

1.5 Interpretations of *Fifth Business*:

In 1970, Davies published *Fifth Business*, the first instalment of his "The Deptford Trilogy." On the surface level, the novel chronicles 60 years in the life of Dunstan Ramsay, an assistant headmaster at a Canadian school. But on a deeper level, Davies weaves into the story many religious and psychological themes. What is more, the novel is a complex study of several characters, full of Jungian archetypes, synchronicity, and questions about power, sexuality, love, and faith. Because of the complexity of novel, L. J. Davis of *Book World* (1970) branded the novel "a work of theological fiction that approaches Graham Greene at the top of his form" (99). With this perspective at the back of mind, let us see how the novel has been critically analysed and evaluated.

At the outset, it is to be noted that the limitation of space does not permit detailed attention to each of the themes of the novel. The novel is analysed on the following grounds:

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- *Fifth Business* reflects upon the picture of Canadian society.
- *Fifth Business* is analysed on the level of spiritual autobiography.
- The major theme is the theme of guilt.
- The theme of the difference between materialism and spirituality. Davies asserts religion is not necessarily integral to the idea – demonstrated by the corrupt Reverend Leadbeater who reduces the *Bible* to mere economic terms.
- *Fifth Business* and the two novels of the trilogy delineate the town's religious denominations.
- The novel throws light on the role of women in society.
- *Fifth Business* has sometimes been read as an allegory of Canada's struggle for recognition and identity.
- The theme of self-discovery.
- The novel is analysed on the level of the Jungian psychology.

The novel is richly multilayered in its exploration of ideas and themes. Let us see some of the themes in detail.

1.5.1 *Fifth Business* has been compared with Davies' life. Davies' own life is reflected in the novel in a number of ways, and Davies was keenly aware of this. A few months before the writing began he told Horace Davenport:

It is autobiographical, but not as young men do it; it will be rather as Dickens wrote *David Copperfield* – a fictional reworking of some things experienced and much rearranged – a spiritual autobiography in fact, and not a sweating account of the first time I backed a girl into a corner. . . . I

discern something that gives great richness to my life, and helps me to behave rather more decently toward other people than my unaided inspiration can achieve. And that is important to me: the world is so full of self-seekers, crooks and sons of bitches that I am very keen to be a decent man – not a Holy Joe, or a do-gooder, but a man who does not gag every time he looks into a mirror. (Grant 473)

His memories of Thamesville were central to *Fifth Business* right from the beginning. With *Fifth Business*, he plumbed new artistic and spiritual depths. The opening scene, which he envisioned taking place at his boyhood home in Thamesville, Ontario, haunted Davies from the first time it appeared to him in about 1960 until he began to draft the novel ten years later:

It was simply a scene that kept occurring in my mind, which was of two boys on a village street on a winter night . . . I knew from the look of the atmosphere that it must be just around Christmas-time . . . and one boy threw a snowball at the other boy. Well, that was all there was to it, but it came so often and was so insistent that I had to ask myself, why is that boy doing that and what is behind this and what is going on? (468)

Many elements of the novel that emerged from this vision were drawn from Davies's early childhood. Davies projects his life experiences into many of his works and it seems no surprise Davies thought of it as "autobiographical, but not as young men do it; it will be rather as Dickens wrote *David Copperfield*, a fictional reworking of some things

experienced and much re-arranged” (473). Davies allows us to peer through a window into his childhood in Thamesville, Ontario and through his young life into higher education and beyond through the character of Ramsay and throughout *The Deptford Trilogy*.

Like Dunstable Ramsay’s father, Davies’s father was the one-man publisher of a village newspaper, and Davies grew up in the newspaper business. Like his protagonist in *Fifth Business*, Davies was raised in the Presbyterian Church. Although he eventually rejected its particular doctrines, he retained a strongly religious temperament. His spiritual explorations ultimately found resonance in the works of Carl Gustav Jung. Ramsay’s attempts to instruct Paul in magic were drawn from Davies’s own experiments as a boy: like Ramsay, Davies possessed a clumsy set of hands. The Madonna that Ramsay spies at the battle of passchendaele is identical to the statue that Davies purchased on a trip to Austria. The following passage reflects upon Davies’s clashes with his mother:

She pursued me around the kitchen, slashing me with the whip until she broke down and I cried. She cried, too, hysterically, and beat me harder, storming about my impudence, my want of respect for her, of my increasing oddity and intellectual arrogance . . . My father and Willie came home, and there was no supper. . . . This I had to do on my knees, repeating a formula improvised by my father,

1.5.3 Another important and leading theme of the novel is the theme of guilt. The novel, *Fifth Business* dominates the consequences of premature birth. The novel begins in the village of Deptford, with a quarrel between two boys. Percy's new sled will not go as fast as Dunstan's old one. Humiliated and vindictive, Percy hides a stone the size of a hen's egg in a snowball and throws it at Dunstan, who ducks. The snowball hits Mary in the head and sends her into labour. Her premature son, Paul, struggles for life.

Dunstan Ramsay feels responsible for Mrs. Dempster's Condition. Burden with a Presbyterian conscience, Ramsay carries his guilt with him for the rest of his life, providing for Mrs. Dempster until she dies. When confronted by young Ramsay with his crime, Staunton refuses to acknowledge his responsibility for Mrs. Dempster's condition, and he promptly forgets the incident. Thus, he can join with the other Deptford youth calling Mrs. Dempster "hoor" with no sense of shame or compunction since he remains unaware of his part in her story. As a seventy-year-old tycoon, he is genuinely surprised to learn about Mrs. Dempster's history.

Mrs. Dempster plays a number of roles in the life of Dunstan Ramsay. There are roles such as Mrs. Dempster's acting as personal saint

to Ramsay, and Mrs. Dempster's role in the private mythology of Dunstan Ramsay: lover.

Dunstan is a man who believes in following his own mind and heart, rather than going along with mob mentality. This trait makes him Mary Dempster's only champion, and young Paul Dempster's only friend. The responsibility he feels towards these two human beings, so damaged by life, will stay with him throughout his entire adulthood. Dunstan is a man of great integrity, and quietly fulfils his responsibilities to Mrs Dempster and Paul, never once seeking praise or recognition for his kind deeds.

1.5.4 Robertson Davies is aware of the role of women in society. He creates a gallery of women portraits in his novel *Fifth Business*. We have Mrs. Ramsay, mother of Ramsay; Mrs. Mary Dempster, Leola, Staunton's wife and prettiest girl; Caroline, Staunton's daughter, Denyse Hornick, a manipulation; Liesl, a Devil; Diana Marfleet, a nurse; Miss Bertha Shanklin, an old maid and aunt of Mary Dempster. Women of Deptford do not breathe freely. These women are governed by the following factors:

- Men believe in the negative power of women.
- The society is male-dominated.
- Mothers are dominating and they go by their own codes of conduct.

- Women of Deptford rule the town with their moral authority.
- The moral code enforces first on women then, on men.
- Committing adultery is a sin.
- The male-dominated religious society of Deptford considers a lifetime sentence of bondage and home arrest to be appropriate punishment.

Women are never allowed to fall short of the mark of perfection; if they do, they stand to lose their reputations, their freedom, their safety, and perhaps even have their children taken away from them. Perfection is a tough line to maintain, as any man can attest. If society allowed women the same margin of error, which it allows men, men would most likely find themselves under less pressure from women to act saintly all of the time.

1.5.5 Regarding religious sectarianism, Dunstan Ramsay says,

We had five churches : the Anglican, poor but believed to have some mysterious social supremacy; the Presbyterian, solvent and thought-chiefly by itself – to be intellectual; the methodist, insolvent and fervent; the Baptist, insolvent and saved; the Roman Catholic, mysterious to most of us but clearly solvent, as it was frequently and, so we thought, quite needlessly repainted. (*FB 20*)

There is religious sectarianism in Deptford dividing the frontier townfolk between five different Christian churches that do not associate with each other under normal circumstances. It takes emergencies for

assumption that certain moral codes will be preserved regardless of faith. For instance, Mary Dempster is a daft-headed girl who habitually flouts the norms of the society, so she finds herself ostracized and ridiculed by her society, and no one comes to her aid when her son runs away. But she is the only member of Deptford society that Dunstan views as truly religious in her attitude because she lives according to a light that arises from within (which he contrasts with her husband's deeply religious attitude, which "meant that he imposed religion as he understood, it on everything he knew or encountered" (56).

As a boy, Dunstable is raised as a Presbyterian, but he also takes an avid interest in Catholic saints. He grows up to develop a more spiritual mode of life that is not reliant on external structures. For Dunstan Ramsay, religion and morality are immediate certainties in life, and the events of the novel show how moral lapses have a way of 'snowballing' and coming back to haunt one.

1.5.6 One of the leading themes of *Fifth Business* is the theme of myth and history.

Davies and Dunstan here are at pains to illustrate to us just how fluid the concept of historical fact really is, and that is not so distinct from the supposition of mythic thinking. Dunstan questions the extent

that he can provide an accurate of the events of his childhood or his participation in WWI campaigns, because what he recalls is surely distinct from the 'consensually accepted reality.'

One aspect of this blurred distinction between myth and history is Ramsay's lifelong preoccupation with the lives of the Saints. The fantastic nature of their stories were always grounded in actual events, but their miracles were given attention and focus based on the psychosocial attitudes and needs of the day, so that what the public wanted had a large measure of influence over what became the accepted canon.