International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature
ISSN 2200-3592 (Print), ISSN 2200-3452 (Online)
Vol. 5 No. 3; May 2016
Australian International Academic Centre, Australia
Flourishing Creativity & Literacy

# The Sacred Sin
# A Brief Analysis of the Narrative Structure of Dual Irony in *The Spire*

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Received: 17-12-2015 Accepted: 08-03-2016 Advance Access Published: March 2016
Published: 01-05-2016 doi:10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.5n.3p.257 URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.5n.3p.257

**Abstract**

In William Golding's novel *The Spire*, irony as a narrative device is conspicuously employed within the narrative of the story, however, hidden behind this obvious textual irony there is another layer of irony ingeniously designed by the author, which smoothly incorporates the readers into its realm of irony. Moreover, the degree to which the readers recognize this dual irony will eventually decide the width and depth of their analysis when they interpret the protagonist Jocelin and even the allegorical significance of the whole novel.

**Keywords:** Jocelin, the spire, irony, dual irony, moral judgment

## 1. Introduction

One of the most conspicuous narrative techniques employed in William Golding's novel *The Spire* is irony. Irony as a rhetoric device in literature is a common occurrence in various literary genres. In *A Rhetoric of Irony Wayne Booth* divided irony into two kinds: stable irony and unstable irony. In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, stable irony is explained as one "in which the speaker or author makes available to the reader an assertion or position which, whether explicit or implied, serves as a firm ground for ironically qualifying or subverting the surface meaning" (Abrams 166); while unstable irony is defined as one which "offers no fixed standpoint which is not itself undercut by further ironies" (166). As can be easily noticed, the difference between stable irony and unstable irony by and large depends on the authorial "assertion" or "standpoint" explicitly or implicitly conveyed, but the problem with this is that the authorial intention can be (and in most cases is) a guesswork in the critic circle. Given the uncertainty of the authorial intention, irony revealed in some literary works may blur the demarcating line between the two kinds and hence takes on a dubious nature. Irony as demonstrated in Golding's *The Spire* is a good case in point. The dubious nature of the irony revealed in this novel enables the irony transcends its textual constraints to incorporate the readers and even critics into its realm of irony. In other words, the irony in this novel operates on two dimensions, one happens within the text, directed at the protagonist Jocelin in terms of his behavior and his ideas, the other occurs out of the text, targeted at the readers and even critics who make judgments about Jocelin's behavior and ideas. On its textual dimension, the presence of irony in the narrative is so conspicuous that the readers and even the critics can be easily induced to make rather unfair and partial judgments when they are trying to give any moral or ethical criticism about the protagonist Dean Jocelin and his enterprise. From the perspective of the novel's allegorical significance, Dean Jocelin should not, or rather, cannot be simply regarded neither as "a tempted visionary, a manic depressive, an obsessive" (Page 29), nor as, like some Chinese critics put it, "self-conceited and self-deceived egomaniac"(Li 140 translated),or a very mean person who "collect money to build his own fame in the name of his reverence for God"(Qu 98 translated). Misreading as such is understandable, given the fact that the entire narrative, on its superficial level, pivots on his behavior and inner world that manifest in an ironic way his obsession, self-conceit and self-deception. However, behind this seemingly superficial irony there is another layer of irony outside the text by means of which the author ingeniously incorporates the readers into the realm of irony. This article aims to explore the narrative techniques that contribute to the construction of this dual irony and to provide some new perspectives of reading in terms of moral and ethical judgment about Dean Jocelin, hoping that it may rectify some existing misreading about this character among the audience and the critics.

## 2. Narrative Trap---Dual Irony

### *2.1 Prearranged Moral Judgment*

In the narrative of the novel, the protagonist Dean Jocelin is endowed with three narrative roles, namely, central consciousness, focalizer and the focalized. This combination of the three narrative roles into one, together with Jocelin's "aberrant" psyche makes the novel tinged from its very outset with the features of the narrative of madness. Indeed, from the perspective of pure reason, who else but a lunatic would determine to build a spire of 400 feet high on a cathedral that lacks foundations itself, and all that is just for a vision. The irony within the narrative can be conspicuously felt at the very beginning of the story, when the two deacons were heard gossiping about somebody:

"Say what you like; he's proud."

"And arrogant."

"Do you know what? He thinks he is a saint! A man like that!" (Golding, 9)

The gossip here serves as a narrative trap, a prearranged moral judgment about Jocelin. At this stage of the narrative, the audience is as unconscious as Jocelin of the fact that in the gossip, "he" refers to Jocelin himself. But as the story unfolds gradually, the audience is very likely to make the same moral judgment about Jocelin as the two deacons did.

*2.2 Jocelin's "Vile"Acts*

The sanctity of his enterprise is gradually giving way to its opposite as the facts about him unveil themselves in the process of the narration. He was not chosen by God, instead, he was chosen by his aunt, mistress of the later king. After having pleased the king, she asked a favor for his nephew (Jocelin) from the king who then decided "to drop a plum in his mouth" (177). His love for Pangall's wife, Goody, who he claimed to be his "daughter in God"(7), has never been pure or holy, this self-deception is revealed from the very beginning of the story when he waited to see her and "got a glimpse of green dress as the grey cloak swung back"(7), this is actually an act of peeping imbued with sexual desire, but Jocelin denies its sexual implication thinking that it's just "foolish" and "childish curiosity"(7). His desire for Goody is also laid bare in the form of dream on a couple of occasions, but he would find various excuses for himself to deny its true implications. He arranged the marriage between Goody and Pangall who he knew is impotent; it betrays, as Howard S. Babb puts it, "how Jocelin has sought practically to preserve her for himself" (145). In order to keep Roger at work he connived at the adultery between Goody and Roger, which leads to Goody's miserable death in childbirth during the conflict between her and Roger's wife Rachel, and this event also becomes the downfall of Roger. The workers he employed to construct the spire are "murderers, cutthroats, rowdies, brawlers, rapers, notorious fornicators, sodomites, atheists, or worse" (161),who are also responsible for the miserable and mysterious death of Pangall. However, in Jocelin's eyes, these people are "the saintly and wise builders" (185). He also persecutes and oppresses his colleagues who oppose him; Father Adam becomes "Father Anonymous" who "has no face at all" (22), and his confessor Father Anselm becomes an overseer at the crossways. All in all, viewing from its story level, Jocelin's sacred mission is tainted from the very beginning to its very end with mundane sordidness and blasphemy, and Jocelin is in one way or another a blasphemy to the holiness of the mission. His desire for Goody constitutes an unrelentingly undermining power against the holiness of the spire, and in this way, the spire is stuck all the way through the novel with the image of a phallus. The dichotomy between sacredness and blasphemy, nobility and sordidness, good and evil, etc, that can be constantly felt in the reading of the novel constitutes a conspicuous dramatic irony. So it seems to be only natural for the audience to make an unfavorable moral and ethical judgment against Jocelin just as the two deacons did at the beginning of the novel. But the irony presented in the novel is far from a mere dramatic irony, it transcends its textual limits, taking on another layer that is targeted at the real audience. For Jocelin's psyche revealed in the novel defies any absolute interpretation and judgment.

*2.3 Jocelin's Wisdom and Compassion for Man*

With Jocelin's all these vile acts in mind, it seems to be only natural to assert that he himself is a blasphemy to the holiness of the mission he undertakes. However, in the long river of human history, in view of the Original Sin, there is really no feat that was not accomplished by "sinners", just as Jocelin says in the novel when he defends himself: "If David could not build the temple because he had blood on his hands, what is to be said of us, of me?"(151) Though he is constantly haunted and agonized by his desire for Goody, he chooses to give up on her. It might not be quite acceptable for the readers in terms of morality and ethnics, but Jocelin does it for the redemption of man, "*This have I done for my true love*" (132). In Jocelin's confused and chaotic thinking, what is frequently revealed is his compassion for the entire human race as well as his visionary and often transcendental insight into the very existence of man. When he tries to persuade Roger to have faith about his enterprise, he makes an analogy about man by comparing the life of mayfly and that of raven:

> Think of the mayfly that lives for no more than one day. That raven over there may have some knowledge of yesterday and the day before. The raven knows what the sunrise is like. Perhaps he knows there'll be another one. But the mayfly doesn't. There's never a mayfly who knows what it's like to be one! And that's where we've come!.....We are mayfly. (111-112)

What Jocelin intends to convey here through the analogy is not only the brevity of man's life but also the truth that man's knowledge about the world is rather limited. Indeed, man's observation and understanding of the world is confined to the five senses, at least it used to be so. Things are there just around us whose existence is far beyond the reach of the five senses of mortal man, ultraviolet rays, radio waves, neutrinos, just name a few, let alone things out there in the whole cosmos. Man's complacency about its knowledge of the world is laughable, modern technology with the advanced equipments that come along with it has proved it and will continue to prove it. Imagine, what sort of maniac would come up with such insightful understanding of man and the world.

Moreover, Jocelin is compassionate about man and its living status. What he sees when he climbs up the spire is a pathetic scene of the world below:

> The earth is a huddle of noseless men grinning upward, there are gallows everywhere, the blood of childbirth never ceases to flow, nor sweat in the furrow, the brothels are down there and drunk men lie in

> the gutter. There is no good thing in all this circle but the great house, the ark, the refuge, a ship to contain all these people and now fitted with a mast. Forgive me. (102)

What Jocelin sees up in the spire is a panoramic scene of a pathetic world full of people living in sins. The biblical reference is clear, blood of child birth, sweat in the furrow is an obvious reminder of the Original Sin and the consequent curse man is put to suffer. In Jocelin's eyes, the church is the only presence in such a world that may redeem those sinners , it's an ark, just like Noah's ark in the old days, and now he is fitting a mast to it. For Jocelin the spire is "a stone bible"(103), "the apocalypse in stone"(103), "a stone diagram of prayer" that "would lift up a cross and fight eye to eye with the fires of the devil"(150). All in all, Jocelin's spiritual aspiration is to restore people's faith in God in a time of spiritual crisis. He hopes that the completion of the spire may serve to turn over a new leaf in human history:

> Presently, with this great finger sticking up, the City would like the hub at the centre of a predestined wheel. New streets, New Inn, New Wharf, New Bridge; and now new roads to bring in the new people. (103)

For the fulfillment of his aspiration, he is ready to make use of anything and sacrifice anybody, literally anybody including Goody, himself, Pangall and Roger and those workers. The "will" is a recurrent motif in the novel, but its nature is also ambiguous, no definite conclusion can be drawn about whether it is Jocelin's will or God's will manifesting itself through Jocelin. Hence it's unfair to condemn Jocelin as a monomaniac who is ready to sacrifice all to exert his will.

## 3. Judgments on Jocelin and His Enterprise

### *3.1 Complexity of the Judgment*

So, in terms of moral and ethical judgment on Jocelin and his enterprise, it's far from an either-or situation. Good and evil are so intertwined here that they are inseparable. However, on the story level the irony presented in Jocelin's behavior is so evident and pungent that it threatens to reduce the story to a farce. But the obviousness of the irony is nothing but a narrative decoy or rather a narrative trap. For, the irony, on the story level, functions on two dimensions, one dimension is what happens in the story, the other being what happens to the readers of the novel outside the story. The moral and ethical judgment the readers may give on Jocelin is also a trial on them in terms of their own moral and ethical values, and in this way, the readers are unwittingly taken into the realm of the dual irony. The narrative effect of the dual irony is further intensified through Jocelin's comment on other people's criticism against him: "They think I am mad……Perhaps I am" (157), "on the purely human level of course, it's a story of shame and folly—Jocelin's folly, they call it"(162). The pronoun "they" here has double significations, it refers to both the people in the story and the real readers outside the story, who tend to dismiss him as a mad man and his enterprise as one of shame and folly. At the end of the story, Jocelin seems to have realized his "folly", he is seen doubting the very nature of his holy mission, repenting what he has done to the people around him and apologizing to them, begging their forgiveness. It seems that it stands to reason that the story is all about an egomaniac's ridiculous and bitter process of discovery about his own folly. But there is much more to that, just as Jocelin puts it in the novel himself: "That's too simple, like every other explanation. That gets nowhere near the root" (188).

### *3.2 What's in William Golding's Mind*

Then, what is the author's attitude towards Jocelin and his enterprise? No clear sign of his attitude can be traced in the narrative. It seems that what William Golding is preoccupied with is the creation of an aura of ambiguity and confusion. He makes use of symbols, images that invite multiple and in some cases opposing interpretations, no wonder Mark Kinkead-Weekes and Ian Gregor made such a comment on the spire and Jocelin:

> The Spire is built in heavy stone, in faith, in sin; all three things are true, and contradictory. For Jocelin there are explanations physiological, psychological, moral, religious, social; all are convincing in themselves, and none is satisfactory(Kinkead-Weekes 235).

Indeed, there is nothing that is definite. Throughout the entire narrative, William Golding endeavors to strike a balance between the opposing motifs such as good and evil, reality and fantasy, holiness and profanity, belief and science and so on. What his endeavor achieves is a powerful sense of tension, which expands from Jocelin's psych to the actual readers'. The tension creates a strong spiritual bond between Jocelin and the actual readers, by so doing, the readers during the process of reading may feel and experience what Jocelin feels and experiences in the story. It seems that William Golding intends his readers to come to the same recognition when they judge Jocelin and his enterprise in terms of morality and ethics, the recognition that the spire is just like "the apple tree"(215),which has "more…..than one branch"(196). Indeed, good and evil in man's nature, its spiritual aspiration and its intrinsic trammels as mortals may form appalling forces that are far beyond man's power of understanding and reason. It's actually the theme of the novel—the universal status of man's life and existence.

What is worth mentioning here, however, is that William Golding does leave, intentionally or unintentionally some trace of his attitude towards Jocelin and his spire. In his initial writing plan, he intended to let the spire fall down, but he finally decided against it (Carey 273). A 400-foot spire built on a cathedral lacking in solid foundation and with four pillars filled with pebbles, isn't it a miracle of faith itself? What does his decision imply? Does it imply that Golding holds a favorable attitude towards Jocelin and his enterprise? Moreover, in 1983, in his speech at the Nobel Prize Award Ceremony, he says:

> Twenty-five years ago I accepted the label 'pessimist'' thoughtlessly without realising that it was going to be tied to my tail, …… critics have dug into my books until they could come up with something that looked hopeless. I can't think why. I don't feel hopeless myself. Indeed I tried to reverse the process by explaining myself. ……when I consider a universe which the scientist constructs by a set of rules which stipulate that this construct must be repeatable and identical, then I am a pessimist and bow down before the great god Entropy. I am optimistic when I consider the spiritual dimension which the scientist's discipline forces him to ignore. Twenty years ago I tried to put the difference between the two kinds of experience in the mind of one of my characters, and made a mess of it. He was in prison.(Golding, Nobel Lecture 1983)

From these remarks, we can see that William Golding doesn't wish to be labeled as a pessimist, and he draws a demarcating line between the material world or a universe in terms of science and the spiritual world of man, and asserts that he is optimistic on the spiritual dimension of the world, in other words, he is optimistic about man's spiritual aspiration and pursuit. The character in whose mind he tried to put the difference between the two kinds of experience obviously refers to Jocelin, for twenty years ago, that is 1963, is the very time when he was writing *The Spire*. His critical remark on his own work may be understood in two ways; one is that he might be indeed not quite satisfied with his performance in the creation of the novel, the other being that he deplores in a manner of speaking the misinterpretations of his intention encoded in the novel. His remark— he was in prison—can be seen as a more straightforward manifestation of his disappointment at the misjudgment on Jocelin, which is still prevalent among common readers and literary critics.

**4. Conclusion**

It's simply impossible to draw a definite conclusion about how to judge Jocelin and his enterprise in terms of morality and ethics; it is a dilemma that is totally left to the discretion of the audience. Just as *The Times Literary Supplement* points out, Golding does have "moralistic designs on us" (qtd. in Summer 69).For, whatever verdicts we may give on Jocelin, they reflect on us as mortals too. The only thing that is clear is that William Golding has tried to convey his hope in man on the spiritual dimension, but unfortunately, his rendering of the story seems to have failed him. Jocelin is indeed a tragic figure, but he also deserves the title of a hero, his intention to build the spire to restore people's faith in God in a time of spiritual crisis is good, and "a good will is good not because of what it performs or effects, not by its aptness for the attainment of some proposed end, but simply by virtue of the volition; that is, it is good in itself" (qtd. in Hutchins 769).

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