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## The Allegory of Irony in a Post-Modern Convention

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Although listed in any handbook of rhetoric allegory and irony can be viewed as something more than rhetorical devices. Both represent not merely stylistic techniques, but rather a feeling about the Universe; therefore they can be seen not only as literary strategies, but rather in terms of a deep-seated habit of the mind. Being literary tropes they nevertheless can be detached from any artistic convention, and regarded as a human tendency manifest in a perception and interpretation of reality.<sup>1</sup> That is why a critical study and appreciation of literature can gain more by seeing allegory and irony not so much, and not exclusively, as concepts, but rather as spirits permeating imaginative works. If some kind of a synthetic overview of the literary history is attempted, it can be seen that allegorical ways of reading dominated literature from the Classical period through the Middle Ages up to the end of the Renaissance. The majority of the greatest works of that period are consciously allegorical. Irony on the other hand has come to be considered as a prevailing characteristic of the literature from 1900 onwards; and the ironic mode,

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis in his fundamental work on allegory, *The Allegory of Love*, writes: "Allegory, in some sense, belongs not to medieval man but to man, or even to mind, in general. It is of the very nature of thought and language to represent what is immaterial in picturable terms" (44).

especially for many critics in modern times, has become a criterion of literary excellence.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of their surface differences allegory and irony are intimately connected. Their close affinity was obvious to classical rhetoricians,<sup>3</sup> who looked upon both of them as pointers to a significance different from that which is immediately present. It was only later in the course of history that irony ceased to be regarded as forming part of allegory. A deep structure similarity between allegory and irony can be seen in their etymological roots deriving from the Greek "speaking otherwise" for allegory, and "dissembling" for irony. However, in that profound similarity there are also the seeds of their fundamental difference, for allegory is associated with the building up of truth in the affirmative mode, while irony functions by means of countervailing truth using the negative mode. It is their common denominator that they both achieve meaning by methods different from a direct statement. The complex character of allegory and irony, and their respective complicated histories, make it difficult to provide neat explanations of either of them. As a result their simple dictionary definitions are bound to be deficient and restrictive. That, however, does not change the fact that allegory and irony have been continuously and intensely at work throughout literature of all ages.

The purpose of this paper is to argue that allegory and irony can be present together and as a literary tandem they can be structured by narrative means and made to interact in a post-modern work of fic-

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<sup>2</sup>Such critical stance regarding irony is reflected, for example, in Northrop Frye's claim that nowadays all literature that deserves its name is ironic (see *Anatomy of Criticism*). Wayne C. Booth in *A Rhetoric of Irony* writes in a similar vein: "The quality of 'being ironic' has perhaps more than any other in modern times been taken as the distinguishing mark of all good literature" (201-2). Cleanth Brooks in his essay "Irony and 'Ironic' Poetry" claims that "much more poetry is ironical than the reader may be disposed to think" (232).

<sup>3</sup>E.g. the Roman writer Quintilian (the 1st century A.D.) in *Institutio Oratoria* speaking of allegory as a "continued metaphor" presents two main aspects of the allegorical mode where one corresponds to the modern use of the term allegory whereas the other emphasises the effects nowadays attributed to the ironic mode. Classical rhetoricians were aware of the close affinity of allegory and irony; Puttenham's term for allegory is "false-semblant"; hence G.G. Sedgewick speaks of "an ancient flirtation between rhetorical irony and allegory" (6). Also Linda Hutcheon in *Irony's Edge* speaks of allegory and irony as two forms which are often combined for "obvious reasons" that both involve saying one thing and meaning another; consequently: "As in the case with irony, the said of allegory could be seen as inseparable from the unsaid" (65).

tion. It attempts to show how the concept of irony, rooted in antiphrasis, quintessentially ambiguous and enigmatic, is rendered to the imaginative savouring and illuminated for the intellectual perception and interpretation through the mode of allegory. The sample text to demonstrate the interplay of allegory and irony is a novel by Muriel Spark, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960).

*The Ballad of Peckham Rye* was published a year after *Memento Mori* and it shares with its predecessor the tendency to perceive life as a huge theatrical performance. It differs from *Memento Mori*, however, by the lightness of tone and the sense of entertainment which replace the seriousness of eschatological approach so typical of *Memento Mori*. The mood of playfulness which characterises *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* is not in the least degree affected either by the occurrence of murder or other scenes of violence in the novel. That idiosyncrasy of the Sparkian narrative, which some critics and readers do not particularly like, is another proof that Spark's fiction and its characters are not to be treated mimetically, as signifiers for flesh and blood reality, but rather allegorically as performers in the existential spectacle of life where the World is being re-made with an imaginative impulse and reflected upon through the prism of Art. The term *ballad* in the title of the novel is also significant because it points to the process of turning the lives of the inhabitants of Peckham into an artefact, which is a piece of narrative. In the course of the story the characters' lives are being falsified and distorted, and thus worked up into an artificial literary construct which bears an intriguing relation to the fictive "reality." A great number of discrepancies and contradictions reside at the meeting point of so-called "reality" and its fictionalised counterpart, and they all become a source and inspiration for ironies related to the interplay of Life and Art.

The chief actor in the spectacle and the leading character in the ballad is Dougal Douglas, with a remarkable experience from the University Dramatics in Edinburgh,<sup>4</sup> who arrives in Peckham to get a job of the Arts man with Meadows Meade and Grindley, manufacturers of nylon textiles. Dougal Douglas is first employed by Mr Druce on the assumption that "Industry and the Arts must walk hand in hand" (*BPR* 15)<sup>5</sup> and as "a man

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<sup>4</sup>See the beginning of Chapter 2 of *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*.

<sup>5</sup>*BPR* is used for *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*.

with vision" (BPR 16). He soon starts upsetting the steady and regular life of Peckham. The scope of his activities expands when using a reversed version of his name, i.e. Douglas Dougal, he obtains a similar post with a rival firm of Drover Willis's.

The lives of the inhabitants of Peckham are variously affected by the arrival of Dougal in their community. He subverts the existing order and thus becomes the great Manipulator on the premises of Peckham. In those with whom he comes in contact Dougal incites adverse reactions of hatred and admiration; he releases their hidden energies and makes contradictory impressions upon people: Mr Druce from Meade and Grindley is under the spell of Dougal Douglas's fanciful and spontaneous behaviour; on the contrary Mr Willis, his counterpart in the rival factory, admires Douglas Dougal as a "solid steady Edinburgh boy" (BPR 69). Mr Druce tolerates Dougal's antics and his erratic performance at work; Mr Willis is impressed by his systematic research, and being Scottish himself he sees in Dougal "his rational compatriot" (BPR 82). Dougal Douglas alias Douglas Dougal is the central enigma in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*. There are many allusions to his diabolical provenance suggested by two bumps on his head, which apparently are the traces of the horns which were removed by a plastic surgeon or, in another version, were lost in a fight. Though Dougal on the one hand seems to be keen on demonstrating his vestigial horns, on the other hand he forcefully denies being a diabolical agent. His answer, however, to Humphrey's straightforward and commonsensical question whether he is supposed to be the Devil, is as enigmatic as the whole aura of ambiguity which surrounds Dougal: "No, oh, no, I'm only supposed to be one of the wicked spirits that wander through the world for the ruin of souls" (BPR 77). It may be noted that in his discussion of the ironic vision in modern literature Charles Glicksberg speaks of the Devil as an everlasting Naysayer who challenges all truths, and embodies the basic traits of irony, such as doubt, sceptical inquiry and the attitude of negation (see Glicksberg). However, it should be stressed that the allusions to the Devil in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* do not primarily emphasise the diabolical attitude of doubt and negation, but rather the subversive attitude of upsetting and overturning of all sanctioned order. Consequently the mood in that post-modern novel is shifted from gravely gloomy to naughtily playful.

As the central presence and a diabolic character in the novel Dougal is an evasive arch-liar. In the Sparkian fictional world he embodies, and at the same time exposes, deception. In that sense Dougal acts as "a catalyst on the inhabitants of Peckham Rye" and "a stimulant, disturbing a spiritual torpor of Peckham" (Whittaker 59); and so he becomes the spirit of irony incarnate. There are close parallels between the disembodied typing voice from *The Comforters* and Dougal as the embodiment of duplicity, subversion and mockery. The spirit of irony, which in *The Comforters* and in *Memento Mori* takes the form of a bodiless voice, in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* assumes the body of the trickster who pulls the strings of the puppets in the living theatre of Peckham, shatters their self-complacency and destabilises all existing certainties: "You've unsettled me, Dougal, since you came to Peckham" (BPR 98), says Miss Coverdale, and her words contain an epitome of irony.

One of the earliest meanings of irony recorded already in Plato's *Republic* is: "a glib and underhand way of taking people in" (Cuddon 335). The concept of *eiron* or "dissembler" is further specified by Demosthenes who looks upon *eiron* as a man who "ducked his responsibilities as a citizen by pretence of illness" (Cuddon 336), and Theophrastus for whom *eiron* is somebody "slippery in his speech, non-committal; a man who does not come out into the open" (Cuddon 336). Those earliest interpretations of the notion of irony seem to be particularly relevant for the understanding of the character of Dougal Douglas alias Douglas Dougal in Muriel Spark's allegorical narrative. Accordingly, the novel can be read as a post-modern allegory of irony where the spirit of irony is personified in the character of Dougal, the enigmatic half-man and half-devil impostor. And the performative force of irony is represented by the operations of Dougal in the community of Peckham.

Elusiveness is one of the most conspicuous features of irony often stressed in critical studies. D.J. Enright, for example, emphasises the hard-to-grasp nature of irony by referring to it in his study, significantly, as the *alluring problem*. The difficulty of placing irony within clear-cut conceptual frames can be seen in such definitions of irony as: "Irony can make things that are, if not as though they were not, then as though they were something quite different" (Enright 42). Irony is difficult to pin down because it is a dynamic phenomenon of a protean nature continually revealing its different faces, and so demonstrating its inconstancy

and generic fluctuations. To a great extent irony makes use of paradox<sup>6</sup>; it has much in common with the absurd and grotesque; like allegory it often goes hand in hand with satire (see MacQueen). And also in the manner analogous to allegory it can be viewed as an all-embracing perception relating to the crucial facts of human predicament. Kierkegaard's definition from *The Concept of Irony* relates irony to the totality of experience: "Irony in the eminent sense directs itself not against this or that particular existence but against the whole given actuality of a certain time and situation. . . . It is not this or that phenomenon but the totality of existence which it considers *sub specie ironiae*" (Muecke 67). A similar overall application of irony characterises Thomas Mann's view where irony, in "The Art of the Novel," is defined as "an all-embracing crystal-clear and serene glance, which is the very glance of art itself . . ." (Muecke 37). Muriel Spark grasps both the elusiveness and dynamism of irony in Dougal Douglas.

Regardless of other interpretations of the character of Dougal, he is in the first place a dissembler and the sense of dissembling is fundamental to his function in the novel (see Rodway). Dougal carries on his game of impersonation in front of the bewildered or enchanted spectators of Peckham Rye. He changes shape to the effect of becoming a different persona, and that characteristic trait of Dougal is stressed as early as Chapter Two where, in the scene of the interview with Mr Druce, Dougal is introduced upon the stage. Many further references to Dougal's impersonating talents recur throughout the narrative. And so, for example, during the walk with Miss Merle Coverdale through the cemetery –

Dougal posed like an angel on a grave . . . He posed like an angel-devil, with his hump shoulder and gleaming smile, and his fingers of each hand widespread against the sky. She [Miss Coverdale] looked startled. Then she laughed. (BPR 30)

Later when they go together to see the excavations Dougal makes himself known "as an interested archaeologist" (BPR 102). Before the eyes of Humphrey he impersonates a bridegroom who in church refuses to marry Dixie; it is that make-believe scene of Dougal's design, which Humphrey acts out in reality afterwards. Having won Mr Druce's confi-

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<sup>6</sup>For Friedrich Schlegel, for example, irony is a form of paradox.

dence, Dougal oscillates between being a sage and a confessor. When Mr Druce further entrusts Dougal with his marital problems, the latter becomes a divorce judge, a psychoanalyst, a lady-columnist and a medium at a spiritualist session. Dougal's impersonating transformations reach a climax, or else a nadir, when Dougal pretends to be a corpse.

Presently he placed a kitchen chair to face the chair on which he sat. He put up his feet on it and said, "Ever seen a corpse?" He lolled his head back, closed his eyes and opened his mouth so that the bottom jaw was sunken and rigid.

"You're callous, that's what you are," Miss Frierne said. Then she screamed with hysterical mirth. (BPR 123)

The character of the narrative discourse corresponds with the character of Dougal as a great impersonator. In keeping with a theatrical convention, and with a clear hint at a theatrical mask which can be put on and taken off at will, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* narrates how "Dougal nodded and took his long serious face out of the room" (BPR 84).

Dougal is not only an actor, but what is more he is a dancing actor. The dance of impersonations, which is performed with the lid of a dustbin on the premises of a youth club, allegorically represents in visual terms another important facet of irony: quintessential joy and pleasure that can be derived from the elusive art of impersonating. Thus the dance scene in the novel can be compared to the motif of a "cosmic dance" which celebrates in metaphysical terms the apotheosis of life,<sup>7</sup> or, if we look at the other end of the scale, it bears resemblance to the medieval motif of *danse macabre*.

Then he placed the lid upside down on the floor, sat cross-legged inside it, and was a man in a rocking boat rowing for his life. The band stopped, but nobody noticed the fact, owing to the many different sounds of mirth, protest, encouragement, and rage. The dancers circled slowly around him while he performed a Zulu dance with the lid for a shield. . . .

Next, Dougal sat on his haunches and banged a message out on a tom-tom. He sprang up and with the lid on his head was a Chinese coolie eating melancholy rice. He was an ardent cyclist, crouched over handlebars

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<sup>7</sup>C.S. Lewis, the author of the scholarly work *The Allegory of Love*, gives an allegorical presentation of a cosmic dance in his work of fiction *That Hideous Strength*.

and pedalling uphill with the lid between his knees. He was an old woman with an umbrella; he stood on the upturned edges of the lid and speared fish from his rocking canoe; he was a man at the wheel of a racing car; he did many things with the lid before he finally propped the dust-bin lid up on his high shoulder, beating this cymbal rhythmically with his hand while with the other hand he limply conducted an invisible band, being, with long blank face, the band-leader. (BPR 59–60)

*The Ballad of Peckham Rye* abounds in the scenes of dancing and dance-like movements involving bouncing, swaying one's body and pirouetting. During his conversation with Miss Coverdale "Dougal did a dancer's pirouette, round and round, and stopped once more by Merle's side" (BPR 100). Merle and Mr Druce making love "went into the bedroom and took off their clothes in a steady rhythm" (BPR 53). The whole narrative is punctuated with short descriptions of carefully choreographed movements and gestures.

Thus Dougal apart from being an arch-liar and a superb impersonator is also a supreme dancer who combines the art of dance, detached from the harsh reality of life, with great manipulative skills of a dance master who structures and controls the steps and body movements of his disciples and followers.

"I have a dream at nights," Dougal said, pouring the wine, "of girls in factories doing a dance with only the movements of their breasts, bottoms and arms as they sort, stack, pack, check, cone-wind, gum, uptwist, assemble, seam and set . . . the girls are wagglng and winding like this –" and Dougal wagglng his body and wove his arms intricately. "Like Indian dancing, you know," he said. (BPR 50)

In the allegorical theatre of Peckham the acts of life and the acts of a ballet performance blend into each other. Dougal leaps in the air in a dance and in ordinary working life situations alike. In such convention a street skirmish is smoothly turned into a bout of singing and dancing as the police approach, and those who were fighters a moment before, now start "singing, performing the twisting jive, merging the motions of the fight into those of the frantic dance" (BPR 47). It should not be underestimated how significant the dance component is for the allegorical pre-



sensation of irony as it enhances and brings into strong relief the mood of detached playfulness which is crucial for the ironic mode.

In accordance with the ballad form, announced in the title of the novel, the narrative discourse is structured according to the principle of repetition. The echo effect in dialogues where Dougal repeats words of his interlocutor, and the replicas of his activities from Meadows Meade and Grindley in the rival company of Drover Willis's are examples of symmetry with a significant variation. They provide a paradigm for the generation of irony where one thing contradicts another and the affirmative continually interplays with the negative mode. Human research for Meade and Grindley is counterbalanced by research in industrial relations at Drover Willis's; gaiety in the former is contrasted with gravity in the latter; randomness is opposed to methodology. The duality, which foretells duplicity, is confirmed by the reversed versions of Dougal's name. Furthermore through the subversive character of his words and actions Dougal produces in both factories the effects opposite to the declared objectives, and so the workers' absenteeism increases instead of being reduced. In the light of such performance it is not surprising that eventually Dougal gets "blackmailed on grounds of false pretences" (BPR 79).

Although Dougal is seen as a "man of vision" (BPR 17), in the allegorical history of Peckham he represents a dramatic impetus which, like irony itself, does not construct new entities, but only undermines, shatters, shuffles around, and in various ways unsettles the existing ones. Dougal therefore is not the Maker, but the Manipulator who can twist the story using "the scrap ends of his profligate experience" (BPR 142). He can be compared to the orchestra conductor who does not make music, but whose presence is indispensable for the successful performance of the musical ensemble and who, in the manner similar to irony, adds a unique flavour to the narrative which he puts together with his deconstructive urge.

Through what he *is*, as well as through what he *is not*, Dougal Douglas alias Douglas Dougal makes *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* an allegorical tale of the hazards, traps, beauties and allures of irony.

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