

Moral Issues in Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business*

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Abstract: Robertson Davies was a Canadian novelist, playwright, critic, journalist and a professor. He was one of the best-known and most read Canadian authors. He shot into fame with his The Deptford Trilogy. The entire Trilogy is a series of consequences that takes place because of a single incident. Davies sustains the reader's interest throughout the Trilogy starting with more engrossing narration of the first novel, *Fifth Business* to the third novel, *World of Wonders*. The entire plot revolves round the three key characters—Dunstan Ramsay, Percy Boy Staunton and Paul Dempster. The three characters are fixed in situations where they have to choose the right or the wrong. The single incident of snow-ball throwing leads to the consequences of events which turned out to be the decider of the fate of the characters. Davies draws much inspiration from his milieu from which the sources spring and projects the life that is Canadian in absolute nature. While *Fifth Business* introduces Dunstan narrating his own life history in a letter to his headmaster on the eve of Dunstan's retirement, the second novel, *The Manticore* explores the subconscious mind of David Staunton, son of Percy Boy Staunton using the Jungian psychotherapy. Finally the third novel, *World of Wonders*, narrates the story of Magnus Eisengrim who becomes a world famous magician and whose very existence is associated with the rivalry between Dunstan Ramsay and Percy Staunton. This paper endeavours to study the Deptford Trilogy of Robertson Davies, focussing on moral issues in his first novel of the trilogy namely, *Fifth Business*.

Keywords: Morality, Conflict, Evil and Good,

Introduction: Robertson Davies works offer penetrating observations on Canadian provincialism. Starting with satires and comedy of manners, Davies shot into fame with his novels of Deptford Trilogy, consisting of *Fifth Business* (1970), *The Manticore* (1972), and *World of Wonders* (1975). The Trilogy examines the intersecting lives of three men from the small Canadian town of Deptford and interweaves Davies' moral concerns with bits of arcane lore and his lasting interest in Jungian psychotherapy. Prior to this, Davies produced *The Salterton Trilogy* consisting of *Tempest-Tost* (1951), *Leaven of Malice* (1954), and *A Mixture of Frailties* (1958), all of which are comedy of manners set in a provincial Canadian university town. The Deptford Trilogy is followed by the Cornish Trilogy with *The Rebel Angels* (1981), *What's Bred in The Bone* (1985), and *The Lyre of Orpheus* (1988). These novels satirize the art world, grand opera, and other aspects of high culture in Canada. Davies was primarily concerned with the moral conflicts of characters in small

Canadian towns. In the course of his narratives he wittily satirised bourgeois provincialism, explored the relating between mysticism and art, and affirmed the possibilities for self-knowledge through Jungian philosophy. McPherson considers him as a serious writer whose constant theme is the plight of the Canadian imagination in chilly cultural climate. According to Elspeth Buitenhuis, in Davis works, the forces of restraint, balance, and reason are at war with intuition, passion and the ultimately untameable irrational. She thinks that Davies has moved from a strict Apollonian approach in the early books to a more Dionysian emphasis in *Fifth Business*.

Fifth Business is the first of series of novels of Deptford Trilogy. It is an autobiographical letter of a retired school headmaster, Dunstan Ramsay. The novel sets the tone for the trace of the lives of three people in a small town called Deptford in Canada. The novel examines and dissects deep into the issues of the human condition. Being annoyed at the so-called tribute on his superannuation as the headmaster who served for 45 years, in the defence of the essence of his life, he starts writing his autobiography to the present headmaster. The reply of Ramsay to his retirement testimonial is the marvellous novel, *Fifth Business*. Davies offers the definition of fifth business in a preface: "Those roles which, being neither those of Hero nor Heroine, Confidante nor Villain, but which were nonetheless essential to bring about the Recognition or the denouement, were called the Fifth Business in drama and opera companies organized according to the old style; the player who acted these parts was often referred to as Fifth Business." In the later part of the novel Liesl explains to Dunstan who he really is and what she thinks of him. She says,

"Who are you? Where do you fit into poetry and myth? Do you know who I think you are, Ramsay? I think you are Fifth Business.

"You don't know what that is? Well, in opera in a permanent company of the kind we keep up in Europe you must have a prima donna -- always a soprano...the heroine, often a fool; and a tenor...a contralto...a sorceress...and a basso, the villain.

...But you cannot make a plot work without another man, and he is usually a baritone, and he is called in the profession Fifth Business, because he is the odd man out, the person who has no opposite of the other sex. And you must have Fifth Business because he is the one who knows the secret of the hero's birth, or comes to the assistance of the heroine when she thinks all is lost, or keeps the hermitess in her cell, or may even be the cause of somebody's death if that is part of the plot.

...you cannot manage the plot without Fifth Business! It is not spectacular, but it is a good line of work, I can tell you, and those who play it sometimes have a career that outlasts the golden voices. Are you Fifth Business? You had better find out." (p.106).

Conflict between Good and Evil: The main conflict in the novel *Fifth Business* exists between Dunstable Ramsay and his 'lifelong friend and enemy' Percy Boyd Staunton. It is viewed as the conflict between the

good and evil. It is an odd conflict because both Percy and Dunstan are best friends and at the same time there erupts a subtle rivalry between the two owing to their personalities. Subsequently it leads to the destruction of Mrs. Dempster. It is evident from Dunstan's account that the conflict is not only superficial between them, but there is internal conflict between good and the personal devil in him. It is the conflict between the Percy's materialism and Dunstan's spiritualism. Dunstan leads a very moral life whereas Percy enjoys womanizing and ends up having multiple affairs. While contrasting, Dunstan says, 'to him the reality of life lay in external things, whereas for me the only reality was of the spirit' (p.51). The events in the novel also prove that. Boy falls in love with vacuous Leola and Dunstan for strong and understanding Diana.

The status conscious minister, Rev. George Maldon Leadbeater appeals to Boy whereas Dunstan learns to appreciate the complete Joel Surgeoner, the earlier tramp. Boy's mature love affair is with the grasping, ambitious Denyse, whereas Dunstan's with the intuitive, other-worldly Liesl. Interestingly, all the three key characters in the novel are twice born. The idea that a single event might generate a maelstrom of infinitely ramifying consequences and catalyse the destructive influence in the number of individual lives shows the dynamics at work in The Deptford Trilogy. The originating point is the single act of boyish malice that Percy Staunton commits in the opening pages of *Fifth Business*. He launches a snowball containing a stone at his friend Dunstable Ramsay. When Ramsay dodges it, the snowball strikes a pregnant woman by name Mary Dempster resulting in the premature birth of her son and what seems to be the onset of her own mental collapse needing care throughout her life. This sense of guilt that Ramsay was the cause for the devastating fate of Mary Dempster haunts him throughout his life and the trilogy as whole would seem to constitute the illustration of what Dunstan has to say at the end of *World of Wonders*, "the consequences that can follow a single action" (p.824). The entire plot is the playing out of this event and its consequences.

The act of concealing a stone in the snow-ball speaks of the treacherous nature of Percy, a permanent symptomatic facet of his character which Dunstan carries throughout his life, when he accuses him that "the stone-in-the snowball has been characteristic of too much you've done for you to forget it forever" (p. 124). At the end of the novel, Dunstan tries hard to accept the responsibility for the fate of Paul and Mary Dempster and accept the truth. Percy was reluctant to discuss the 'ugly truths'. On the other hand, Paul Dempster is the victim of the event who never sees the evil in the event but views it as something fortunate event that happened to him to become a world famous magician, Magnus Eisengrim. Paul alias Magnus opines that it was that incident in the final analysis of his life which is responsible for the present success to become a world renowned magician. He acknowledges Dunstan as his first

teacher and learnt his first lessons from him. This is the good side of Magnus. However, he remarks that Percy Boy is in his debt 'for eighty days in paradise' (p.124) invoking personal revenge. It is Dunstan who stands in foreground of the novel who is passionate about saints and undertakes long tours to Europe to study hagiography. This kind of interest is quite unlikely in the province of Deptford and he reasons this to snow-ball incident. It is his guilt that draws him nearer to Mary and Paul and the exposure to the Mary's vision of life which ultimately leads to take interest in saints and become famous hagiologist. In his case, the two forces—good and evil—are diametrically opposed to one another and are intertwined with each other that one cannot be accomplished without the exposure of the other. The snow-ball incident determines Dunstan's life and his existence more than those of Mary and Paul. As a library boy, Dunstan develops interest in the lives of saints and it gets intensified with the three miracles of Mary Dempster. Being a Presbyterian, it is interesting to see Dunstan to have such curiosity in the lives of saints. It is the role of guilt that initiates the psychic maturity which ultimately paves the way for the spiritual pilgrimage that he undertakes in his life. The miracles play their role in this journey. The first miracle is the revival of Willie, his brother, from his death, but only Dunstan is convinced that Mary has miraculous powers and she saved his brother from death, the second is the most telling in 1917 when he is in the World War I and seriously injured in the mud of Flanders. He loses his leg but manages to drag himself into a church and collapses at the foot of a Madonna statue and the statue is definitely wearing the face of Mary Dempster, eventually he falls into a six months long coma. The third one is with the tramp who later turns out to be a servant to God and society. If Mary acts a catalyst to perform the good in Dunstan, he sees the devil's presence in himself and in the form of the ladies—Diana and Liesl. There is a conflict and Dunstan faces the confrontation with his own personal Devil.

The presence of good and evil is even more apparent in the case of Mary. The sympathy that she arouses among the inhabitants of Deptford and tolerating her mental equilibrium and her vague and desultory habits vanish with the act on night when she is found in the copulation act with a tramp in a grave pit near the town. She arouses ridicule from the town mates when she presents this act as a deed of charity when she says that the tramp 'wanted it so badly.' (p.20). The tramp, later identified as Joel Surgeoner, finds God in Mary Dempster. He is a changed man after the incident and good prevails in him. He operates a mission for derelicts and neglected people and dedicates his entire life for the care and concern of destitute and defeated people. Surgeoner confesses to Dunstan that incident in his life made him to turn to God as he describes the experience as being "as if I had gone right down into Hell and through the worst of the fire, and come on a clear, pure pool where I could wash and be clean" (p.62). He believes that God "worked through

that woman, and she is a blessed saint, for what she did for me...was a miracle” (p.62). It is the conflict between good and evil at force once again, and it is interesting to note that good manifests itself through visible evil, but that good and evil are so entangled with one another as to be practically indistinguishable. By the end of the novel, Dunstan realises that life is to accommodate both good and evil within a single perspective and he learns this on to come to terms with demonic principle within himself on the path to wisdom by encountering the mentors. Dunstan refuses Diana's love and to marry her and lead a normal domestic life. At this Diana confers upon him the name Dunstan in tribute to his scholarly saint who grappled with the Devil and prevailed (p.42). Later he meets his demon in the person of Liesl, he almost reenacts Saint Dunstan's exploits almost in combating with Liesl twisting her nose. It is Liesl who tells him that he is not living his own life as fully as he might, and in order to realize his own humanity, he will have to establish his contact with the devil within himself. She says,

You should take a look at this side of your life you have not lived...every man has a devil.... You must get to know your personal devil. You must even get to know his father, the Old Devil. (p.102).

David Lucking classifies *The Deptford Trilogy* as a novel which is 'essentially religious in tenor if not in doctrine' and the trilogy 'embodies an extended, and on the whole coherent, meditation on what is frequently referred to as the “problem” of evil and the ambiguous role it plays in human affairs. What the trilogy as a whole articulates is in effect a series of variation on the idea that what appears in the immediate view to partake of evil might paradoxically prove to be beneficent in its ultimate consequences, from which it is only a short step to suggesting that evil might have as necessary and as important a role to play in the cosmic scheme of things as good itself’ (p.45). There are oblique references to Canadian Theosophy in *Deptford Trilogy* which Davies explicitly names the Society as a cultural force in Toronto. The use of occult philosophy and the understanding of evil and karma of Theosophical Society and gnostic beliefs are also linked in *Trilogy*. In Annie Besant's *Karma* (1897), she proposed that this natural law (karma) affects individuals and nations and it is the immutable edict that determines all other laws. Evil was 'that which prevents a living creature from completing its life-cycle, from passing through the normal processes of gestation, growth, maturity, and old age. On a deeper level, it cuts the creature off from enjoying the unbound fullness of life which all living things desire and which lies behind their need to eat, rest, mate and play' (quoted in Ellwood 145). When viewed from this perspective, Karma is the law governing the snowball thrown by Boy that results in Mrs. Dempster's madness and her son's uncanniness. Dunstan Ramsay knows this concept by a different name in another language: Highland Scots, the people who settled the fictional Deptford, Ontario, would say “dree his weird” (*World of Wonders* 308), which means 'submit to his fate'

in English. Thus, the novel, *Fifth Business* is basically the story of a boy who throws a snowball, but, in the hands of Davies, it becomes a deeply more tale, questioning man's and child's responsibility for the multitude of subsequent events that follow from a simple thoughtless act. Philosophically what is suggested in the act of the thrown object is principally an existential dilemma. To sum up, in the image of a stone, Davies gives the readers an enigma wrapped in a metaphor: the quintessential Canadian object, a snowball that sets in motion a timeless story but plainly a Canadian one, with occult possibilities. At the end of *World of Wonders*, the whole events finally substantiate Dunstan's conviction, wherein he expresses that there is no easy solution to this conundrum:

God wants to intervene in the world, and how is he to do it except through man? I think the Devil is in the same predicament.... it's the moment of decision—of will—when those Two nab us, and as they both speak so compellingly it's trick work to know who's talking. Where there's will, there are always two ways. (p.824-5).

However, Davies achieved the goal Harris set for Canadian artists when he called for ageless art with its roots in the very soil.

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