

William Golding's 1954 novel "Lord of the Flies" tells the story of a group of young boys who find themselves alone on a deserted island. They develop rules and a system of organization, but without any adults to serve as a civilizing impulse, the children eventually become violent and brutal. In the context of the novel, the tale of the boys' descent into chaos suggests that human nature is fundamentally savage.

Chapters 1–3

The novel opens with a young boy named Ralph and a chubby, glasses-wearing boy as they walk onto a lagoon wearing their school uniforms. We soon learn that they are part of a group of boys who were evacuated during the war and who survived the plane crash that followed what they suspect was an enemy attack. As Ralph and the other boy see that there are no adults around, they decide they must attract the attention of any other surviving children. Ralph locates a conch shell and begins to blow into it, summoning the other boys with the noise. The chubby boy reveals that the other children used to call him Piggy.

Ralph believes rescue is imminent, but Piggy argues that they must get organized because they may be stranded for some time. The other boys choose Ralph to be their leader, although the choice is not unanimous; the choir boys, led by Jack Merridew, do not vote for Ralph. Ralph gives them permission to form a hunting group. Ralph quickly establishes a rough form of government and order, exhorting the boys to enjoy their freedom, work together for their mutual survival, and maintain a smoke signal on the beach to attract any potential rescuers. The boys in turn agree that anyone holding the conch gets to speak without interruption.

Ralph, Jack, and a boy named Simon are the popular leaders and begin a tense partnership. They explore the island and confirm it is deserted, but locate fruit trees and a herd of wild pigs that Jack decides he and his friends will hunt. The boys use Piggy's glasses to spark a fire, and Piggy quickly finds himself an outcast despite his friendship with Ralph. Simon begins overseeing the construction of shelters, concerned for the younger boys—referred to as "littluns."

Chapters 4–7

The initial burst of organization doesn't last long, however. Without adults, most of the boys refuse to do any sort of work and instead spend their time playing and sleeping. At night, rumors of a terrible monster in the trees spark a panic. Ralph insists monsters do not exist, but Jack says otherwise. He claims that his hunters will find and kill the monster, which boosts his popularity.

Jack gathers a group of boys for a hunting expedition, which takes them away from the job of maintaining the signal fire. The fire goes out. Shortly after, a boat moves past the island but does not spot the boys thanks to the lack of fire. When Jack and the other hunters return in triumph with a pig, Ralph confronts Jack, complaining that they missed their chance at rescue. Jack, angry at his moment being ruined but knowing he cannot fight Ralph, beats up Piggy, breaking his glasses.

As the boys cook and eat the pig ravenously—ignoring warnings about eating undercooked pork—Ralph tells Piggy he wants to stop being the leader, but Piggy convinces him to stay on. Piggy is terrified at what might happen if Jack took over completely.

One evening, there is a dogfight between planes near the island, and a fighter pilot ejects. Killed in the air, his body floats down to the island and becomes entangled in the trees. A boy sees his corpse and parachute and is terrified, convinced that he has seen the monster. Jack, Ralph, and a boy named Roger head off to hunt the monster, and all three boys see the corpse and run in terror.

Chapters 8–12

Now convinced that the monster is real, Ralph calls a meeting. Jack attempts a coup, but the boys refuse to vote Ralph down. Jack leaves in anger, saying he will start his own tribe, and Roger sneaks away to join him. More and more boys begin to sneak away to join Jack's tribe, lured by the roast pigs that Jack and his hunters are able to provide. Jack and his followers begin to paint their faces and behave in an increasingly savage and primitive manner while Ralph, Piggy, and Simon try to maintain a semblance of order at the shelters.

Simon, who sometimes suffers mental attacks, goes off into the woods frequently to be alone. Hiding, he observes Jack and his tribe perform a ritual designed to satisfy the monster: They impale a pig's head on a sharpened stick and leave it as a sacrifice. It quickly becomes swarmed with flies, and Simon hallucinates a dialog with it, referring to it as the Lord of the Flies. The Pig's Head tells Simon he is foolish to imagine the monster is a flesh-and-blood thing; it is the boys themselves who are the monster. The Lord of the Flies then tells Simon that the other boys will kill him because he is the soul of man.

As Simon walks away, he comes across the dead pilot and realizes that he has found proof that the monster does not exist. He runs back to the other boys, who have begun to dance in a crazed ritual. When Simon begins crashing through the trees, the boys believe he is the monster, and all the boys—including Ralph and Piggy—attack him in terror, killing him.

Meanwhile, Jack has realized that while the conch is a symbol of power, the true power lies in Piggy's glasses—the group's only means of starting a fire. Jack has the support of most of the boys, so he conducts a raid on Ralph and his remaining allies in order to steal Piggy's glasses. Ralph, in turn, goes to their home on the other side of the island, a rock formation known as Castle Rock. Accompanied by Piggy and just two other boys—twins named Sam and Eric—he takes the conch and demands that Jack return the glasses. Jack's tribe ties up Sam and Eric, and Ralph and Jack engage in a fight. Piggy, alarmed, takes the conch and attempts to address the boys, pleading for order. Roger sneaks up above Piggy and drops a heavy rock on him, killing the boy and destroying the conch. Ralph flees, leaving Sam and Eric behind. Jack hurts the twins until they agree to join his tribe.

Jack orders the hunters to go after Ralph, who is told by Sam and Eric that they intend to kill him and impale his head on a stick. Ralph flees into the woods, but Jack sets fire to the trees to drive him out. As the flames begin to consume the whole island, Ralph desperately runs. Hitting the beach, he trips and falls, only to find himself at the feet of a British naval officer. A ship spotted the flames and came to investigate.

All of the children, including Ralph and Jack, suddenly begin to cry, collapsing in exhausted grief. The officer is stunned and expresses disappointment that good British boys would fall into such a state of misbehavior and savagery. Then he turns and studies his own warship contemplatively.