a blatant allegory in which each spokesman caricatures the position he defends." 15 Ralph and Piggy think that rules and organization can cure social ills, and that if things "break up," it is because individuals are not remembering that life "is scientific," rational, logical (p. 97). Jack hates rules, only wishes to hunt, and believes that evil is a mystical, living power that can be appeased by ritual sacrifice (p. 159). Simon feels that evil is not outside but rather within all human beings, though he is "inarticulate in his effort to express mankind's essential illness" (p. 103). He uses comparisons with excrement and filth to describe his notion of human inner evil.

Simon's confrontation with the pig's head on a stick, the Lord of the Flies, is another instance of allegorical dialogue. At first, Beelzebub seems to triumph: Simon is mesmerized by the grinning face (p. 165); he is warned that he is "not wanted," for Simon is the only boy who possesses a true vision of the nature of evil; and finally he faints (p. 172). However, Simon recovers, asks himself, "What else is there to do?" (p. 174), discovers the dead parachutist, and then takes the news about the "beast" to the rest of the boys. The entire scene with the pig's head represents the conflict that is occurring within Simon's own consciousness. The Lord of the Flies is only an externalization of the inner evil in all humans. Later when Ralph comes upon the pig's
head, "the skull [stares at] Ralph like one who knows all the answers and won't tell" (p. 22). Though Ralph does not understand the significance of the pig, he does feel a "sick fear." In desperation he hits the head, as if breaking it would destroy the evil on the island. However, the broken pig's head lies in two pieces, "its grin now six feet across" (p. 222). Rather than being destroyed, it ironically has grown. In the final pages of the novel, when Ralph is desperately fleeing from the hunters, he runs in circles and retraces his steps back to the broken pig's head, and this time its "fathom-wide grin" entirely dominates the burning island.

Four patterns of imagery reinforce the symbolism in Lord of the Flies. Images pertaining to excrement, darkness, falling, and animalism help define the human capacity for evil and savagery.

The many references to excrement, and also to dirt, underline thematically the vileness of human nature itself. As the boys' attempts at a sanitation program gradually break down, the inherent evil in human nature is symbolically manifested in the increasing images that refer to dung: "the two concepts merge in Golding's imagination--covertly in Lord of the Flies and manifestly in Free Fall, which is a literary cloaca, full of that revulsion psychologists try to explain in terms of the proximity and ambiguity of the apertures utilized for birth and excreta."16

Images associated with excrement (and more generally, dirt) are used in a negative sense, depicting human corruption. The conch makes "a low, farting noise" (p. 15). Johnny, the first "littlun" Ralph and Piggy meet, is in the act of defecating (p. 16). Pig droppings are closely examined by Jack's hunters to determine how recently the pig has left a particular place; the temperature of feces has become the central subject of interest (pp. 54 and 132). Ralph slowly loses his battle against filth: "With a convulsion of the mind, Ralph discovered dirt and decay, understood how much he disliked [his own long, dirty hair]" (p. 88). Even when Piggy tries to clean his glasses, the attempt is in vain (p. 11). He is appalled at the increasing filth on the island: "We chose those rocks right along beyond the bathing pool as a lavatory. ... Now people seem to use anywhere. Even near the shelters and the platform. You littluns, when you're getting fruit; if you're taken short--' The assembly roared. 'I said if you're taken short you keep away from the fruit. That's dirty'" (p. 92).

Weekes and Gregor recognize the realistic level of description here--eating nothing but fruit does indeed bring on diarrhea--but they add, "The diarrhea might seem to invite allegorical translation--the body of man is no longer fit for Eden."17 At one significant point, the inarticulate Simon tries to think of "the dirtiest thing there is" (p. 103) in order to describe the fallen human condition, and Jack's answer, "one crude expressive syllable," reaffirms the metaphor of excrement, which prevails throughout the novel. The area near the decaying, fallen parachutist is "a rotten place" (p. 125). When the pig's head is mounted on the stick, it soon draws a "black blob of flies"; it is literally a lord of the flies, as well as figuratively Beelzebub, from the Hebrew baalzebub, "lord of flies." Sometimes this name is translated "lord of dung." By the end of the novel, Ralph himself has been reduced to a dirty, piglike animal.
Golding uses light-dark contrasts in a traditional way: the numerous images of darkness underline the moral blackness of the boys' crumbling society. The normal associations with the sinister, with death, with chaos, with evil are suggested by this imagery. Decaying coconuts lie "skull-like" amid green shadows (p. 7); Jack's choirboys are clothed in black; the beast is naturally associated with the coming of night (p. 39); the "unfriendly side of the mountain" is shrouded in hushed darkness (p. 48). Roger is described as a dark figure: "the shock of black hair, down his nape and low on his forehead, seemed to suit his gloomy face and make what had seemed at first an unsociable remoteness into something forbidding" (p. 68).

With a Hawthornesque touch, Golding describes the subtle change that has come over all the boys' faces, after the group has become largely a hunting society: "faces cleaned fairly well by the process of eating and sweating but marked in the less accessible angles with a kind of shadow" (p. 130). Jack is described as "a stain in the darkness" (p. 142). Generally, the coming of night turns common surroundings into a nightmare landscape of imaginary horrors: "The skirts of the forest and the scar were familiar, near the conch and the shelters and sufficiently friendly in daylight. What they might become in darkness nobody cared to think" (p. 155).

Images of light and brightness are identified with spirit, regeneration, life, goodness. The description of Simon's dead body as it is carried out to sea suggests transcendence: "Softly, surrounded by a fringe of inquisitive bright creatures, itself a silver shape beneath the steadfast constellations, Simon's dead body moved out toward the open sea" (p. 184). The contrast between the bright, gaudy butterflies and the black flies on the pig's head emphasizes the symbolic conflict between good and evil used throughout the novel. The bright butterflies are drawn to the sunlight and to open places (p. 64); they surround the saintly Simon (p. 158); they are oblivious to the brutal killing of the sow: "the butterflies still danced, preoccupied in the centre of the clearing" (p. 162). In this particular instance, they remind the reader of those indifferent seagulls in Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat"--simply a part of nature, not threatened by the environment, and a mocking contrast to the violent predicaments that human beings either perpetuate or suffer. But the butterflies represent a more positive force, and significantly they desert the open space dominated by the grinning pig's head.18

Golding's obsession with the fallen human state permeates the imagery of Lord of the Flies. The opening chapter is typical. Ralph appears amid a background of fallen trees. He trips over a branch and comes "down with a crash" (p. 5). He talks with Piggy about coming down in the capsule that was dropped from the plane. He falls down again when attempting to stand on his head (p. 25). He pretends to knock Simon down (p. 28). In addition to the descriptions of the fallen parachutist, Simon's fainting spells, Ralph's "nightmares of falling and death" (p. 229), and his final collapse at the feet of the naval officer, the act of falling is closely associated with the idea of lost innocence. Ralph weeps for "the end of innocence ... and the fall through the air" of Piggy. Animal imagery reinforces the boys' transformation into savages and subhumans. Predictably, evil is associated
with the beast, the pig's head, or a snake, but as the story progresses, the boys themselves are described with an increasing number of animal images.

The boys' disrobing early in the novel at first suggests a return to innocence, but as the hunters become more and more savage, their nakedness merely underscores their animalism. Sam and Eric grin and pant at Ralph "like dogs" (pp. 17 and 46). Jack moves on all fours, "dog-like," when tracking the pig (p. 53); during the hunt he hisses like a snake, and is "less a hunter than a furtive thing, ape-like among the tangle of trees" (p. 54). Ralph calls him a "beast" (p. 214). Piggy, whose very name suggests an obvious comparison, sees that the boys are becoming animals; he says that if Ralph does not blow the conch for an assembly, "we'll soon be animals anyway" (p. 107). Without his glasses, Piggy laments that he will "have to be led like a dog" (p. 204). When he dies, his body twitches "like a pig's after it has been killed" (p. 217). Simon, hidden in the shadows of the forest, is transformed into a "thing," a "beast," when the narration shifts to the other boys' view (pp. 182-83).

Ralph's transformation is slower than the others, but it is clearly discernible. Early in the novel, he viciously accepts the hunters' raw pig meat and gnaws on it "like a wolf" (p. 84). He is caught up in the savage ritual when Roger plays the pig (p. 181); he is part of the unthinking gang that murders Simon. When Piggy is killed, Ralph runs for his life and obeys "an instinct that he did not know he possessed" (p. 217). In the last chapter, Ralph is little more than a cornered animal. Ironically he sharpens a stick in self-defense and becomes a murderous hunter himself: "Whoever tried [to harm him] would be stuck, squealing like a pig" (p. 231). We are told that he "raised his spear, snarled a little, and waited" (p. 233). Ralph's transformation is both shocking and saddening. Alone in the forest, he brutally attacks the first adversary he meets: "Ralph launched himself like a cat; stabbed, snarling, with the spear, and the savage doubled up" (p. 234). When Ralph is trapped in the underbrush, he wonders what a pig would do, for he is in the same position (p. 236).

Related to these animal images is the continual reference to the word savage. In *Lord of the Flies* the distinction between civilized human being and savage becomes increasingly cloudy and a source of further irony. Early in the novel Jack himself proclaims, "I agree with Ralph. We've got to have rules and obey them. After all, we're not savages" (p. 47). Piggy asks more than once, "What are we? Humans? Or animals? Or savages?" followed by the double irony, "What's grownups going to think?" (p. 105). The painted faces of the hunters provide "the liberation into savagery" (p. 206), an ironic freedom to destroy society; and the animal imagery contributes to this idea.

Several "levels" of meaning operate in *Lord of the Flies*, apart from the surface narrative. First, from a particular psychological viewpoint, the tripartite organization of the human psyche--ego, id, superego--is dramatized symbolically in the characters of Ralph, Jack, and Piggy, respectively. The conflict between Ralph, the level-headed elected leader of the boys' council, and Jack, the self-appointed head of the hunters, corresponds to an ego-id polarity. Ralph realistically confronts the problem of survival and works out a practical plan for rescue. Jack
is quick to revert to savagery, dishonesty, violence. Piggy, the fat, bespectacled rationalist, reminds Ralph of his responsibilities, makes judgments about Jack's guilt, and generally represents the ethical voice on the island. Since Piggy does not acknowledge his own share of guilt for Simon's death, Oldsey and Weintraub conclude that this inconsistency "spoils the picture often given of Piggy as superego or conscience."19 However, the many times Piggy reminds the weakening Ralph of what must be done far outweigh this one reversal.

A second level of symbolism emerges from the archetypal patterns in the novel. The quest motif is represented by Ralph's stumbling attempts at self-knowledge. His is literally an initiation by fire. Ironically the knowledge he acquires does not allow him to become an integrated member of adult society, but rather it causes him to recoil from the nightmare world he discovers. He is a scapegoat figure who must be sacrificed as atonement for the boys' evils. Simon and Piggy are also variants of the scapegoat symbol. Simon is most clearly the saint or Christ figure. The Dionysian myth is also reworked, as the boys' blindness to their own irrational natures leads to their destruction. As James Baker has observed, Euripides' Bacchae "is a bitter allegory" of not only the degeneration of society but also of essential human blindness: "the failure of rational man who invariably undertakes the blind ritual-hunt in which he seeks to kill the threatening 'beast' within his own being."20

On still another level, Lord of the Flies accommodates a political allegory in which Ralph represents democracy and Jack totalitarianism. Golding has often stressed the impact of World War II on his own life and his change from an idealist who believed in human perfectibility, to a more skeptical observer who had discovered a dark truth "about the given nature of man."21 In his most explicit statement about the effect of the war on his estimation of humanity and its political systems, Golding says:

It is bad enough to say that so many Jews were exterminated in this way and that, so many people liquidated—lovely, elegant word—but there were things done during that period from which I still have to avert my mind lest I should be physically sick. They were not done by the headhunters of New Guinea, or by some primitive tribe in the Amazon. They were done, skillfully, coldly, by educated men, doctors, lawyers, by men with a tradition of civilization behind them, to beings of their own kind. ... When these destructive capacities emerged into action they were thought aberrant. Social systems, political systems were composed, detached from the real nature of man. They were what one might call political symphonies. They would perfect most men, and at the least, reduce aberrance. Why, then, have they never worked?22

Such statements not only define Golding's own social background but also illuminate his use of the microcosmic island society in Lord of the Flies.

Golding's own comments about Lord of the Flies continually focus on the potentials and the limitations of the democratic ideal. Though he supports a democratic doctrine, he recognizes its weaknesses: "You can't give people freedom without weakening society as an implement of war, if you like, and so this is very much
like sheep among wolves. It's not a question with me as to whether democracy is the right way so much, as to whether democracy can survive and remain what it is.  

By giving up all its principles, the island society of Lord of the Flies demonstrates the inefficacy of political organizations that attempt to check human beings' worst destructive instincts. It is only by first recognizing these dark powers that democracy can hope to control them.

The fourth level of meaning is the moral allegory, which focuses on the conflicts between good and evil, and encourages philosophical or theological interpretations. Golding is defining the nature of evil. Whether it is embodied in a destructive, unconscious force, a mistaken sacrifice that unsuccessfully atones for the boys' collective guilt, or a dictatorial power opposing the democratic order (corresponding to the psychological, archetypal, and politico-sociological levels, respectively), the problems of moral choice, the inevitability of original sin and human fallibility, the blindness of self-deception create a fourth level of meaning in the novel.


Ralph, "the fair boy" (p. 5), who unties the "snake-clasp of his belt" (p. 7). Ralph possesses a "mildness about his mouth and eyes that proclaims no devil" (p. 7); he rallies the boys to the open, sunlit part of the island; his conch sounds a Gabriellike note unifying (if only temporarily) his followers. Jack, on the other hand, is identified with darkness and violence: when his band of choirboys first appears, it is described as "something dark," like a "creature" (p. 19); the black caps and cloaks hide their faces; Jack's red hair suggests a devilish element; his impulsive decision to be a hunter and kill pigs foreshadows his demonic monomania for destruction; when he first meets Ralph, Jack is sun-blinded after coming out of the dark jungle.

However, because Golding complicates the characterization and shows Ralph to be susceptible to evil forces and at times paradoxically sympathetic to Jack, the reader recognizes ambiguities not easily compatible with a neat but rigid system of symbols. If Lord of the Flies "teaches" through its moral allegory, it is the lesson of self-awareness: "The novel is the parable of fallen man. But it does not close the door on that man; it entreats him to know himself and his Adversary, for he cannot do combat against an unrecognized force, especially when it lies within him."