

CHAOS AND DISSOLUTION: DECONSTRUCTION AND SCOTLAND IN THE LATER FICTION OF ROBIN JENKINS

Ingibjörg Ágústsdóttir
University of Glasgow

ABSTRACT

This paper will examine Robin Jenkins's representation of Scotland and the wider world in his most recent fiction. It will demonstrate how Jenkins deconstructs the idea of a society with a fixed set of values and moral codes, for example through the troubled sense of identity and the obvious breakdown of moral and human values portrayed in his novel *Just Duffy*. In a characteristic manner of ambivalence and irony, Jenkins juxtaposes the postmodern with the traditional, the subversive with the reactionary, and the disturbing with the moving, so that we are presented with a world where there are no set answers to any of our questions, independent of whether they are inward—or outward—looking. Throughout his later fiction, Jenkins criticises the increasingly immoral, hypocritical, and disordered vision of modern society, which ultimately emerges as a deeply disturbing reminder to his readers, relevant not only to Scotland and Scottish issues, but also to the world as a whole. Accordingly, Jenkins's later fiction reveals a concern with a Scotland where the whole idea of society or community is falling apart, leaving the reader with an uneasy feeling that Scotland's young people have been betrayed by their own community and by the political upholding of the centuries-old class divisions of British society. Moreover, the reader is constantly made aware of the pitfalls of morality, of how a person's or an organization's determination to work for a "good" cause can ultimately lead to evil, which in turn becomes applicable to more universal issues such as terrorism and world politics.

Since the publication of *So Gaily Sings the Lark* in 1950, Robin Jenkins, now approaching his 88th birthday, has published 25 novels and 2 collections of short sto-

ries. Spanning half a century, the quality and complexity of Jenkins's writing has been assessed and praised by critics such as Douglas Gifford, Bernard Sellin, and Glenda Norquay,¹ but, despite this, Jenkins's work has never received its due recognition among the general readership and even in academic circles. Perhaps, Jenkins's uncompromising and idiosyncratic approaches to those moral and social issues closest to his heart have, through their often disturbing ambiguities, proved too close to the bone in their treatment of human fallibility and social hypocrisy.² Moreover, Jenkins has kept himself at a distance from Scotland's literary circles and has been reluctant to promote his work in the media and elsewhere, and these could possibly also explain his marginal status on the Scottish literary scene. But even though Jenkins's work is still relatively unknown to the general Scottish readership, his fiction reveals a strong awareness of his Scottish roots, even in the case of the many novels written about foreign places like Borneo and Afghanistan.³ Always despairing at the Scots' lack of political confidence and the absence of true national unity—Jenkins supports the SNP—and consistent in his critical approach to the disturbing effects of Calvinism on the Scottish psyche, Jenkins nevertheless argues that the Scottish scene has a strength of subject matter to offer Scottish novelists.⁴ He maintains that, despite the fact that nothing much of great importance happens in Scotland, it is his pleasure and duty to write about his country and find inspiration in its ordinary people and ordinary circumstances (Ágústsdóttir, "Truthful" 14-15). While Jenkins proclaims himself as a strongly "Scottish" writer, moreover, his fiction is generally fraught with moral ambivalence, tackling issues of social idealism and human fallibility, and often suggesting an absence of social and individual certainty in a world of spiritual disillusionment and disintegrated communal values. This aspect of Jenkins's writing is often strongly related to the Scottish focus of his work, although his central moral concerns also carry wider and more universal significance.

It is my intention here to examine Jenkins's treatment of Scottish society and character in some of his later fiction, while also showing how his tackling of moral questions relates to topical universal issues like world politics and international warfare. I will demonstrate how Jenkins's texts deconstruct the conception of fixed moral codes, presenting a world where previously ordered binary opposites like "good and bad," "right and wrong," and "idealism and fanaticism" are undermined and even reversed, so that it is ultimately very difficult to establish any clear-cut boundaries between them. Through his portrayal of Scottish society, Jenkins criticises the increasingly immoral, hypocritical, and disordered vision of the modern world, constantly making his readers aware of the pitfalls of morality. Moreover, Jenkins's ironic and ambiguous portrayal of the fallibility of idealism suggests that individual or organised intentions to work for a "good" and "just" cause can have disastrous consequences and even result in immoral or evil acts being committed in the name of the general Good.

I will focus mainly on the novel *Just Duffy*,⁵ first published in 1988, while also briefly discussing *Matthew and Sheila*,⁶ published in 1998. Both novels have strong Scottish resonance, accentuated still more through their treatment of Calvinist concepts of election and grace. While *Just Duffy* will thus be my main point of reference, *Matthew and Sheila* is also important because it echoes many of the issues dealt with in *Just Duffy*, and because it is a perfect example of how the binary oppo-

site of good and evil is established and then undermined, questioned, and *deconstructed* through the text's deeply ambiguous and elusive approach to the novel's two main characters.

Critical treatment of *Just Duffy* has been unusually substantial compared to the little or scant attention given to the greater part of Jenkins's writing (except for novels like *The Cone-Gatherers*, *Fergus Lamont*, and *The Awakening of George Darroch*). Perhaps this is due to the novel's disturbing portrayal of a morally aware teenager determined to show up the social and moral hypocrisy in his community, but whose crusade against a corrupt society ultimately leaves him infected by the very evil he wants to destroy. The essential ambiguity surrounding Duffy's moral campaign is moreover a key feature of the novel and is reflected in the multi-layered meaning of the ironic title: is Duffy an insignificant and good-for-nothing teenager, is he a fit and just judge of human morality, or is he a "justified sinner" in the tradition of James Hogg's *The Private Confessions of a Justified Sinner*? *Just Duffy* offers no fixed solutions to the problems it raises, nor any moral certainty to the reader. However, despite being at times somewhat unconvincing in its portrayal of the protagonist and his moral and social fixations, this novel is a startling example of Jenkins's ability to create unusual characters and through them manipulate our perceptions and evaluations of idealism and human morality.

Just Duffy presents us with the Scottish Lowland town of Lightburn, situated on the outskirts of Glasgow, a town described by one critic as "an imaginary satellite town" (Binding, "Calvinist" 25). This is a society characterised by the usual class distinction seen elsewhere in Jenkins's fiction, with working class people living on top of each other in dilapidated tenements, suffering poverty and degradation, while the more privileged live in comfortable bungalows and villas, and view most working class people with disapproval and distrust. The moral and social values presented seem, to say the least, very confused and paradoxical, and examples of social hypocrisy are seen, for instance, in that youths such as Mick Dykes and Johnnie Crosbie, both coming from extremely poor families, are constantly blamed for any crime of vandalism or theft committed in the area, while upper-class youths easily get away with things like painting the local statue of Robert Burns, simply because "The sons and daughters of the most respectable citizens in the town mustn't have their careers ruined" (*JD* 19). Most of the young people in *Just Duffy* come from the margins of society, and these are seen wandering aimlessly around a world of poverty and unemployment, totally disaffected, and with nothing else to do than swear, steal, damage public property, and insult and harass their elders. It is the world of graffiti, vandalism, and small crime, inhabited and to some extent created by restless and depraved young people, who have been betrayed by their own community, and by the political upholding of the centuries-old class divisions of British society.

At the centre of all is Duffy, referred to by Norquay as "an ambiguous figure who could be either saint or fool" ("Disruptions" 13), classified by Beth Dickson as "the holy fool *manque*, innocent but dangerously idealistic" (11), and seen as "an emotional outsider" by Colin Milton (27). Although other characters see Duffy as a simpleton, he is more intelligent than they realise, but, ironically, the plot eventually reveals that this intelligence is quite misguided and dangerous. Duffy's naive idealism and his obsession with war and its false moralities prompt him to wage his own

private war against the selfishness, hypocrisy, and immorality he sees in his community. Thus we are early introduced to Duffy's moral reasoning:

Duffy was well aware that though most human beings were capable of atrocities very few committed them and the great majority condemned them utterly: except of course if they were done to win a war. No one cared how many babies or cats were burned to death in Hiroshima or Dresden. (*JD* 11)

Having asked his history teacher Flockhart "what gave nations the right to declare war and thereafter claim that the killing of their enemies was permissible and legal" (*JD* 2), his teacher had simply answered that most nations would argue that God gave them that right. Duffy concedes that if he ever declared war himself, he too would use God as an excuse, but "with more right, for his purpose would be to save not to destroy" (*JD* 2). Flockhart's ironic and often radical answers to Duffy's questions no doubt contribute to Duffy's obsession with war and morality, and Duffy's subsequent actions are frequently explained and justified by opinions expressed by Flockhart in the classroom. Jenkins recurrently suggests in his fiction that religion is a common cause for wars and human cruelty, and Duffy's list of Biblical passages, found by his friend Cooley, suggests that his war, too, may be caused by religious obsession:

Inside this folder was the yellow tract, Duffy's message from God. It was full of quotations from the Bible. In brackets were the names Ezra, Jeremiah, and Isaiah. As far as she [Cooley] could make out it announced that the world was full of sinners who if they didn't repent soon would be destroyed, not by flood this time but by the fires of a nuclear holocaust. (*JD* 65)

It soon becomes evident that the concept of moral hypocrisy in times of war is a central theme in the novel. The concept of war, moreover, determines Duffy's actions throughout the narrative. As he declares his war against the "Defilers of truth and abusers of authority" (*JD* 25), Duffy applies to himself the rules he has often previously found reason to question. The dangers inherent in Duffy's way of thinking are obvious, yet Duffy's war at first consists merely of breaking into the local library where he, along with his "army" of social misfits Helen Cooley, Mick Dykes, and Johnnie Crosbie, tears a page out of hundreds of books, a symbolical gesture meant to force people to face the truth about themselves, as Duffy believes that books are false representations of reality. Thereby the question of truth and its various representations in history and literature is brought to the fore through Duffy's symbolic acts. Moreover, by putting human excrement on the hymn books in one of the local churches, Duffy believes he will remind the upper class owners of the hymn books of their ordinary humanity, meaning that they should never regard themselves as superior to other people. The bizarre connotations of this act seen through Cooley's thoughts of Duffy in the act as "a minister giving communion" (*JD* 29) and of the act itself as "anointing" (*JD* 111) reflect other instances in the plot where religious language is used, and reinforce perceptions expressed elsewhere of Duffy as priest-like.

However, strange as these acts of "war" may seem, they are "innocent" in that they do not involve hurting or killing a fellow human being. Yet it is soon implied that

Duffy's war, however morally justified, may eventually turn into something altogether more sinister. Setting himself up as a judge, as morally just, and *justified*, Duffy initially decides that his war makes deceit "necessary and permissible" (*JD* 61). Moreover, he threatens his friend Cooley with a knife when she refuses to help him defile the hymn books because the smell disgusts her, and argues that "In war the penalty for refusing an order is death" (*JD* 109). Duffy's moral ideals and his obsession with his war and its justification eventually leads to the novel's terrifying climax, when he bashes Crosbie's head in with a brick to prevent Crosbie from betraying him to the police. Even as he commits the foul crime, he imagines himself as "not an assassin or executioner but a deliverer" (*JD* 155). This perspective can be interpreted in two ways. What the novel tells us straightforwardly is that Duffy sees himself as delivering Crosbie from the pain caused by a mortal tumour on his brain. Alternatively, however, Duffy may here view himself as the deliverer of his society: what harm is there in one death, of a mortally ill boy at that, when this one death will guard the general interests of the people in ensuring the success of Duffy's moral campaign? It could therefore be argued that Duffy's initially well-intentioned idealism has become tainted with utilitarianism, although Duffy clearly sees his actions in a moral and religious light and not in political terms. Moreover, in assuming the role of the all-knowing and morally justified leader of his crusade, seeing himself as "the embodiment of justice" (Milton 28), Duffy's perspective begins to verge on religious fanaticism and even despotism. He is consumed by notions of ordered moral behaviour and has thus become a tyrant who sees his values as the only truth, and therefore believes in absolute justification whilst imposing these on other people.

Accordingly, what at first seems to be merely simple-minded and well-intentioned idealism rapidly becomes a justification for brutal and bloody murder. Duffy's ideal of what is good and bad is at first simple: he believes there is more good than bad in most people and therefore that good will eventually have the upper hand if only given the chance by people themselves. Helen Cooley's common sense counterpoints this; it tells us that the concept of good and bad is much more complicated than this, and therefore her point of view is highly significant in terms of the novel's moral questioning and its representation of how blurred are the boundaries between polarities of good and evil:

[...] how did you measure goodness and badness? And what one person would call good another person might call bad. It was a lot more complicated than Duffy seemed to realise or was willing to admit. (*JD* 28)

As the story moves towards its conclusion, this passage is increasingly relevant to the way in which Duffy's ideal of good and evil is reversed through his own actions. Convincing himself that he is acting in the interests of a good and morally just cause, moreover, Duffy situates himself on the moral highground. As is pointed out by Margery McCulloch, it is doubtful whether Duffy's reputation for goodness is grounded on reality, when Duffy totally lacks human warmth: "Can such 'goodness' be true goodness? Is there not the arrogance of evil in his election of himself as jury and judge?" ("What Crisis" 16-17). Consequently, Duffy eventually commits an act of pure evil by killing a fellow human being who trusts him. In other words, he has

“added ‘betrayer of trust’ to his categories of defilers of truth and abusers of authority” (McCulloch, “Hogg’s” 16). Therefore, Duffy has come to represent precisely those things he aspired to eliminate, and even though Duffy realises this and does in the end decide to take responsibility for his actions, his degeneration from good to evil deconstructs the very idea of these binary opposites as laid out by him in the beginning of the novel. While obviously conscious of this quality of his text, no doubt applied to emphasise the dangers of idealism, Jenkins also portrays the world of Duffy as extremely fluid in its morality, to which no fixed sets of values can be applied. As suggested by McCulloch, *Just Duffy* disturbingly “unsettles our social and moral judgements” (“Hogg’s” 16), and its “increasingly crazed” plot (Hawtree 839) ultimately conveys a sense of society where no one can expect any kind of moral certainty.

In this context, Helen Cooley is a significant character, both in terms of the novel’s treatment of moral hypocrisy and social disadvantage, and in relation to our understanding of Duffy himself. It is interesting that Jenkins has a great liking for Cooley, seeing her as a symbol of strength and endurance despite her difficult and hazardous life (Ágústsdóttir, “Truthful” 19). Importantly, Cooley is condemned as a promiscuous and criminal teenager by most people in Lightburn, such as Mrs Porteous and Duffy’s mother. However, Cooley’s relationship with Duffy shows her as one of the more insightful of the novel’s characters. True, Cooley is a disaffected teenager on the run from the police when trying to evade going to a reform school, but, despite her petty criminality, she is ultimately a character whose integrity and moral understanding deconstruct the novel’s previously established moral polarities. It is Cooley who sees through Duffy’s naive idealism right from the beginning, and gradually her presence in the narrative comes to represent a voice of conscience for Duffy. Cooley realises the dangers inherent in Duffy’s moral campaign; she understands that Duffy is really a seriously disturbed boy who might end up killing somebody as a result of his fanatical convictions. She early notes the paradoxical difference between herself and Duffy: “That was the strange thing: he spoke more intelligently than she ever could, and yet she understood the ways of the world so much better. He lacked a necessary cunning” (*JD* 28). Significantly, Cooley tries to warn Duffy of the dangers of his campaign, but without success. This is later brought into prominence when Duffy imagines her talking sensibly to him, warning him, for example, of the folly and futility of burning himself to death: “‘Who do you think you are, Duffy, if you believe that burning yourself to death would do anybody any good?’” (*JD* 243). Cooley’s role in the novel is therefore extremely important, both when assessing the morality and sanity of Duffy’s actions, and when viewing the more general morals of society, and indeed, as noted by J.A. Fairgrieve, she “illustrates Jenkins playing his most complex and idiosyncratic moral games” (37). Cooley’s dialogue is clever and witty, and brings humour into a narrative with otherwise bleak undercurrents.

What, then, does *Just Duffy* tell us about Scotland? First of all, the society presented through the narrative is obviously characterised by moral chaos and class segregation. There are not many happy characters in the novel, except perhaps the upper class youths as represented through Margaret Porteous and her friends. Ultimately, Duffy’s war proves futile and wrong, and nothing much has changed at the end of the novel apart from the fact that Duffy has realised the beauty inherent in people’s de-

pendence on one another. Despite the serene atmosphere at the novel's conclusion, there is at the back of it an uneasy feeling of a society at odds with itself, characterised by general disaffection, torn by class division, confused sense of value, and moral and social hypocrisy. Duffy's ultimate realisation does nothing to alter this, and we are left with an uneasy feeling at the end, which suggests that nothing has really changed. Duffy will no doubt go to prison, or a lunatic asylum, and his war will soon be forgotten. The community portrayed will remain unchanged and unaffected. In terms of the moral questioning presented in the plot, it seems that there is little to be done about the evil that resides in human society. This urban decadence seems to contain a bitter vision, as argued by Dickson: "although goodness exists, the evil within us all inevitably overcomes it" (11). However, I would suggest that Dickson takes the conclusion of *Just Duffy* a bit too far. Although Jenkins's vision is often pessimistic, he never explicitly states that evil has the upper hand in society, but rather reveals it as an intrinsic part of human nature which people need to know and be wary of (a theme explored through the evil of Duror in an early novel, *The Cone-Gatherers*). At least, there is some kind of positiveness in the fact that Duffy's final thoughts show "a recognition that he is not the prophet and teacher he had thought himself to be" (Milton 28), even though Duffy himself is left as an outcast with little hope for the future. Accordingly, the novel is bleak in its resolution, but ambitious in its showing up of human inadequacy and inconsistency.

On another level, the Scottish resonance of *Just Duffy* is obvious in terms of its preoccupation with religious fanaticism. Duffy's self-appointed position as a just and justified moral rectifier echoes certain aspects of extreme Calvinist thought and makes him comparable to characters like Robin Wringhim in Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. This suggests that Calvinism is still a strong influence on Scottish character and therefore makes the novel more "Scottish" in its focus, which is made more prominent by its portrayal of small-town life in 20th century Lowland Scotland. As a result, *Just Duffy* has been cited as an even stronger manifestation of the influence of Calvinism on Jenkins's work. While maintaining that the novel is a "suspenseful modern morality drama" (McCulloch, Introduction v), McCulloch also insists that *Just Duffy* is a 20th century descendant of Hogg's *Justified Sinner*, since there is a relationship "between Duffy's self-election as destroyer of evil and the behaviour of a Calvinist such as Robert Wringhim" (Introduction viii). McCulloch refers to numerous aspects of the novel that support this view. In Jenkins's pun on the title, "just" comes to mean any of three things. Firstly, *inconsequential*—as Duffy is no more than just Duffy, a youth with little impact or significance. Secondly, *right, fair, or impartial*—as Duffy sets himself up as a judge who is fair and morally just. Thirdly, *righteous or justified*—as Duffy becomes righteous and justified in his actions because of the assumed moral rightness of his campaign. Evidently, therefore, the title shows that the last two meanings of "just" are closely related in terms of Duffy's ideals:

And so, just Duffy, with his perception of human inadequacy, becomes translated into *justified* Duffy who determines to wage war on 'the defilers of truth and abusers of authority' in order to bring them to a realisation of their sins, to repentance and to a re-ordering of their ways. (McCulloch, "Hogg's" 15)

However, McCulloch's careful analysis of the Hogg-element in Jenkins's novel fails to recognise how the split psyche, and the dissociation of personality which relates to this mental condition, are represented in Jenkins's novel. *Just Duffy* echoes the theme of duality, which is central to some major novels within Scottish tradition, such as Hogg's *Justified Sinner* and Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Clearly, Duffy's degeneration from naive idealism to his ultimate and evil betrayal and murder of Johnny Crosbie involves a definite move from a seriously disturbed mentality towards outright schizophrenia at the time of Crosbie's murder:

It did not seem to be himself, *but someone else*, who a few minutes later resolutely dragged Crosbie's body into a nearby close ...

Then that someone else took off the dusty and bloody gloves and pushed them well down through a hole ...

Duffy watched with horror all this being done. *He knew intimately this cool, active, thorough, and resolute person in the black jerkin spotted with blood, but seemed to have no influence over him.*

Together they ran home, Duffy panting and fearful, the other alert and silent.

It was ten past seven when *they* were back inside the house. (JD 156, emphasis added)

There have been hints before as to the duality of Duffy's character; the shrewd Cooley discovers two paintings in his room and notes that they are both of Duffy and almost identical (JD 63), and later she has 'a curious feeling that there were two Duffies in the room, the one watching the other all the time' (JD 104). Accordingly, Cooley's reflections already imply that Duffy may have something of the schizophrenic in him. However, it is only at the time of Crosbie's murder that Duffy starts perceiving himself as two people. Evidently, Duffy is here victim to mental dissociation; he is not one person, but two, and he is aware of this change. Robert Wringhim's schizophrenic state in *Justified Sinner* has been much referred to in studies of Hogg's novel, both in terms of Robert's condition when confined to his bed,⁸ and in terms of his relationship with his possible alter-ego, Gil-Martin. Duffy's psychological state at the time of murdering Crosbie is clearly reminiscent of Robert's mental condition, and it is therefore surprising that McCulloch fails to include this aspect of *Just Duffy* in her analysis. Although the importance of dualism and schizophrenia has become somewhat of a cliché in the Scottish literary canon, *Just Duffy* is yet another manifestation of its continuity within Scottish tradition.

Jenkins himself has expressed his great disappointment with the reception of *Just Duffy*, and seems to think that the lack of public response is related to his unusual decision not to use Scots dialogue in the novel (Ágústsdóttir, "Truthful" 17). The use of Standard English, it appears, was applied because Jenkins hoped *Just Duffy* would have "universal appeal" (Ágústsdóttir, "Truthful" 17). Furthermore, Jenkins claims to look on *Just Duffy* as one of his most optimistic novels because of Duffy's ultimate discovery that "there is something quite beautiful in the dependence of people on one another" (Ágústsdóttir, "Truthful" 19). However, this view of *Just Duffy* is bound to puzzle most of Jenkins's readers because, in spite of Duffy's final positive vision, he is left without any hope for himself, a murderer about to be apprehended by the po-

lice, an outcast, a misfit in society, and barred forever from the life he has just realised is beautiful. This confusion is shared by Douglas Gifford, who feels perplexed by Jenkins's claim:

Yes, Duffy may finally see the quiet friendliness of churchgoers as beautiful, but why does he have to [be] an outcast to see it? And can we trust Duffy's up till now pretty changeable perceptions? The claim for a hopeful ending seems [...] a bit unconvincing and at the very least offset by the final image of permanently outcast Duffy waiting on the rubbish dump for police and authority to come for him. (Gifford, "Spring" 13)

Just Duffy is not a hopeful novel, and certainly not when considering the fate of its protagonist, but despite its bleakness it is ambitious in its attempt to throw light on the fallible nature of human morality, and successful in demonstrating the confused line between good and evil, right and wrong, innocent idealism and blind fanaticism.

On the other hand, *Just Duffy* is not merely a Scottish novel, especially since it is evidently deeply concerned with international warfare; in this context, Jenkins's mention of the novel as a universal appeal is highly relevant to its moral dimension. The symbolism of war used throughout the novel suggests the double morality of those who are involved in war. Thus Duffy's own "war" becomes an epitome for the supposedly "moral" killings committed in times of war, killings that are sanctioned and approved of by both those who authorise them and by the population of the nations involved. Duffy's little war therefore points toward a criticism of the moral inconsistencies of people and governments of the world, where on the surface human relationships may seem decent and pleasant enough while wartime killings, injustice, and brutality are taking place in front of our eyes. Moreover, Duffy's initial good intentions that ultimately lead to evil reflect the more general issue of organisations that, in working for a cause they consider "good" and "just," would not hesitate to kill in order to achieve their mission. In this context, the brutal consequences of many organised terrorist activities are especially relevant. Accordingly, Jenkins's claim for *Just Duffy* as a universal appeal is perfectly applicable, as his novel remains a powerful reminder of humanity's strange tendency to destroy itself.

It is therefore evident that through his portrayal of Duffy and his world, Jenkins poses highly ambiguous and challenging moral questions, questions that continue to unsettle the reader even after reaching the novel's conclusion. This novel is not an easy read in the strictest sense of the word, due to both its disturbing quality and its startling depiction of an exceptional but highly unusual protagonist, whose isolated status seemingly gains him a better understanding of the moral and social fallibility of humanity. Duffy may initially have clearer moral judgement than other characters in the novel, but ultimately his naive idealism and fanatical assurance of his own moral worth befuddle his vision and prove him no less fallible than the people he has condemned for moral slackness. Duffy's moral credibility is therefore gradually undermined and eventually deconstructed through the narrative process.

Matthew and Sheila is the story of Matthew Sowglass, son of a painter, Hugh, and Catriona, the daughter of a minister of the Free Church in Uist. When Matthew is ten, his mother dies. Struck by grief, and by desire to find fresh inspiration for his art, his

father leaves Scotland for Mexico, and Matthew is left in the care of their housekeeper, Mrs Macdonald. The novel then charts Matthew's lonely childhood in Lunderston, his hometown, and the holidays spent in Uist with his aunt Fiona. His grandfather's Calvinist ravings are a strong influence on Matthew, and the boy becomes obsessed with the idea that he is one of the Elect. At the same time, Matthew sets himself apart from children his age through his apparently simple-minded goodness and sensitivity. The real twist to the plot comes with Matthew's acquaintance with his classmate Sheila, a beautiful girl with a great musical talent, who shows her nasty side only to Matthew, by making vicious comments about other people, showing cruelty to animals, claiming to have killed a baby, and later to have murdered their classmate Davy Moore, and insisting that she intends to kill her own father. Lacking determination and courage, Matthew is unable to rid himself of Sheila's "friendship," and when his father finally returns to Scotland with a pregnant Mexican wife, causing Matthew's jealousy, Sheila tries to encourage Matthew to do away with his step-mother. The narrative is straightforward, and even has a child-like ring at times, but Jenkins's approach is deeply ambiguous, so that the reader is ultimately unsure of the moral significance and value of the central characters. Accordingly, although the narrative initially establishes clear polarities of good and evil through Matthew and Sheila, the line that divides these moral concepts has become vague and obscure at the novel's conclusion.

Jenkins's use of the binary opposite of good and evil in *Matthew and Sheila* is useful both as a comparison and contrast to how it is employed in *Just Duffy*. Jenkins maintains that he was trying to portray true goodness in the character of Matthew, and pure evil in the character of Sheila (Ágústsdóttir, "Truthful" 17). While Jenkins thinks that he has succeeded as far as Matthew is concerned, he remains unsure about Sheila, whom he refers to as "a mysterious character" (Ágústsdóttir, "Truthful" 17). As is clear from this information, Jenkins wrote *Matthew and Sheila* with the intention of establishing, and maintaining, a set of binary opposites through the two children. It seems to me, though, that this set of binary opposites does not survive for long in its original form. First of all, by making Matthew become consumed with ideas of Calvinist grace, thinking he is one of "those favourites of God who could do no wrong, or rather who, if they did what in others would be called wrong, were immediately absolved and protected from punishment" (MS 3), Jenkins — possibly somewhat inadvertently — undermines the notion of Matthew as good. Jenkins's portrayal of Calvinist ideology remains extremely critical throughout his fiction (*The Thistle and the Grail*, *A Toast to the Lord*, and *Fergus Lamont* are but few examples), and this fact would therefore seem to contradict the novelist's own view of Matthew's good qualities. As a result, Matthew's embracing of Calvinist thought already points towards an ambiguity in his character. Moreover, as the novel moves towards its conclusion, we become aware of flaws in Matthew's goodness, especially when considering his hatred of his new stepmother.⁹ This view is supported by Gifford, who sees "the classic juxtapositioning of apparent Good and Evil" as highly questionable, especially in light of Matthew's belief that he is "justified" in seeking Sheila's help to destroy his step-mother (Gifford, "Autumn" 4). On the other hand, the evil mentality of Sheila is never proved, just hinted at, and then through Matthew who is the only person to whom Sheila shows her unpleasant side. All along, there is the possibility that Sheila's evil is merely an illusion, sustained by Matthew's vivid imagination and Sheila's pos-

sibly false boasts of doing evil deeds. Moreover, the truth of Sheila's claims of having killed several people, including her own father, is never fully established either.

Accordingly, the boundaries between the concepts of good and evil as portrayed through the characters of Matthew and Sheila become increasingly blurred as the story develops. Eventually, we are left unsure about the qualities of either character. If Sheila is an evil murderer who eventually pushes Matthew's stepmother to her death down the stairs (despite the fact that Matthew no longer wishes to get rid of her), why has the good Matthew not revealed her crime to the appropriate authorities? Did Sheila really murder all the people she claims to have murdered, or is she merely telling Matthew these things to scare him? Can Sheila perhaps be read as Matthew's symbolic alter ego, an evil conscience, a second self, such as depicted in Gil-Martin in Hogg's *Justified Sinner*? We are left pondering these questions and many more at the end of the novel, but since we are given no fixed answers to them in the text, we cannot but question the initial set up of good and evil as suggested by Jenkins himself. Therefore the ultimate ambiguity concerning the characters of Matthew and Sheila shows how Jenkins's originally ordered concept of good and evil has been undermined, questioned, and ultimately deconstructed through his approach to the two characters. This, I believe, is not intentional on Jenkins's part, at least not as far as Matthew is concerned, and thus Jenkins has here written a narrative which "*transgresses the law it appears to set up for itself*" (Selden 90). When compared to *Just Duffy*, therefore, we see that a similar thing takes place when Duffy's original idea of good and evil is wholly undermined and obscured by his own subsequent actions. The only difference is that the deconstruction of good and evil in *Matthew and Sheila* is more or less accidental while in *Just Duffy* it is clearly intentional.

There are some other similarities between the two novels. To start with, Matthew and Sheila presents a world where there are no moral certainties and where people seem to have lost all sense of real value when faced with an increasingly fragmented and chaotic social order. Moreover, the novel echoes the attitude to war expressed in *Just Duffy*. Thus Mrs Macdonald, Matthew's housekeeper, questions the justification of killing in time of war:

[...] didn't nations do wicked things and claim that they had a right to do them, a right given them by God? Wasn't this war in Vietnam an example? Just a few evenings ago she had seen on television a child younger than Matthew running along a road, its body on fire, caused by chemicals dropped by American planes. Those pilots would say they had God's permission and therefore God's pardon. They would expect praise, not blame. (MS 35)

Obviously, this echoes the reasoning used in *Just Duffy* to imply a severe criticism of war and its moral inconsistencies, and, like there, stresses the importance of religion, both in terms of the moral hypocrisies portrayed, and in terms of its influence on the main characters. Finally, the murders of slums boy Davy Moore and Johnnie Crosbie are parallels. Both of them are battered to death with a brick, and both deaths cause great consternation and fear that a mass murderer is on the loose.

As we have seen, *Just Duffy* and *Matthew and Sheila* both depict communities characterised by a confused sense of moral and social value, and Jenkins uses these to

criticise the increasingly hypocritical and disordered vision of modern society. His tackling of moral concepts in these narratives is loaded with irony and ambiguity, emphasising the fluidity and reversible nature of moral polarities within the chaos, confusion, and dissolution that are part of contemporary life. Within this context, the portrayal of the novels' protagonists and their environment ultimately deconstructs the various binary opposites that are initially laid out by the narrative voice. At the same time, Jenkins's specific reference to Calvinist ideology, and his continuation of themes that have characterised classical works of Scottish literature, highlight even further the specific Scottish focus of both narratives. Yet, even though the moral argument of both novels is backed up by the strong Calvinist influence on the characters of Duffy and Matthew, the obvious concern with the issue of international warfare gives both narratives a wider universal significance, warning that idealism can easily turn into dangerous fanaticism within the wide scope of religion and politics.

Notes

- ¹ See, for example, Douglas Gifford, "'God's Colossal Irony': Robin Jenkins and *Guests of War*"; Bernard Sellin, "Robin Jenkins: The Making of the Novelist"; and Glenda Norquay, "Four Novelists of the 1950s and 1960s."
- ² For other proposed explanations see, for example, Moira Burgess, "Robin Jenkins: A Novelist of Scotland"; Isobel Murray, "One Toe in Eden Still: Robin Jenkins' Fiction"; Glenda Norquay, "Against Compromise: The Fiction of Robin Jenkins"; and Glenda Norquay, "Disruptions: The Later Fiction of Robin Jenkins."
- ³ For further discussion of the Scottish resonance in Jenkins's foreign works, see Ingibjörg Ágústsdóttir, "Full Circle: The Function of Place in the Fiction of Robin Jenkins."
- ⁴ See Robin Jenkins, "Novelist in Scotland"; Robin Jenkins, "Why I Decided Scotland Must Be Seen through Fresh and Truthful Eyes"; and Robin Jenkins, Foreword, *Lunderston Tales*."
- ⁵ Robin Jenkins, *Just Duffy* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1995). All further references in the text are to this edition, abbreviated as *JD*.
- ⁶ Robin Jenkins, *Matthew and Sheila* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1998). All further references in the text are to this edition, abbreviated as *MS*.
- ⁷ James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1991). All further references in the text are to this edition, abbreviated as *Justified Sinner*.
- ⁸ See Hogg, *Justified Sinner*. Robert's Antinomian perspective distorts the reality of his circumstance and ultimately leads to a split in his character: "I generally conceived myself to be two people. When I lay in bed, I deemed there were two of us in it; when I sat up, I always beheld another person..." (*Justified Sinner* 154). For critical discussion of Hogg's novel and aspects of its psychological/religious/supernatural dimension see, for example, John Bligh, "The Doctrinal Premises of Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*"; Thomas Crawford, "James Hogg: The Play of Region and Nation"; and Douglas Gifford, *James Hogg*.
- ⁹ For a different critical perspective, which sees Matthew's goodness as unquestionable, and the novel as "a study in goodness, or [...] in the emergence of goodness," see Paul Binding, "Liberating" 20.

Works Cited

- Ágústsðóttir, Ingibjörg. "A Truthful Scot." In *Scotland 1* (Autumn 1999): 13-22.
- "Full Circle: The Function of Place in the Fiction of Robin Jenkins." *Terranglian Territories: Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference on the Literature of Region and Nation*. Ed. Susanne Hagemann. Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2000. 179-186.
- Binding, Paul. "A Calvinist Out East." *Times Literary Supplement* 1 Mar. 1996: 25.
- "Liberating the Elect." *Times Literary Supplement* 18 Dec. 1998: 20.
- Bligh, John. "The Doctrinal Premises of Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*." *Studies in Scottish Literature* 19 (1984): 148-164.
- Burgess, Moira. "Robin Jenkins: A Novelist of Scotland." *Library Review* 22.8 (1970): 409-412.
- Crawford, Thomas. "James Hogg: The Play of Region and Nation." *The History of Scottish Literature*. Ed. Douglas Gifford. Vol. 3. Aberdeen: Aberdeen UP, 1989. 89-106.
- Dickson, Beth. "Recent Fiction: Familiar Themes of Good and Evil." *Books in Scotland* 28 (Summer 1988): 9-12.
- Fairgrieve, J.A. "Instruments of God?: Female Voices in the Fiction of Robin Jenkins." M. Phil. Dissertation. U of Glasgow, 1997.
- Gifford, Douglas. "Autumn Fiction: Good Times, Bad Times." *Books in Scotland* 67 (Autumn 1998): 1-7.
- "'God's Colossal Irony': Robin Jenkins and *Guests of War*." *Cencrastus* 24 (1986): 13-17.
- *James Hogg*. Edinburgh: Ramsay Head, 1976.
- "Spring Fiction: Dreams of Love and Justice." *Books in Scotland* 57 (Spring 1996): 8-15.
- Hawtree, Christopher. "A Sorry Crew." *Times Literary Supplement* 29 July 1988: 839.
- Hogg, James. *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. 1824. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1991.
- Jenkins, Robin. Foreword. *Lunderston Tales*. By Robin Jenkins. Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996. ix-x.
- *Just Duffy*. 1988. Edinburgh: Canongate, 1995.
- *Matthew and Sheila*. Edinburgh: Polygon, 1998.
- "Novelist in Scotland." *Satire Review* 5 (1955): 7-10.
- "Why I Decided Scotland Must Be Seen through Fresh and Truthful Eyes." *Glasgow Herald* 12 Oct. 1982: 11.
- McCulloch, Margery Palmer. Introduction. *Just Duffy*. By Robin Jenkins. Edinburgh: Canongate, 1995. v-xi.
- "Hogg's *Justified Sinner* and Robin Jenkins's *Just Duffy*." *Studies in Hogg and His World* 6 (1995): 12-21.
- "What Crisis in Scottish Fiction?: Creative Courage and Cultural Continuity in Novels by Friel, Jenkins and Kelman." *Cencrastus* 48 (Summer 1994): 15-18.
- Milton, Colin. "*Just Duffy* by Robin Jenkins." *Scottish Literary Journal Supplement* 29 (Winter 1988): 27-29.

- Murray, Isobel. "One Toe in Eden Still: Robin Jenkins' Fiction." *Scottish Review* 38 (1985): 88-95.
- Norquay, Glenda. "Against Compromise: The Fiction of Robin Jenkins." *Cencrastus* 24 (1986): 3-6.
- "Disruptions: The Later Fiction of Robin Jenkins." *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies: New Visions, Old Dreams*. Ed. Gavin Wallace and Randall Stevenson. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1993. 11-24.
- "Four Novelists of the 1950s and 1960s." *The History of Scottish Literature*. Ed. Cairns Craig. Vol. 4. Aberdeen: Aberdeen UP, 1989. 259-276.
- Selden, Raman. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989.
- Sellin, Bernard. "Robin Jenkins: The Making of the Novelist." *Cencrastus* 24 (1986): 7-9.