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The Influence of Symbols

Symbols and their meanings influence the choices made by people on a regular basis. From advertisements to religion, symbols are everywhere. In William Golding's, *Lord of the Flies*, there are various objects that serve as symbols, the conch, for example. The question is, why do we hold them to such high power? There have been a multitude of psychological studies done on this and the majority came to the same general conclusion. In many cases, symbols, such as lucky charms, tend to be coping mechanisms. Symbols distract people from the fact that, in the grand scheme of things, their lives are relatively small and insignificant. In other words, they give people something to look up to and believe in.

In the beginning of Chapter 2, Ralph, the elected leader of the group, uses the conch to call the boys to a meeting. He begins by explaining that they are, in fact, stuck on an uninhabited island. He then goes on to establish that they need some form organization and regulation to keep track of what happens in the group. The first rule created is that the person holding the conch is allowed to speak without being interrupted. We can see the rule in action immediately because Piggy decides to pick up the conch. The author writes, "Ralph felt the conch lifted from his lap. Then Piggy was left cradling the giant cream shell and the shouting died down." (33) As the reader can see, the conch is already respected. The moment Piggy grabbed the conch, all side conversations stopped. One might think that the respect was aimed at Piggy, however, the

children have showed that they don't really care what Piggy has to say in previous scenes, oftentimes, when Piggy tries to speak, he is interrupted or yelled at. In this scene alone, the author writes that Jack looked at Ralph "uncertainly" when Piggy prepared to speak. The conch is respected, while Piggy is not. This is due to the fact Piggy is a human, therefore he is subject to change and he's in the same boat as the other boys. The conch, on the other hand, is an unchanging symbol of the respect that the boys need to have for each other.

Symbols are not only found in books, they are seen in real life, too. Even when examining religion alone, there is an abundance of symbols. Take rosaries, for example, they are strings of beads used to keep count of prayers. In terms of material worth, they typically aren't worth much. However, they have great value when it comes to religious and personal meaning. Symbols aren't just limited to being physical objects, religion as a whole is a symbol on some level. The American Psychological Association did an interview with Kenneth I. Pargament, who is a leading expert on the psychology of religion. When he was asked about the relationship between religion and coping, Pargament stated, "People often do turn to their faith as a source of solace and support in their most stressful moments." To put it simply, religion is a source of comfort for many. It allows people to momentarily escape the stress of the things that are bothering them. Although faith is different for each individual, the part that remains consistent is that it offers the comfort of having something larger than them to give them a purpose. In the long run, the lives of individuals aren't as impactful to the entire world as we would like to say they are. For many, religion helps them cope with this fact. When they feel as though their lives are insignificant, they turn to their version of the greater good to find meaning.

Throughout the novel, Ralph has his priorities set on keeping the fire going. The majority of the other boys don't take this as seriously as he does, possibly because the fire doesn't mean as much to them as it does for Ralph. At this point in the book, around the middle of Chapter 4, Ralph had just watched a boat pass by and he realized that the boys that were supposed to be in charge of keeping the fire going left to hunt for food. Ralph was extremely upset by this as the reader can see when the author writes, "Ralph spoke again, hoarsely. He had not moved. 'You let the fire go out.' This repetition made Jack uneasy." (70) Ralph is furious to the point where he is calm. To him, the fire was the representation of rescue, it was the last hope for the boys to be freed. For Jack to let the fire go out is to kill the opportunities they had to escape. The author describes the topic of the fire going out as an "irrelevance" to Jack, which shows us that the fire isn't as important to him as killing a pig. To Ralph, this makes it seem like Jack has accepted that they are stuck on the island and that they will be for a while. The fire was the symbol of escape, if it weren't for the carelessness of Jack and his hunters, the boys could have been saved right then and there. Ralph believed that the fire was the one thing that determined whether or not they were going to be saved. The fire going out shows the first glimpse of the civilization they are trying to build, falling apart before it is even created.

Overall, it may be said that symbols are of the most influential parts of human life. They are the strongest coping mechanisms that humans have, simply because they can have any meaning an individual assigns to them. The opinions people have tend to change, based on a variety of factors and other people tend to disagree with them. One person's meaning for a symbol never disagrees with their own opinions, which is why symbols are held to high power.

This is seen in the *Lord of the Flies* as well as in real life situations and it very obviously influences many of the decisions made.

Works Cited:

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Pargament, Kenneth I. "The Psychology of Religion and Spirituality." Interview by American Psychological Association. *What Role Do Religion and Spirituality Play in Mental Health*. American Psychological Association, 22 Mar. 2013. Web. 28 Mar. 2017.
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