‘Pilgrims of Conscience’ in the Fiction of Robin Jenkins

Ingibjörg Ágústsdóttir

Abstract

A central aspect of Robin Jenkins's fiction is his exploration of human fallibility and the ambiguous nature of goodness through a portrayal of central characters whose experiences bring them towards self-knowledge and love of their fellow humans. Through these aspects of his characters' development, Jenkins consistently emphasises the essentially flawed nature of humanity and thereby the near impossibility of achieving moral perfection. These central characters, or 'pilgrims of conscience,' undertake a moral pilgrimage of sorts in the course of their story. In order to demonstrate the importance of the moral pilgrim figure in Jenkins's fiction, the first part of the chapter explores in more general terms the function and development of the pilgrim of conscience through the course of Jenkins's work. After this, the essay focuses on how Jenkins's central concerns are revealed through his portrayal of an exemplary type of the moral pilgrim, Bell McShelvie in Guests of War (1956).

Keywords


Jenkins's treatment of his central concerns – be it the influence of Calvinism on Scottish society, the question of urban versus rural values, the fragile nature of innocence and the experience of children, the cruelty of war, racial prejudice and cultural conflict, the effects of class division and the injustices of capitalist ideology – is always driven by intense ethical awareness. Jenkins examines the moral inconsistency and hypocrisy of human nature, yet continually throughout his work is concerned with the idea of attainable moral perfection, the elusive possibility that pure goodness can exist in a world of selfishness and greed, where 'goodness' itself can be a highly ambiguous thing. This exploration is conducted through portraying central characters whose experiences bring them towards self-knowledge and/or love for their fellow humans through their own ultimate disillusionment, or acknowledgment of
misguided actions and acceptance of their own and others’ human fallibility. These central characters are often forced to acknowledge the importance of community, reliance on other human beings, and man’s essential loneliness. The fiction of Jenkins argues that we are all flawed as human beings and therefore unable to achieve moral perfection – and that the true wealth of humanity lies in its diversity. Indeed, if moral perfection seems to have been achieved by a character in Jenkins’s fiction, this either exists outside reality and beyond the limits of a socially conditioned world (as with Calum in *The Cone-Gatherers* (1955)), or is received with suspicion and scepticism (as with Gavin Hamilton in *A Would-Be Saint* (1978)). Despite all this, Jenkins believes that each individual’s effort towards moral perfection is worthwhile, if only to bring him or her face to face with how limited yet precious people really are.

I term such characters ‘pilgrims of conscience.’ Their moral challenges force them to reach a new understanding of themselves and of human morality. This essay outlines the development of this central figure in Jenkins’s work. Most attention is given to one of Jenkins’s early manifestations of this character type, Bell McShelvie in *Guests of War*, who, I argue, is a quintessential pilgrim of conscience.

**Early Pilgrims of Conscience**

Different types of the pilgrim of conscience can be detected in Jenkins’s first published novel, *So Gaily Sings the Lark* (1950), a subtle study of character interactions, community, and questions of religion and morality. Its protagonist, David Sutherland, journeys from urban Lanarkshire to Kilcalvonell in the West Highlands (Argyll) to work in forestry, soon falling in love with a local girl, Kirstie Hamilton. At first sight, this might seem to be a simple love story; instead, it is a complex tale of complicated, frustrated, and often cruel love between people who are ill-suited, in terms of their ambitions and expectations, and their attitudes to other people. David’s goodness, charity and self-denial is challenged and resented by the materialistically selfish Kirstie. David Sutherland realises this, and he is aware that Kirstie’s materialism will in the

---


2 A similar suggestion is made in the portrayal of another fraught and complicated love affair, that between Hugh Carstares and Constance Kilgour in *Love is a Fervent Fire* (1959), since Constance’s uncompromising pride and cruelty is a clear challenge to Carstares’s essentially