



BREAD AND CIRCUSES: JACK'S OFFER TO THE BOYS

It is not uncommon to hear people talk about “bread and circuses” when discussing governance and politics. The term was coined by Roman satirist Juvenal almost 2000 years ago. Broadly defined, bread and circuses describes when people become so easily distracted by food and entertainment they lose their focus on more important issues facing society.

In some ways, the appeal of Jack's rule over Ralph's demonstrates this concept. Jack is often associated with exciting concepts like hunting, feasts, and dances. Ralph, on the other hand, is often associated with more mundane concepts like democracy, rescue, and shelter. This contrast is well-demonstrated as the feast ends in Chapter 9:

“Who'll join my tribe and have fun?”

“I'm chief,” said Ralph tremulously. “And what about the fire? And I've got the conch—”

“You haven't got it with you,” said Jack, sneering. “You left it behind. See, clever? And the conch doesn't count at this end of the island—” (p. 166)

Ralph's concern with stability, order, and well-being is contrasted with Jack's concern for fun, or bread and circuses. One outcome of prioritizing bread and circuses is highlighted as the storm approaches:

“Going to be a storm,” said Ralph, “and you'll have rain like when we dropped here. Who's clever now? Where are your shelters? What are you going to do about that?” (p. 167).

Taken together, this illustrates how Ralph's leadership priorities mean people will have basic necessities. Jack's fixation of feasts and dances, on the other hand, does not fulfill these needs.

However, none of this means that Ralph is above the temptation of bread and circuses. Ralph (and Piggy) took Jack's gift of meat at the feast, “dribbling” at it like dogs. This would suggest that even leaders with the purest of motives are still subject to human desires.

Indeed, there is nothing wrong with celebrations, feasts, and entertainment. In fact, they are necessary for a happy and fully-functioning society. However, as the lack of shelters for the coming storm indicates, it is doubtful that society can survive on bread and circuses alone.

CONSIDER

1. When Piggy arrives at the feast, he is bumped by boys carrying hot meat:

Immediately, Ralph and the crowd of boys were united and relieved by a storm of laughter. Piggy once more was the centre of social derision so that everyone felt cheerful and normal. (p. 164)

- a) How has the social ridicule of Piggy been one of the “circuses” for the boys?
- b) Is this healthy for Piggy? Explain.
- c) Is this healthy for the boys as a whole? Explain.

2. How do bread and circuses work to obscure public debate about good laws and good governance?
3. Do you think there are too many bread and circuses in society today? Not enough? Explain.

FOR FUTURE READING

At the feast, Ralph tried to remind the boys of the importance of huts for shelter and fire for rescue. As the story continues, watch to see if Jack takes heed of Ralph's advice.