Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

Lord of the Flies

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Plot

- During a war, a plane carrying British schoolboys crashes on an uninhabited tropical island. There are no adults.
- Ralph is elected chief and uses a **conch** shell to call meetings. Piggy, clever but mocked, advises him. The boys build shelters and a signal fire, lit using Piggy's glasses.
- Jack, head of the choirboys, leads the hunters. Obsessed with hunting pigs, they let the fire go out just as a ship passes. Fear of a 'beast' spreads.
- Jack breaks away and forms his own tribe. Simon, alone in the forest, sees a pig's head on a stick, the 'Lord of the Flies', and discovers that the 'beast' is a dead parachutist. When he runs to tell the others, the boys, in a frenzied dance during a storm, kill him.
- Jack's tribe steals Piggy's glasses. Roger kills Piggy with a boulder, and the **conch** is smashed. The tribe hunts Ralph and sets the island on fire. A naval officer arrives and rescues them, and Ralph weeps.

Themes

- **Civilisation** and **savagery**, power and leadership, fear, the **loss of innocence**, and the evil within human nature.

Symbols

- The **conch** stands for order and democracy; Piggy's glasses for intelligence and science; the signal fire for hope of rescue; the beast for the boys' own fear and evil; and the Lord of the Flies for the evil inside everyone.

Context

- William Golding published it in 1954. He had served in the Royal Navy in the Second World War, and wrote during the Cold War, in the nuclear age.
- It responds to The Coral Island (1857), an adventure story in which stranded British boys behave well. Golding suggests the opposite: at the end, Ralph weeps for 'the end of innocence' and 'the darkness of man's heart'.

How to get top marks

- Have a big idea: Golding suggests that evil isn't out there on the island, but inside the boys, and so inside us.
- Track the symbols as they change: the **conch** shatters, the fire goes from rescue to destruction, Piggy's glasses are stolen.
- Use context in one sentence: Golding wrote after serving in the Second World War, and had seen what ordinary people could do.

Key terms

Allegory	A story in which characters and events represent bigger ideas.
Symbolism	Using objects to represent ideas.
Civilisation	An ordered society with rules and laws.
Savagery	Wild, violent behaviour without rules.
Microcosm	A small world that represents a larger one.
Loss of innocence	Moving from childhood innocence to knowledge of evil.
Conch	The shell used to call meetings and give the right to speak.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Why are the boys on the island?
2. What does the conch symbolise?
3. How is the signal fire first lit?
4. Why is Ralph angry with the hunters when a ship passes?
5. What is the 'Lord of the Flies'?
6. What does Simon discover the 'beast' really is?
7. How does Simon die?
8. Who kills Piggy?

Your notes

Answers

1. Their plane crashed during a war
2. Order and democracy
3. With Piggy's glasses
4. They let the signal fire go out
5. A pig's head on a stick
6. A dead parachutist
7. The boys kill him in a frenzied dance, mistaking him for the beast
8. Roger

What to do next

Practise 12 questions on this topic

Try 4 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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