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William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*

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An important theme in William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies* is social power relations. These power relations are everywhere on the island, and are shown at different levels throughout the novel. These power relations are illustrated by symbols in the novel, which center on two different power systems, a democratic system, with Ralph as the head, and a dictatorial system with Jack as the leader. Sometimes these symbols are tied so closely together to both power systems that they mean different things for each of them. The aim of this essay is to investigate the different kinds of symbols that are used in the novel, and to show how they are tied to its social power relations. Those symbols that I have found are always important items that either Ralph or Jack use intentionally or unintentionally. The use of symbols is crucial to this novel, thus Golding shows us that an item is more powerful than it first seems.

An important theme in William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies* is social power relations. These power relations are everywhere on the island, and are shown at different levels throughout the novel. The novel, according to Kristin Olsen, concentrates on describing "the desire for power, [...] the fear of other people, anger and jealousy" (2). The power relations in the novel reflect Golding's own "experience of the war, [...] the use of the atomic bombs on Japan, in the postwar revelations of the Holocaust and the horrors of Stalinist Russia" (Baker, "Fables" 315), in particular the battle between fascism and democracy, seen in World War II and the battle between dictatorship and democracy during the Cold War, which had just begun. These power relations are illustrated by symbols throughout the novel, which center on two different power systems, a democratic system, with Ralph as the head, and a dictatorial system with Jack as the leader. Sometimes these symbols are tied so closely to both power systems that they mean different things for each of them. The aim of this essay is to investigate the different kinds of symbols that are used in the novel, and to show how they are tied to its social power relations.

A central symbol at the beginning of the novel is the conch shell. It is Piggy who finds it. He has seen this shell before and he has heard that it can be used as an instrument to make a loud sound (Golding 15). This gives him the idea to give it more purpose than just a sound machine. Whoever holds the conch in their meetings has a right to speak, and everyone accepts that. What power the conch really possesses is made clear by Golding when he describes the situation after the election of Ralph as the leader: "[M]ost obscurely, yet most powerfully, there was the conch" (Golding 22), i.e., the boys gain power through holding the conch. This rule is made by Ralph, through Piggy (Golding 33) and shows that the conch stands for law and order, a main trait of a democracy, since everyone has the right to free speech with the conch. The shell becomes "a symbol of parliamentary order" as Piggy, together with Ralph, turns it into "a tool of civilization" (Olsen 6). The conch shell is a

symbol of democratic power; in fact it is “more than a symbol - it is an actual vessel of political legitimacy” (“Themes, Motifs & Symbols”). As John Fitzgerald and John Kayser argue, by introducing the conch, “Piggy can [...] be deemed the true founder of the parliamentary society created by the assembly” (81). These assemblies are important, because that is where the conch is used as the tool of power, since everyone listens to the holder of the conch and has to wait for their turn to speak. Once they get the conch, they get to speak and everyone listens. The conch thus provides freedom of speech, as well as law and order. The conch’s power, though, is completely dependent on the recognition by the boys (Fleck 34). But when the power shifts over to Jack, the conch slowly loses its influence. At the end of the novel, the democratic power system is symbolically terminated by the destruction of the conch: “[T]he conch exploded into a thousand white fragments and ceased to exist” (Golding 181). With the conch gone, the dictatorial system prevails: “The shattered conch symbolizes the end of reason and a once known civilization with all of its structure and ideals pertaining to it. In correlation to the view of the author, after authority is destroyed on the island, the boys succumb to savagery” (“The Use of Symbolism”). In this case, the conch is the last thing that is holding the democracy together; with the conch shattered, all that Ralph and Piggy have fought for is destroyed and gone forever on the island.

Another symbol for Ralph’s group in the novel are the shelters they build (Golding 52). After Ralph is voted leader, he decides to improve and organize the conditions for everyone on the island. Not only do the shelters provide safety from wind and weather for all the children, but they also act as a sort of team building that everyone finds worth participating in. Furthermore, it is a way to maintain civilization on the island. Having something that the boys can call a home also helps them overcome their fears. The very first step to make civilization for settlers was to settle themselves down by building homes. This is exactly what Ralph wants to do too. This is reinforced by the map over the island that makes

all the boys feel even safer (Golding 27). The map would show where it is safe and what things are important to know. It is like a life saver for the boys that are afraid of exploring. Ralph's organization, the shelters and the map are symbols for the making of a democracy, because, in a democracy, everyone should have the right to live free and without fear.

The glasses are another important symbol on the island. It is Piggy who has this very important tool of power, being the only one with glasses. Once the boys decide to make a signal fire in hope of getting rescued, Ralph comes up with the idea that Piggy's specs can be used as a lens to focus the sunbeams on one point which leads to making fire (Golding 40). Without Piggy's specs it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to get a fire lit (Golding 40). The boy having the specs can therefore be considered as the lord of the fire on this island. The person having command over this tool of power has a big advantage over everyone else. In the beginning it is Ralph who has the power, since Piggy is in his team. But later on, when the power systems change, Jack decides to steal the specs because he knows that they are important and powerful (Golding 166-67). Hence Jack acquires this important tool to create fire. This makes him the new lord of the fire, and gives him even more dictatorial power. He now has one important tool that Ralph and Piggy do not have anymore, which in turn diminishes their power. Also, the glasses were used for two purposes before Jack stole them. They were used to make fire (Golding 41) and to help Piggy see. After the theft, Jack can only give them one purpose, to start the fire round which the tribe gathers. This means that the tool is converted into the dictatorial arsenal, at the same time that it neutralizes Piggy because he can no longer see clearly. Jack offers a man for his personal, and his tribe's gain.

In the beginning of the novel, there is serenity. Then there is loudness after Jack and his tribe take over the island. Of course, even from the start the boys are shouting every now and then when they play, but overall the atmosphere is calm. This peacefulness is also a symbol for the democratic power system. The blowing of the conch is the loudest thing on the

island to that point (Golding 17). Since the conch is the symbol for the democratic power system, it is fitting that it is the loudest, and that it demands silence: “By the time Ralph finished blowing the conch the platform was crowded. [...] Silence now” (Golding 32). When the military boys with Jack in front meet up with everyone else after Ralph blows the horn, Jack asks: “Where is the man with the trumpet?” and Ralph responds: “There’s no man with a trumpet. Only me” (Golding 20). The conch is so loud that one can hear it far away. The assemblies are normally not topsy-turvy and no one shouts, except for Jack. Loudness is what Jack needs, and this is only one of many examples when Jack is very loud. This is somehow ironic, since he is the leader of a church choir where harmony, not noise, is the norm. His role as “chief” for the dictatorial power system requires him to be loud. Everything he does is noisy. He does that because he needs the other boys to be drowned out. When he speaks to his fellowship, he either yells at them or talks to them in a very clear voice. He never whispers or uses any form of silence except while ambushing (Golding 166). Jack’s whole tribe are loud while dancing, hunting and killing (Golding 152). These are the main things they do on the island and they are all noisy actions. This means that loudness in the novel becomes a symbol for the dictatorial power system.

The fire itself, after being created by Piggy’s glasses, is a very important symbol for both the democratic and the dictatorial power system. It stands for either a beacon for Ralph’s rescue and safety, or for Jack’s food and war dance. The signal fire has to be lit at all times, so that passing ships can pick up the lost boys: “The fire is the most important thing on the island. How can we ever be rescued except by luck, if we don’t keep a fire going?” (Golding 80). But the boys find it hard to keep the fire burning. Most of the boys really do not understand the importance of the fire and therefore tend to ignore it. Especially Jack is not very keen in dealing with the fire as a symbol of need for rescue. First after a ship misses them because the fire is out does Jack apologize to Ralph because he sees that it clearly was a

mistake. Ralph tries to talk sense into Jack and is upset at how Jack feels about the fire: “I said before, the fire is the main thing. Now the fire must be out- [...] Hasn’t anyone got any sense?” (Golding 102). Ralph and his democratic camaraderie feel safe when the fire is lit. It gives them hope. Also it saves them from being attacked by the beast or any other malevolent creatures. For Jack, the fire also provides a place of safety and a sense of being home, but he goes further than just that. He uses the fire as a weapon too: “Ironically, at the end of the novel, a fire finally summons a ship to the island, but not the signal fire. Instead, it is the fire of savagery - the forest fire Jack’s gang starts as part of his quest to hunt and kill Ralph” (“Themes, Motifs & Symbols”). After Jack steals the specs from Piggy, giving him command over the fire, he uses it for his own tribe’s interests. The fire from now on stands for Jack’s and his tribe’s camp, their cuisine, their dance area and their social meeting point, the place where Jack and his followers meet to discuss their work, the hunt.

Eating is another symbol in *Lord of the Flies*. When the children eat fruits, they live off the island and do not work to get their food. Eating pork instead is a dictatorial demand, Jack’s way of persuasion, since they had to kill for this meal. But Ralph is not doing any of this. Instead he bites his nails until his fingers bleed (Golding 131). Ralph’s behavior could be interpreted as self-cannibalism, slowly gnawing and consuming him to defeat (Olsen 11). When Jack and his group meet to feast at the fire, they eat pork, which they get as a result of the hunt. This is also why more and more boys join Jack’s tribe: to get pork. Since the boys are bored with eating fruits and crabs, they want real meat. This decreases Ralph’s power, since he has no experience in hunting and wants everyone to focus on other tasks. This pork, though only food, becomes the island’s currency: “It is hard to obtain but can be gotten with hard work and skill” (Olsen 9). Since there is no money on the island, something else must have a value. As stated before, the hunt is Jack’s tribe’s work. As a result of hard work, one gets a reward; in our world it is money, for the boys it is pork to feast on.

The tribe is without a doubt the biggest symbol of Jack's dictatorial power system. All other symbols of the dictatorial system are subordinate to the tribe. Without the tribe, neither Jack nor his dictatorial power system would work. Only as part of a group can Jack sustain his ambition to conquer his rival Ralph and his whole social power system. Jack's power therefore stands and falls with the tribe. The tribe makes him strong. Not only is he the leader of the tribe, he is also the brain, the founder and the string-puller. It is Jack's top concern that the tribe is intact at all times. He can only be as strong as his tribe, and he therefore strengthens the tribe by weakening the democratic power. Furthermore, Jack needs the tribe to survive, and the tribe needs Jack to survive. The boys in Jack's tribe certainly need someone to tell them what to do. Jack, on the other hand, needs the tribe for his plans to be a "chief" of both the boys and the island. Once Jack's tribe is in perfect sync, defeating everything in his way, he has all the power he needs.

The hunt is another important symbol of Jack's dictatorial power system. It is what binds Jack's group and it is also their work together. The one object that lights up Jack's eyes in the beginning of the novel is the sow he saw while exploring the island (Golding 31). When Ralph tells Jack that his choir can be whatever he wants them to be, he immediately responds that they will be hunters (Golding 23). This is not enough for Jack though. After a while, since Ralph himself is no hunter, Jack feels that he needs to take the power away from him so that the hunt, his specialty, can get more power than before. Jack finds it to be so important that he makes everything circle around the hunt. On the island they hunt to live and they live to hunt. Just like killing opposing forces in the army, he now wants to hunt down and kill wild pigs on the island. To hunt one has to have a weapon. Since Jack's knife is not enough, the boys create spears: "We better take spears" (Golding 103). The boys always keep their weapons with them, which gives them more confidence and power on the island. The spears are the most dangerous weapon that the boys come up with. Later on, when the power

system changes in Jack's favor, only Jack's tribe has the spears. The rest of Ralph's group does not feel that they need any weapons to survive, but can manage on this island without them. But Jack's tribe wants complete power and therefore carry the spears around all the time, especially to protect themselves from any harm. One could say that the spears give Jack's tribe as much safety (Golding 91) as the signal fire gave Ralph's group when they had the power. The hunt is the first sign of a power shift to Jack's advantage.

Another powerful symbol is the beast, which embodies the power of the boys' fears. All the boys can be frightened. They are scared of something that does not even exist. When Jack finally converts this fright into a creature, the boys call it the beast. Especially the littluns are afraid, and Jack uses this fear to make his dictatorial power system stronger. After the boys find a dead parachutist, their fear of a beast from the air makes them even more afraid than before. Jack "uses its existence to make the other boys willing followers of his commands. — Fear is the source of Jack's power" (Winfriedschule Fulda). Thereafter, most of the boys join Jack's new-found tribe to find safety, which he promises. Jack thinks that he can win over even more hearts of the boys by hunting the beast down (Golding 91). Yet, "he is the one being a beast by building up a reign of terror. His behaviour has to be regarded as the evil in every mankind, the 'beasty side'" (Winfriedschule Fulda). But Jack is afraid himself. He can convince the boys that there is no beast, but he cannot persuade himself. He never tells anyone about his fright, but deep inside he knows that he is afraid. That is why Ralph always has to go first when Jack thinks that the beast might be near (Golding 104). Simon is the only one to know the truth about the beast: "There is a beast, but it's only us" (Baker, "Beast" 78). The beast, only dreamt about by littluns, has always been in their minds, but never before their eyes. Although the boys mistake Simon for the beast, while he was running towards them, they never saw the beast.

The pig head created by Jack's tribe is a symbol of cruelty and power. After

killing the first sow, Jack decides that the sow's head should be on a stick: "Sharpen a stick at both ends" (Golding 136). Since the tribe is afraid of a beast roaming around the island, Jack decides to offer something to the beast, in order to win its goodwill: "This head is for the beast. It's a gift" (Golding 137). But the pig head becomes more than just a sacrifice. Very quickly the rotting head is surrounded by insects. This makes the pig head the lord of the flies. The meaning of "lord of the flies" is a translation from Hebrew, which stands for Beelzebub, a synonym for the devil. It is a "symbolic dramatisation of human evil" (Winfriedschule Fulda). On one level Jack is the real "lord of the flies" if we see the boys as worthless flies that need a vessel, Jack, to be able to live their lives, but the pig head is also more than that: it can be seen as the symbol of evil on the island. Golding tries to "emphasize the existence of evil inside man and its part in the human condition" (Winfriedschule Fulda). For every human, good and evil can be next to each other. Golding tries to show this by having the island's most evil thing, the pig head, and the best thing, Simon, closely together. The imaginary beast of the boys speaks to Simon, using the pig head on the stick as a vessel: "It is Simon who witnesses [the great god's] coming and hears his words of wrath" (Baker, "Beast" 79). "You [Simon] knew, didn't you? I'm [the beast] part of you? Close, close, close! I'm the reason why it's no go? Why things are what they are?" (Golding 143). Also, Golding makes fear in the boys' minds prevail. After their imaginary conversation, Simon runs off to the others but gets killed. After he comes running towards the boys, while they are dancing and celebrating the hunt, they get scared, mistake him for the beast, and stab Simon to death. "Ironically, they have killed the one person who could have saved them from bestiality" (Hynes 62). The boys protected themselves from what they thought to be a beast. "It was dark. There was that-that bloody dance. There was lightning and thunder and rain. We was scared!" (Golding 156). But since Jack's tribe is so cruel, they do not care what it was they killed. The pig head is still there. Epstein sees the lord of the flies as Golding's "modern

equivalent, the anarchic, amoral, driving force that Freudians call the Id, whose only function seems to be to insure the survival of the host in which it is [...] embodies, which function it performs with tremendous and single-minded tenacity” (108). Golding makes the pig head the real leader of the island, hence evil prevails. Not only the pig head, but also the imaginary beast is still there in the boys’ minds. But most importantly, Jack’s dictatorship is the last power system standing.

The use of uniforms becomes a symbol of transformation that bonds Jack’s tribe even closer together. Already from the beginning, when Jack is introduced as the leader of the church choir, they wear uniforms:

[D]ressed in strangely eccentric clothing. Shorts, shirts, [...] but each boy wore a square black cap with a silver badge on it. Their bodies [...] were hidden by black cloaks, which bore a long silver cross on the left breast, and each neck was finished off with a hambone frill. [...] The boy who controlled them was dressed in the same way though his cap badge was golden. (Golding 19)

These uniforms mark them as a team. Once Jack’s tribe is established, however, they have a new kind of military uniform: different colors of dirt as dazzle paint (Golding 140). Once a boy “converts” to Jack’s tribe, he gets the dazzle paint to show that he is one of them now. Everyone in Jack’s tribe gets marked with the dazzle paint to distinguish themselves from Ralph’s group. Also, as the uniforms did for the choir, the dazzle paint strengthens them as a team, like soldiers going to war. The dazzle paint is meant as camouflage, so they cannot be seen. The paint also robs the boys of their personal identities, making them do things they could not do as individuals, like killing a person: “When the hunters paint their faces and kill pigs, they are losing their individualism, and becoming part of a group mentality of savagery” (Stein et al.). The paint separates them from their usual principles, such as choosing what is right and wrong. Jack wants the individual to be nothing and the group to be everything

(Alpers 30). A good example is Sam and Eric. In the beginning, they are twins with different names. But as the novel moves on, they are named as one person, namely Samneric. This shows that they are also stronger as a team than alone. Another example is when Jack does not care about that a boy from his choir is fainting (Golding 20). But the dazzle paint does one more thing. Jack himself alters his personality by painting his face. After that, his name becomes “chief” instead of Merridew, and he gets even more aggravated and goes berserk. Jack’s “[p]ersonality is overcome by power and he loses his name” (Gregor and Kinkead-Weekes 31).

One consequence of the symbolism of tribal hunting as well as the military symbols is killing. If Jack clearly knows that a boy cannot be convinced to join his tribe under any circumstance whatsoever, there is only one way to defeat his enemy: by killing the boy, getting rid of the enemy. This happens twice in the novel. The killing of Simon we have already discussed. The most tragic one, and the one that Jack is responsible for, is the death of Piggy: “[Roger’s] one hand [...] on the lever. [...] Roger [...] leaned all his weight on the lever. [...] The rock struck Piggy in a glancing blow from chin to knee” (Golding 180-81). Although Roger does the deed, Jack is still to blame for this catastrophe, because Roger is the right hand of Jack and does what is best for the chief, and therefore best for the chief’s tribe. Jack also wants to get rid of Ralph. He knows that Ralph has nothing anymore. Since democracy is no more, he can hunt him down like an animal: “Roger sharpened a stick at both ends” (Golding 190). Jack plans to kill Ralph and put his head on this stick in the ground, as he did with the pig they once killed. In other words, in the end, it is war to the death between Jack’s tribe and Ralph. Jack and his tribe fail to kill him only because Ralph stumbles upon a naval officer (Golding 200). This is another example of the symbolism for the violent tribal hunt.

Dancing would normally be a symbol of joy, pleasure, and of community.

However, in the novel it instead becomes a decoy, not seeing or feeling the fright on the island. When the members of Jack's group are scared, they dance around the fire. When Jack feels that fear starts to grow among the boys, he gets them to dance. For example, in one situation of the novel a thunderstorm is approaching: "The flickering light became brighter and the blows of the thunder were only just bearable. The littluns began to run about, screaming. Jack leapt on to the sand. 'Do our dance! Come on! Dance!'" (Golding 161). Focusing on something else, it gives the boys the feeling of not being alone and therefore takes away their fears (Gregor and Kinkead-Weekes 34). But they also dance in connection with the hunt. They do this either before or after the hunt, but it has always the same pattern. They scream, shout and dance. The dance is like a role play, or an Indian war dance. One boy is the sow and the others hunt him down while they scream, laugh and try to stab the boy with their spears. One important slogan is screamed and sung each time, because it is like Jack's tribe's sacred words: "Kill the beast. Cut his throat. Spill his blood" (Golding 152). By analyzing only the verbs in this saying it is clear that the shouting leads to violence and destruction. These are words of power and dominance, the words of a dictator.

The implied violence symbolized by the military uniforms and the war dance is directed not only outward, but within the tribe as well. Jack can grant or withhold food and hunting whenever he feels like it. To control others in order to keep discipline is one of his uppermost priorities. He has no problems in blackmailing a boy to get what he wants. Firstly, he is still somewhat calm: "If you want to join my tribe come and see us. Perhaps I'll let you join. Perhaps not" (Golding 140). He makes clear that he is the authority and that he decides what should happen. But he can also yell at the boys to make them feel inferior (Golding 20), and he loves to punish everyone for breaking the rules: "I said 'grab them'! [...] Tie them up! [...] Go on. Tie them" (Golding 178, 179). Sam and Eric, for example, get tortured by Roger on Jack's order:

The hangman's horror clung round him [Roger]. The chief said no more to him but looked down at Samneric.

"You go to join the tribe."

"You lemme go-"

"-and me."

The chief [...] poked Sam in the ribs. [...]

"What d'you mean by not joining my tribe?"

The prodding became rhythmic. Sam yelled. [...]

Roger edges past the chief [...] Roger advanced upon them [Samneric] as one wielding a nameless authority. (Golding 182)

Jack orders their torture because he wants them to join his tribe, and nothing else. He gives them only two options: join the tribe, or die. Also, at one time Robert and Roger are talking about Jack's punishment of Wilfred:

"He's going to beat Wilfred."

"What for?" [...]

"I don't know. He didn't say. He got angry and made us tie Wilfred up. He's been"-he giggled excitedly-"he's been tied for hours, waiting-"

"But didn't the chief say why?"

"I never heard him." (Golding 159)

These situations clearly show that Jack is willing to do everything to remain the chief of the island. If punishment is the only thing that works on the boys, then Jack has no problems in announcing a punishment for them. And apparently, Jack's strategy bears fruit. Sam and Eric decide to join Jack's tribe after being in captivity because they know what Jack is capable of.

Symbolizing the society of the island, there are tiny creatures along the shore.

When Henry walks along the beach, he discovers these tiny creatures:

He poked about with a bit of stick [...] and tried to control the motions of the scavengers. He made little runnels that the tide filled and tried to crowd them with creatures. He became absorbed beyond mere happiness as he felt himself exercising control over living things. He talked to them, urging them, ordering them. Driven back by the tide, his footprints became bays in which they were trapped and gave him the illusion of mastery. (Golding 61)

It clearly shows that everyone wants to be a leader sometime. As long as one is faster, stronger and taller than others, then one has the power to control them. “[B]ecause there is savagery in all of us, civilization is a thin and fragile veneer” (Dalrymple 26). Henry is in this case not better than Jack, because Henry rules over the small creatures in the sand like a dictator. He does not care how the creatures feel about his decision to poke around them with a stick and disturbing their lives. He just does it, just like in a dictatorial power system. No one is right but the leader, in that case Henry. The little critters have no other chance then to allow Henry to do what he does in order to survive. This shows us that savagery is in all of us. The critters can be compared to the littluns since they share the same problems facing a strong leader without a possibility to change the situation. This savagery is the way the boys behave on the island.

To sum up, one can see that many of the symbols in the novel are tied to a social power relation. The conch is the most powerful symbol for the democratic power system. Yet the shelters and the map are also important for democracy. Since the democratic system is associated with peace, silence is an essential symbol. As for Jack, noise describes his tribe. Also Piggy’s glasses can be considered a democratic symbol, since they provide vision and are used to bring the group to safety by lighting the signal fire. When Jack steals them later

and uses them for his and his tribe's purposes they no longer provide vision but are used to light the tribal fire. The fire can also be a symbol for both power systems. The democratic power system uses the fire as signal while Jack's tribe uses it as a centre for food and dance. Eating is also a symbol that can be tied to both power systems. In the beginning they only eat fruits because Ralph cannot hunt. Jack's tribe hunts and therefore they get pork, which can be considered the island's currency. Jack's tribe itself is important as a dictatorial symbol. Everything Jack does is because of or for the tribe. The most important symbol that the tribe does is hunting. They even dance around the fire to celebrate the hunt. The dancing itself is also one of many symbols that are tied to Jack and his power system. The uniforms and the dazzle paint are used by Jack's tribe and are therefore tied to Jack as well. What the boys fear is the beast. This symbol that should be tied to the dictatorial power system is imaginary, yet it is in every boy's head. Without the beast, Jack's tribe would have been different. This is also why he decides to erect a pig head on a stick, the cruelest symbol in the novel, and one that represents evil. Since Jack's tribe created the pig head, it belongs to the dictatorial power system. Lastly, the society on the island is shown by the tiny creatures that Henry plays god over. This symbol for the society shows how Jack is "chief" over the boys in another way. Those symbols that I have found are always important items that either Ralph or Jack use intentionally or unintentionally. The use of symbols is crucial to this novel, thus Golding shows us that an item is more powerful than it first seems.

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