

Lesson 6: Symbolism, Part 1

☐ Getting Started

When you see a heart shape, what do you think of? You probably think of love, femininity, or romantic attraction. The reason you're prompted by this sight is that the heart is consistently used as a symbol for these ideas. A **symbol** is something that is used to represent something beyond its literal meaning, usually something greater, more complex, or more abstract than the symbol itself. The heart shape is a visual symbol. Another example of a visual symbol is a flag. When you see one, you think of the country that arrangement of shapes and colors represents.

Lord of the Flies, like most great works of literature, contains symbols. There are clues for recognizing important symbols in a story; for example, look for objects that are repeatedly discussed and are important to a main character. In *Lord of the Flies*, Piggy's glasses meet these criteria. The conch does as well. While virtually everyone who has read the novel agrees that these are important symbols, there are varying opinions regarding what precisely these objects represent.

In order to determine your own ideas about what an object represents, ask yourself some basic questions about the object. For example: What does it do or accomplish? Who does it belong to? It is powerful? Is it fragile? Take a moment to think about the answers to these questions about Piggy's glasses before reading the next paragraph.

Piggy's glasses enable him to see. They also are used to create fire. Fire can be destructive, or it can be helpful. So the glasses are powerful. They are also fragile. Some critics believe that the glasses represent science and technology. Some readers interpret the glasses to represent intelligence, and some say they represent civilization. Although these interpretations vary somewhat, the concepts are closely tied. Symbolism usually leaves some room for interpretation or debate among readers, but a good author's broad aim can always be, at least approximately, determined by readers through critical thinking.

Stuff You Need

- *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding
- journal

Ideas to Think About

- How does individual power change in relationships with others?
- Do individuals control groups, or do groups control individuals?

Things to Know

- A **symbol** is anything that is used to represent something beyond the meaning of the original; symbols are often more complex or more abstract than the original.

Activities

☐ Activity 1: The Conch and the Glasses

In this activity, you will explore some important symbolic objects from the novel and consider which interpretation you support about what those symbols represent. Explain the interpretation you agree with and back up your explanation with support from the text. Follow the instructions on the activity page "The Conch and the Glasses."

☐ Activity 2: Journal Entry

Write a one-page journal entry from the point of view of the character you chose to write about in Lesson 3. The character should record actions and quotes from the other main characters that indicate the effect the boys have on one another and the island. As you write, consider the top priorities of the boy you are writing for. What is most important to him? What does he fear? Whom does he trust?

Wrapping Up

Art and literature are open to interpretation. People from disparate backgrounds are able to understand and relate to the same work in different ways. Even if you have read or heard someone else's interpretation of the symbols in *Lord of the Flies*, consider the things you know to be true of the author and perform your own evaluation.

Homework

For homework, you will read and answer questions about Chapter 7 of the novel and add to your STEAL character pages.

☐ Reading and Questions

Read Chapter 7 and then answer the following questions. Add to the STEAL character pages as you read or after you have completed the reading.

1. How does the environment impact the boys' psyches?

2. What does Simon tell Ralph when they are sitting alone? How do you think he knows this?

3. What did they do to Robert during the pig hunt?

4. What did Ralph, Roger, and Jack discover in the woods?



The Conch and the Glasses



Directions: Below are listed some of the important symbolic objects from *Lord of the Flies*, along with examples of the ways critics have interpreted each object. Circle the interpretation you most agree with and write a brief explanation, supported by the text, of why you made that choice.

Body paint: violence new identities priorities

As Jack separates himself from the original group, he takes off his clothes from civilization and wears only the paint. The paint becomes a way for the boys to hide who they are: "We'll put on paint and sneak up" (p. 136), and it marks their new violent selves: "Savages appeared, painted out of recognition" (p. 175).

Piggy's glasses: science and technology intelligence civilization

The conch: social order democracy communication

The signal fire: hope civilization inner goodness

The beast: savagery fear ignorance

Parachutist: death the failures of civilization loss of hope

Clothes: link to civilization restraint morality

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Getting Started

✿ Ideas to Think About

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- Do individuals control groups, or do groups control individuals?

📖 Things to Know

- A **symbol** is anything that is used to represent something beyond the meaning of the original; symbols are often more complex or more abstract than the original.

🎯 Skills

- Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme. (LA)
- Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text. (LA)

Introducing the Lesson

In this lesson, students learn that symbols are used to represent ideas in addition to their literal meanings — ideas that are greater, more complex, or more abstract. *Lord of the Flies* is filled with symbolism. Students are taught to recognize symbols by considering the possible meanings of recurring objects and objects that are important to main characters. Students are also introduced to some of the critical thinking questions that will help them form their own ideas regarding symbolism in the novel.

Activities

Activity 1: The Conch and the Glasses

Students are asked to consider some of the common interpretations of symbolic items in *Lord of the Flies* and to choose the interpretation they most agree with. They will follow that up with a brief explanation of why they made the choice they did. One choice per symbolic item should be circled, and two to three sentences should follow in the lines provided. Answers will vary. Note that any of the interpretations for each item is acceptable, but students should be able to explain their choice and back it up with support from the text.

Activity 2: Journal Entry

Students are asked to write a one-page journal entry from the point of view of the character they chose to write about in Lesson 3. The journal entry should include this character's observations about each of the main characters' personality traits and impact on the group. Answers will vary but should be consistent with these ideas:

- Ralph is frustrated with the other boys and obsessed with being rescued.
- Piggy is loyal to Ralph and is intelligent, but Piggy is not self-reliant or influential with the other boys.

- Jack is not very interested in returning to civilization, and he is obsessed with hunting.
- Simon is private, loyal to Ralph, and tends to be optimistic.

Wrapping Up

Questions to Discuss

- The conch is an important symbol. Does the importance of the conch to the boys change from the beginning of the novel to the later chapters? Why or why not? (The conch is used to facilitate communication by both calling boys to meetings and maintaining order during the meetings. As fear and unrest grow among the boys, the conch becomes less respected and influential.)
- Nature and the island are symbolic in the novel. Do they sustain the boys or trap them? What do you think Golding felt about the relationship between humans and the natural world? (Answers will vary.)
- Would Piggy survive on the island without Ralph and the other boys? Would they survive without him? (Answers will vary but should indicate that Piggy has physical limitations, so he needs to rely on the other boys to perform physical tasks including gathering wood. On the other hand, he contributes to society through ideas and through the aid his glasses provide in starting fires. However, the fire in the beginning of the novel burns out of control and one boy dies. Additionally, they have not been rescued by a signal fire, so the contribution of the fire is yet to be determined.)

Things to Review

Encourage students to think critically about what each symbolic item represents and to remain open to adjusting their interpretations as the novel unfolds. This will help prepare them for the final essay at the end of the unit.

Homework

For homework, students will read and answer questions about Chapter 7 and add to their STEAL character pages.

Reading and Questions

1. How does the environment impact the boys' psyches?

Their moods can change based on the environment. If it is sunny and beautiful outside, they seem to be happier and more carefree. If it is dark, they are afraid. On the peaceful side of the island they seem to feel more hope. On the other side of the island, they are more hopeless.

2. What does Simon tell Ralph when they are sitting alone? How do you think he knows this?

He tells Ralph that he will get back all right. Answers will vary but could include that he is hopeful, or he is just being encouraging, or that he may be supernatural.

3. What did they do to Robert during the pig hunt?

They jabbed at him, surrounded him, and started chanting "Kill him!"

4. What did Ralph, Roger, and Jack discover in the woods?

A creature that looked like a great ape.