

The Spire Short Guide

The Spire by William Golding

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Characters

Dean Jocelin is the human force behind the building of the spire. He is a study in contradictions, and as such he reflects the theme. The idea of building the spire comes to him in a vision, so he believes he has been chosen to do God's work. But soon, religious fervor is replaced by pride and will as Jocelin exploits all those around him to achieve his aims. He simply shuts out from his awareness the damage he is doing, until in the end of the novel, he is forced to see the evil in himself.

Roger Mason, the master builder, is the representative of reason which opposes Jocelin's spiritual impetus. He calculates that the foundations are not adequate for the spire but is overruled and overrun by Jocelin.

Pangall and his wife Goody are two other victims of Jocelin's monomania.

Their fate and that of the master builder demonstrates the degree of corruption that is part and parcel of raising the spire.

Social Concerns/Themes

Golding once declared himself "by nature an optimist, by observation and deduction a pessimist," and while much of his work concentrates on the blackness in man's soul, in *The Spire* he presents a more holistic view. In fact, *The Spire* affords Golding's clearest statement of the theme that man is a synthesis of good and evil. The impulses behind the building of the spire in the novel are both religious vision and personal pride; the drive to complete it is both admirable and repulsive; the finished edifice raises men's minds to God, but the human price paid reduces men to their basest natures. In this novel, man is an example of the unity that can exist in paradox.

Because it acknowledges the simultaneous existence of good and evil in man, *The Spire* is Golding's most affirmative work.

Another important theme in this novel is self-knowledge. Jocelin, like every person, can come to self-awareness only by acknowledging both good and evil impulses within. Jocelin is blind to his true self as the spire is rising. But through a series of confrontations with characters he has exploited, or ironically been exploited by, he learns about himself and, by extension, others.

Techniques

Golding's most distinctive technique in this novel is linking symbols to develop his themes. Throughout the novel the spire represents the idealism or vision that enables man to do what seemingly cannot be done. The spire stands despite inadequate foundations and lifts men's hearts and minds. But opposing the spire is what Golding terms the cellarage, a pit dug at the center of the nave. It represents the evil that was also necessary to build the spire — the murders and exploitation. The apple tree, with its associations with the Fall, is an apt symbol for the nature of man.

Linking these three symbols, particularly at Jocelin's moment of selfawareness, Golding reiterates the theme of the simultaneous existence of opposites in man. When Jocelin on his deathbed sees the spire through his window, he says, "It's like the apple tree!" "It" can be both man and the spire. Root and blossom, cellarage and spire, evil and highest aspiration, the opposites are inseparable in tree, tower, and man.

Literary Precedents

Bernard S. Oldsey and Stanley Weintraub, in *The Art of William Golding* have posited two literary precedents for *The Spire*. T. S. Eliot's play *The Rock* (1934) and Henrik Ibsen's play *The Master Builder* (1892) both concern church-building. Both Eliot and Golding point out that the cost of creating the visible structure that reminds man of an invisible power can be extremely high. *The Spire* is similar to Ibsen's play in its exploration of physical and spiritual obsessions, and in its examination of the way characters see completion of the structure as expiation for the sins involved in building it.

Related Titles

Several other novels in Golding's canon deal with the theme of selfknowledge and the imposing of one's own will. In *Pincher Martin* (1956), the dead seaman pits his will against God's, refusing to give up. He learns that his will is no match. Sammy Mountjoy, in *Free Fall* (1959), looks back on his life to see where he lost his freedom. He finds that it was the moment he imposed his will on another and ruined her life. Like Sammy, Oliver, the protagonist in *The Pyramid* (1967), learns about himself in the course of the novel; but where Sammy wishes to overcome his dark side, Oliver is willing to live with it because the price to change is too great. An enigmatic combination of Sammy and Oliver, Edmund Talbot in *Rites of Passage* (1980) recognizes his failings and his role in another man's demise, but critics debate the degree of change that may result.

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