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Circular Thinking: An Original Analysis of *Lord of the Flies*

John Callon
Wright State University

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**Circular Thinking: An Original
Analysis of *Lord of the Flies***

JOHN CALLON

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Dr. Nancy Mack

Dr. Mack notes that students were challenged to do a close reading of a classic novel to look for patterns in the text that would lead to an original literary analysis. As future teachers, they also learned strategies for teaching discovery methods to inductively scaffold student learning. John's essay explores the symbol of circles in the text rather than the more obvious symbols of the shell or the glasses.

After reading William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* for the first time in the 11th grade, I have considered it to be one of my favorite novels. This distinction, in the past, has been based solely on the storyline and setting of the book. Not until rereading in college have I realize how much of a genius Golding is and how eloquent his writing is. Everything from his language and characterization to his use of imagery and symbols help to create this subtle-yet-poignant masterpiece. The text is so rich that, even on my third reading of it, I am still discovering new gems, as I'm sure I will with future readings.

One aspect of the book that really stood out to me most during my recent reading is how symbols in the book change in meaning as the story progresses. There are several instances of this, but I want to focus specifically on the use of the circle and how its purpose shifts within the text. In many parts throughout the book, the boys are arranged together in a circle, for meetings, for hunting, for play, etc. I will explain how Golding repeatedly uses the boys gathered in a circle to illustrate that the very nature of the collective changes from security and stability to exclusion and violence. I will start by looking at the good uses for the circle and end with the bad.

At the beginning of the novel, the boys gather in a circle for their meetings. Though far from flawless, even from the beginning, this circle serves a mostly good purpose. The circle gives them a forum to express their ideas and share their deepest fears. It gives them an illusion of civilization and order, as well as a sense that they are not alone. Ralph is in charge of these meetings and even he takes comfort in the circle, as he "looked for confirmation round the ring of faces" (32). At its best, the circle represents safety and security. It gives the boys an opportunity to be together for reassurance and community. Golding uses these brief instances of harmony and fellowship to contrast harshly with how relationships on the island change by the end of the novel.

Other than their meetings, the boys also find a feeling of safety and security by gathering together around their signal fire at the top of the mountain. In the company of each other and in the warmth of the fire, "unkindness melted away. They became a circle of boys around a camp fire" (67). Regardless of the fears of beasts or the

ever-increasing tensions between the boys, the harmony of the circle combined with the comfort of the fire provides the boys with a momentary feeling of well-being. The reader gets a sense that, despite the ongoing power struggle and hurt feelings between Ralph and Jack, everything is fine for the boys in this exact moment. Life is fine while they eat together and bask in the warmth of the fire. Golding uses this moment to show the reader that the circle allows the boys to forget their troubles and differences briefly because of the solace that their community offers.

By the end of the novel, however, the circle serves a much different purpose. Rather than providing the boys with belonging, it helps to exclude. After the death of Piggy and the capture of the twins, Ralph goes alone to Castle Rock where Jack and his hunters dwell. He hears dancing and knows that “Somewhere on the other side of this rocky wall there would be a dark circle, a glowing fire, and meat. They would be savoring food and the comfort of safety” (172). It is a scene very similar to the one previously mentioned, except that this time someone is on the outside of the circle looking in rather than a part of it. Ralph is not just alone, but alone and excluded from the comfort of the circle, which makes his isolation that much more profound. With Ralph on the outside of the circle looking in, Golding shows the reader how the collective can quickly shift its purpose from accepting and supporting individuals to marginalizing and ostracizing them.

The boys also utilize the circle for the purpose of hunting pigs. Though by no means a necessity, hunting does provide them with some extra nourishment. Hunting is only possible if the boys work together, and so Golding mentions the circle and the collective again. The circle is the key weapon in their first successful hunt, as “[the pig] turned back and ran into the circle bleeding [...] the first blow had paralyzed its hind quarters, so then the circle could close in and beat and beat” (68). The circle is used in this instance as a means of killing - for nourishment, yes - but also partly for recreational purposes. The boys clearly find great pleasure in hunting the pig. As their time on the island passes, the hunting becomes more savage, brutal, and gruesome, especially for this vegetarian reader. Through

hunting by way of a circle, Golding shows that strength can be found in the collective. Though not always good, great things can be accomplished using this collective strength.

It is clear that the boys are hunting for more reasons than just sustenance, especially when they start mock hunting each other for fun. As with real hunting, their mock hunting employs a circle and allows them to do everything but kill their fake pig. In one of many instances of mock hunting in the novel, the boys walk a fine line between fun and malice. In one example of mock hunting, “Jack shouted. ‘Make a ring!’ The circle moved in and round. Robert squealed in mock terror, then in real pain” (106). What starts out as fun goes much too far and easily gets out of control. The killing of the pig is reenacted and revealed in over and over by the boys. Even Ralph, who is supposed to be the responsible one among the group, is drawn to the mock hunting. At one point, Ralph is “fighting to get near, to get a handful of that brown, vulnerable flesh. The desire to squeeze and hurt was over-mastering” (106). The mock hunting is compelling evidence of how something like hunting, though not entirely necessary or good in itself, can be perverted and used to derive a very dark, primal pleasure.

Eventually, it is the circle that allows for the boys to murder Simon. Up until this point, none of the boys would ever dare to murder another human, but the anonymity that the circle offers suddenly makes it very easy to do. Gathered in the circle, they lose their individuality and “throb and stamp [like] a single organism” (140). This lack of individuality and conscience allows them to commit violent acts that normally they would not do. The circle of boys becomes a unique creature, a creature hungry to inflict pain. It gives them an opportunity to escape their own humanity. When Simon wanders out of the forest to where this creature comprised of boys is located, he is swallowed up by it. Golding describes how “the mouth of the new circle crunched and screamed” and “the beast [Simon] was on its knees in the center, its arms folded over his face” (141). He doesn’t describe it as the boys killing Simon, but as the circle killing Simon. The circle becomes a fierce creature of its own that can commit violence as it wishes. This vision of the pain

individuals can inflict on others when caught up in the collective is extremely haunting for the reader.

During my investigation on circles and how their use changes in the text, I finally grasped just how brilliant Golding is as a writer and why *Lord of the Flies* is taught so widely. Something as simple as mapping when the boys are in a circle, a fairly subtle detail, provided me with a very compelling reading of the novel. This could be done with any number of symbols, objects, or characters, which is why I have an even greater appreciation for Golding and for the novel than I did before.

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Work Cited

Golding, William. *Lord of the Flies*. 1954. New York: Penguin Putnum. Print.