

The Spire: A Construction of Desire

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The Spire was written during the first phase of William Golding's career when he was exploring radical ideas in an attempt to understand human nature. In this novel Golding takes a simple idea, the building of a spire on a medieval cathedral, and turns it into an intricate, thought-provoking novel. By exploring the psychological motivations of the characters he creates, what makes people think and behave as they do, Golding reveals the true complexity of the apparently commonplace. Golding's genius is to present an enjoyable work of fiction that, at the same time, rewards an attentive reader with important insights into human nature and also encourages self-investigation. When thinking about some of Golding's complex ideas it is helpful to consider the ideas of Gaston Bachelard.

Bachelard was a French philosopher who created new ways of thinking about literary theory. Like Golding, he was very interested in psychology. Bachelard's book, *The Poetics of Space*, was first published in English in 1964, the same year as *The Spire*. In his book Bachelard looks at the different spaces in buildings and considers how people relate to them, such as why people find cellars spooky, and why they feel more powerful when standing at the top of a tower.

In this context Bachelard's ideas seem very relevant to Golding's novel when thinking about what the spire and the cathedral represent as spaces. The spire symbolises a radical vision that is imposed on the amalgamation of ideas that form the cathedral. Bachelard also suggests that, in our daydreams.

... the idea of a tower creates an intimate, romantic space that raises our perceptions from the earthly depths to 'the abode of a soul that believes in heaven'. The vertical structure of a tower makes an impressive statement rising from the landscape, creating a personal space, raised above the earth, in which to think elevated ideas unrelated to everyday life on the earth.

But the very structure of the tower, when looking up, only leads in one direction; it affords only a narrow, bounded perspective. A view from the top of the tower looking down, however, offers a wider perspective, enabling the viewer to see things that may have been hidden when at ground level. Therefore the building of a tower can be seen as a journey that offers a development in perspectives.

These ideas are helpful in understanding the character of the dean of the cathedral, Jocelin, who – in Golding's novel – is responsible for the building of the spire. They help us to understand his relationships with other people. The building of the spire reveals the often hidden desires of the people involved in its construction. *The Spire* can therefore be seen as a construction of desire.

Throughout this text Golding explores ideas of vision and perspective when he presents the reader with Jocelin's divine, but restricted 'vision', and with his gradually expanding perspectives. The building of the spire reveals serious problems, which Jocelin ignores, and so it becomes known as 'Jocelin's folly', an indication of how other people come to view him. This process changes the common perception of Jocelin from a figure of reverence to one of ridicule. Jocelin believes that God has

chosen him to organise the building of the spire. The spire will glorify God and provide a focus for prayers that rise from earth to heaven. By claiming that God revealed this task in a vision, Jocelin lends to his desire to build the spire a divine authority that cannot be questioned. This enables him to ignore the inconvenient truths that the building of the spire reveals.

However, Golding undermines Jocelin's claim to be engaged in a divine mission by providing a raft of reasons for building the spire, all of which result from individual desire. This results in a questioning of the validity of Jocelin's 'vision' and suggests its delusional nature.

Bachelard argues that the horizontality of buildings deprives them of intimacy, which can only be encompassed by vertical structures. In other words, buildings on one level create a sense of everyone being an indistinguishable part of the crowd, whereas a vertical structure provides a space for an individual to be apart from the crowd. A vertical structure allows an individual to have an intimate space in which to have and to assess distinctive ideas.

The cathedral was a building on one level, and although it was divided into different areas, which Jocelin compares to the parts of a body, they flow together to make one body. The structure of the cathedral did not provide any intimate space. Golding echoes Bachelard's ideas in Jocelin's observation that, 'All these years I have gone on, put the place on me like a coat'. A coat conceals the body and covers the physical appearance of a person and perhaps hides an essential self. Jocelin's life, as dean of the cathedral, has encouraged him to conceal his desires and submerge

his essential self beneath a coat of conformity. A coat also protects the wearer from the elements, and in this context Jocelin's vocation in the cathedral protects him from the realities of everyday life. By wearing God's coat, that is, immersing himself in serving God, Jocelin has acted to isolate himself from the intrinsic problems of human nature, including his own. The construction of the spire offers Jocelin an opportunity to rise above the confines of his life in the cathedral and to fulfil his desires.

At the beginning of the novel Jocelin is depicted holding a model of the spire and stating that he has 'waited half my life for this day'. This miniaturisation of the spire enables him to possess it, and what he possesses is the symbol of his desire, the worthy legacy he wants to leave to the world. The spire is a monument to his power and his success in imposing his vision on the cathedral. Building the spire is 'doing the unthinkable', changing the cathedral and its surroundings forever. The single finger pointing heavenwards will always be associated with him. This distinguishes him from the rest of the church and implicates him in laying 'a hand on the landscape', forcing the countryside into 'shrugging itself obediently into a new shape'. From the start, although Jocelin chooses to ignore it, the building of the spire is motivated by his earthly desires.

To build the spire Jocelin needs money, which he receives from his aunt, the Lady Alison, in exchange for a burial place within view of the high altar. This privileged position would not usually be available to someone like her, the king's mistress, whom the church regards as a sinner. By funding the spire Lady Alison wants to

satisfy her desire for salvation. Jocelin takes her money to fund his desire but makes no promise to fulfil hers. Already Jocelin's 'vision' is tainted by duplicity.

The construction of the spire is also based on faith. Jocelin has faith that the Lord will provide a way of overcoming the crucial problem – the foundations of the cathedral are not sufficient to support a spire. But Golding shows how the building of the spire also depends on secular faith. The master builder, Roger Mason, must guess how much weight the structure will bear and how it will withstand the strength of the wind. He must have faith that his calculations are correct. His workforce, or army, must have faith that Mason's guesses are correct. Their livelihoods and their very lives depend upon it.

The lack of foundations for the cathedral, as well as being a practical problem, also suggests its lack of connection with the earth. Bachelard identifies a cellar as the roots of a house going down into the ground, 'buried walls that have a single casing and the entire earth behind them'. But Mason's inspection pit reveals that the cathedral floats on a brushwood raft without proper foundations. It has been imposed on the surface of the earth but does not connect with it. The church is out of touch with the world. The cathedral itself floats above the darkness of earthly concerns.

Jocelin's desire to build the spire is also a desire to impose his will on the landscape. He tells the reluctant master builder, Mason, that he will 'thrust you upwards by my will'. However, Mason has his own desire to build the spire, because it will enable him to establish his identity as a master builder. As Jocelin states, 'without the army you [Mason] are nothing'. For Mason the spire is also a construction of desire; it

provides the physical space where he can meet Goody Pangall to find sexual and emotional fulfilment.

Mason's control of his army and the challenge of overcoming the difficulties in constructing the spire give him self respect. His confinement in marriage to a dominating wife in an unfulfilling relationship has denied him this. Mason's success in conquering his vertigo demonstrates the power of his desire to escape from his wife and build this complicated structure, and to be with Goody.

From the start Jocelin is aware of Mason's desire for Goody, but he ignores the adulterous relationship because he knows that it will keep Mason working on the spire. This compromises Jocelin's religious beliefs. However, confrontation with the evidence of their relationship reveals Jocelin's own complicated desire for Goody. Jocelin has known her since she was a child and their innocent relationship had brought him 'an unworldly delight'. In what can be seen as either a demonstration of Jocelin's desire that no man shall defile that innocence, or as a desire for power over her body, Goody is confined by Jocelin in an arranged marriage to a lame, impotent man, Pangall. She is also made to conceal her red hair, an important symbol of her identity and her pagan ancestry, under a wimple.

Golding's choice of the name, Pangall, reflects the sudden pain the building of the spire causes this faithful servant of the church. Pangall becomes the focus of cruel ridicule by the army of workmen who defile his church with their bad language, fighting and obscene songs. They invade his private space with their materials to build the spire he opposes. Mason tacitly condones the army's cruelty to Pangall as

a way of warding off bad luck. Jocelin overlooks both the cruelty and the significant implications of Mason's excuse. This again compromises Jocelin's religious beliefs.

No one tries to stop the cruelty, and the taunting of Pangall develops and reaches a climax. In a strongly written scene the mob of workmen hound Pangall to his death and reveal the pagan, rather than Christian, foundations of their faith.

The earth in the inspection pit has started to move. In a metaphor for the darkness of human feelings, Golding describes how 'that which ought not to be seen or touched, the darkness under the earth [was] turning, seething, coming to the boil'. He also reveals the workmen's fear of 'the living, pagan earth unbound at last and waking, Dia Mater'.

This not only describes the movement of the earth under the weight of the spire but also suggests the darkness of the pagan belief that survives and is connected with the earth. The soil had the cathedral imposed upon it without proper foundations to root it. Similarly, the pagan beliefs of the population were suppressed by the imposition of Christianity, which forced their traditional beliefs to become occult or hidden.

The idea that the building of the 'impossible' spire forces the workmen's pagan beliefs to become exposed is later made overt. It is revealed that Pangall's dead body has been immured in the foundations of the cathedral in the belief that this will ward off the evil associated with the building of the spire, the moving of the earth and the pained singing of the stone pillars. Pangall has become a scapegoat or blood

sacrifice, a victim of old belief but also of Jocelin's complicity. He did not protect a loyal servant of the cathedral. The workmen believe that Pangall's death will preserve their lives. Jocelin's desire to build the spire to glorify God has forced the frightened workmen to revert to pagan beliefs.

Later Jocelin comes to realise that 'I was a protected man. I never came up against beldame'. He recognises that the church has prevented him from confronting or even understanding the complexity of human nature; his 'protection' has made him ignorant of the people's beliefs. Later, when the workmen refuse to work on Midsummer's Night and instead join other 'devil worshippers' in lighting fires, Jocelin recognises it as another lesson.

Jocelin realises that just as the cathedral did not connect with the earth, his faith did not connect with the people. His 'vision' of the spire was a mono-perspective and his vision of the people was similarly occluded. He failed to see the complexities of human nature. He wanted the simplicity and uncomplicated structure of a spire pointing heavenward, but this was no more than a construction of desire. Building the spire enabled Jocelin to gain the insight that life and faith are not simple structures. They are more like a tree, connecting with the earth – complicated, with more than one direction, but still pointing heavenward.