

THE UNIVERSAL LITERARY MOTIF OF HUMAN SACRIFICE FOR THE ERECTION OF A STRUCTURE

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The literary motif of a necessary human sacrifice for the building of a permanent and lasting structure, such as a cathedral, a tower or other monumental buildings, can be detected in different cultural areas and in periods ranging from ancient or mediaeval times to the modern twentieth century.

In the present paper, we aim to outline some instances of this motif, without establishing a necessary direct influence between the different works, pointing however to the universality of the motif, and of course to the quite different artistic ways of embodying it in an artistic creation, as well as to the sundry underlying conceptions of their creators.

We shall, for the beginning, refer to *The Ballad of the Argesh Monastery* or of *Master Manole*, a recurrent motif in Romanian literature. According to the legend, whatever the craftsmen built in daytime was destroyed at night, so that the completion of the project seemed unattainable, to the moment when, following Manole's dream-vision, the builders decided that the first wife to bring them victuals the next morning should be built into the structure. It was only through this sacrifice of human life that the building could be finally completed. The stress in the legend is on fate, on a divine will imposing the sacrifice.

In the old Celtic legend about the tower of Vortigern, a defensive tower was to be built in Wales, in some rocky mountains at the request of Vortigern. All attempts to erect the structure of the tower seemed futile. All that was built by day, fell at night. The only way to achieve the project was to sacrifice the life of a young man. The subsequent variants of the legend and their equivalents on the continent have all in common the necessity of a sacrifice of human life for the successful completion of the project. Virginia Cartianu in her book on Celtic influences on Romanian culture has embarked on a detailed study of such examples¹

Turning to modern literature, we can identify the same motif in Ibsen's *Master-Builder Solness*, whose main character has had to pay a high price for the buildings he has erected. The price is the loss of happiness, he has to give up family life, gets estranged from his wife and family. Alienation from other human beings is the price paid by the artist for the fulfillment of his artistic creation.

This more modern tackling of the motif can be detected in William Golding's *The Spire*, which we shall deal with in what follows.

The Spire is the story of dean Jocelin's vision and subsequent determination to erect the spire of a cathedral, in a place where the land is not suitable and therefore such an enterprise is against the laws of architecture and of building engineering. Jocelin is ready to impose his strong will on the master builder Roger Mason, who, based on common-sensical arguments, refuses to carry out the project. The strong will motif is suggested in the novel by a recurrence of the word in different combinations, with different epithets such as: "His will began to burn fiercely"²; "and this is how a will feels when it is linked to a Will without limit or end"³; "and now my will has to support a whole world up there, before I can do it."⁴; "In this dry air his will, his blazing will was shut down to a steady glow, that illuminated and supported the new building and nothing else"⁵.

Once Jocelin choose this way he is ready to sacrifice all for it. He is not going to desist from his purpose, even though he gradually realizes that is is contrary to reason. The price paid for building the spire I shall term Jocelin's alienation. For Jocelin will find himself isolated, deserted by his former friend Anselm, and blamed by everybody for the loss of human life during the building of the spire. Alienation in Golding's novels is linked with the infringement of the limits set

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¹ Virginia Cartianu, 1972. *Urme celtice in spiritualitatea si cultura romaneasca*, Bucharest: Univvers.

² William Golding, 1964. *The Spire*, Faber, p. 82

³ idem, p. 84

⁴ idem, p.96

⁵ idem, p. 97

by reason. Anselm and Jocelin were once close friends, but they are now separated because they disagreed on the matter of the erection of the spire. Jocelin regrets the loss of friendship, but is prepared to pay the price. "I thought you would cost no more than money. But still, cost what you like."⁶

This is the motif of alienation from the fellow-human beings, a sacrifice Jocelin has freely assumed for the building of the spire.

The use of others for one's own ends, specific to other characters of Golding, such as Christopher Martin, or Samuel Mountjoy, is in Jocelin's case more elaborate than stated so far in the present paper. Jocelin becomes aware of a love affair between the master builder and Goody Pangall, but does nothing as a priest to stop it, as he sees in it a means of preventing the master builder's leaving the construction site. The death of Goody Pangall in child birth must also be added to the cost of the spire building, for Jocelin used her as his tool for preventing the master builder from giving up work on the spire and going elsewhere.

Ironically the building of the spire, instead of bringing people together in worship in the cathedral, leaves the place deserted and Jocelin is isolated, estranged, alienated. "All I know is, I looked for men of faith to be with me; and there was none."⁷ Jocelin is at the beginning convinced that he must act at the command of a divine power and therefore thinks that his motifs are pure and selfless. He used to think of himself as a saintly man soaring above the common man, looking at the rest of humanity from the height of a tower, a height that symbolized a morally pure man. In the name of the divine power he thinks any price may be paid, human lives included, for the attainment of the final target. He becomes responsible in this way for the death of a workman, for that of Goody Pangall, for the shattering of Roger Mason's life, who could have left for another building site, but had been prevented from it.

Gradually in the novel, through his stream of consciousness flash-backs or from his confessions, we find out that he had more earthly reasons for keeping

Goody near him. He was in love with her and had arranged her marriage with the impotent church servant Pangall. From these insights as well as from the others' angle of vision, he is far from being a saint, he is a tyrant, a man bringing destruction to those around him.

Jocelin also finds out that his being chosen Dean of the cathedral was by no means of a divine nature. His aunt had arranged for his promotion with the king, whose mistress she had been. Seen in this light Jocelin's claim that he has acted as the performer of a divine mission is ironically reversed. Irony has always been a favourite device in Golding's novels. It takes a long time of suffering and efforts for Jocelin to become aware of his real nature and get a feeling of guilt. He finally realizes that the dark aspects of his nature had prompted him to act so as to go beyond reasonable limits for the attainment of goals that, to him, had seemed to be inspired by a divine mission.

Man's ideals seem elevated and the failure to reach them is tragic. On the other hand, ideals cannot be reached because of the flaws in human nature. The bringing out of these is usually a comic revealing, that gradually comes to the reader's attention. To Jocelin his motifs seemed pure but they are revealed as selfish, unreasonable and therefore conducive to the character's alienation. The incongruity between human intention and human deed is thus a source of the comic. This combination of tragic and comic elements makes us suggest that *The Spire* is a tragi-comic novel. Some of the original traits of the motif of human sacrifice for the building of a work of architecture, such as a tower, a church etc, have been preserved in *The Spire*: the divine will requesting the sacrifice, the tragic character of the work embodying the motif. However, in the usual Golding technique of ironic reversal of the initial model, in the end it comes out that the failure, although tragic, is due to inner causes in man's nature. Their unveiling is usually comic rather than tragic, hence a hybrid form between tragic and comic is the vehicle for the message.

⁶ idem, p.35

⁷ idem, p.165