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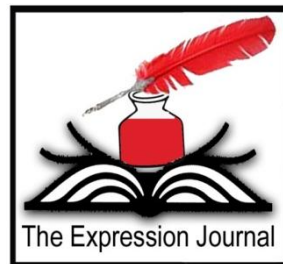
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## **ROBERTSON DAVIES AS A CANADIAN WRITER WEAVING PSYCHOLOGY AND MYTHICAL REALISM IN HIS *FIFTH BUSINESS*: A BRIEF ANALYSIS**

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### **Abstract**

William Robertson Davies was born on 28 August 1913 in Thamesville, Ontario. He was a renowned Canadian novelist, journalist, playwright, critic and professor. He was the founding figure of Massey College. He died in 1995 at the age of 82. He has published three trilogies: The Salterton Trilogy, The Deptford Trilogy and The Cornish Trilogy. He was writing the Toronto Trilogy also but he could publish only two novels *Murther and Walking Spirits* (1991) and *The Cunning Man* (1994) of this trilogy. He has written three essays, 15 plays and many pieces of criticism. This paper is an attempt to depict the centour of Canadian Literature in English as one of the most virile new literature that came of age offering two major critical stances with a focus on tradition and canon and how Canadian literary studies found a way into the Universities with critical attention on a host of writers like Hugh MacLennan, Ethel Wilson, Mordecai Richler and Robertson Davies. It also examines the literary qualities of Robertson Davies and his establishment of his stature as a notable writer whose works are an analogy of the Canadian struggle for national identity and self-recognition, with special reference to his *Fifth Business*.

### **Keywords**

William Davies, *Fifth Business*, Canadian Literature, Cantour, Tradition, Attention, Bollandist, Crucial, Dualism.

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The contour of Canadian Literature in English is one of the most virile new literatures, and that it has come of age at present. If Canadian literature is virile and has come of age, it is only imperative that it must also have a tradition and a canon. Studying the literature of a country marked by such dissonances historical, social and political involves on the part of the reader an effort to disengage from the fetters of conditional response. More significantly, it is a critical engagement of reading a text within a text. Though true of all new literatures, it is more so of the Canadian literature.

Canadian literary studies found a way into the unities during the 1960's which is about the time when this literature, especially its poetry and fiction, engaged critical attention along with interest. The works of Hugh MacLennan, Ethel Wilson, Robertson Davies and Mordecai Richler imparted a touch of otherwise to the new Canadian fiction during the mid-century, of whom Robertson Davies established himself as an excellent writer-cum-socialist. He was born in 1913 in a small village in Southwestern Ontario, Canada, called Thamesville, which would eventually be transmuted into the root scene of his most well-known and acclaimed novel *Fifth Business*. He spent six years there, during which time important influences and ideas shaped his conscious and unconscious life, remaining with him until his death. The important, ineluctable and ambiguous relationships that exist within a family were first impressed on him at that time, relationship that not only comprised the present familial unit, but also reached far back to the family's spreading histories. His parent's ancestors, from Scots, Welsh and Canadian pioneer stock were living presences that coloured daily life and development of the Davie's household that would eventually find their way as dominant players into Davie's late novel namely *Murthen and Walking Spirits*.

Davies observed that stories were a key to understanding not only his family but also himself. In his family, storytelling was a venerable, persistently practised tradition, its oral nuances carefully honed. His father Rupert's family stories, his ghost stories and his stories steeped in myth formed and underlined Davie's propensity for sound and rhythm and perhaps this great, life-long love of the theatre itself. In fact, he regularly told himself stories in bed until

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he began to write in earnest when he was eighteen. As a correlative to this oral tradition, Davie's parents emphasized the art of conversation, focusing not only on the content but also on the proper use of grammar syntax, tone and the astute use of the only correct word. Rupert's work supported this: as the owner and editor of the local newspaper, the Herald; he was an active participant in village life, and spoke often to his family about the things he had heard and seen. His meticulous observations and information were passed on to his son, Robertson, who later would make use of these descriptions, details and insights to turn his sometimes - outlandish fictional settings into credible arenas of action. Besides the vagaries of his family life, often marked by dissension and acrid exchanges between his parents, "there of Florence's and Rupert's shared abiding interests were transmitted to and became lifelong passions of Davies: the theatre, music and the primacy and love of knowledge." (Birbalsingh 59)

For Davies, the theatre was always to embody the element of illusion in life as well as serving as the jumping-off point for his belief in the crucial importance of the arts in the shaping of personal and national identity. He was to be an intelligent boy at school and even at the college, other students saw him as a brilliant but eccentric student a poseur adored with dramatic costumes and adroitly witty and a truly fine writer, editor and actor as well. It was during this time there that theatre assumed a prime importance in his life. He enjoyed success as Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* as well as in roles in Gilbert and Sullivan Operettas, and from these successes he began to envision an acting career in England. Davies left for England and Oxford University in 1935. The University afforded a highly congenial atmosphere that nourished his love of theatre, literature and life and allowed him to fully play out the various youthful personae that he embodied. He was a frequent theatre goer and joined the Oxford University Dramatic Society. That society collaborated with the professionals from London, thereby creating a network that would be invaluable in later years for theatre students. Davis worked there as a stage manager, writer and doctor and again played the part of Malvolio, this time with a brilliance that earned him favourable recognition from many including his Professional London Colleagues.

Soon after his graduation with a Degree in literature, Davies was offered one-year contract at the old Vic in the capacity of actor, researcher, writer and teacher. Here at Old Vic, Davie's ambition to become a playwright. He pursued various, always overlapping professions in Canada: editor, journalist, playwright, Professor, Director, and novelist among others. In 1940, Davies inaugurated the satiric *Samuel Marchbanks*, *The Table Talk of Samuel Marchbanks* (1949) and *Marchbanks Almanack* (1967). He became the literary editor of Saturday Night as well, Canada's leading weekly journal for which he also occasionally wrote theatre and music reviews. Having taken over the editorship of the Examiners in 1942, he wrote, acted in and directed a substantial number of plays, many of which won prestigious contents and won many awards for direction. Throughout the 1950's, he continued his work in the theatre and established himself to be a persuasive Shakespeare festivals. He has to his credit production of such notable plays as *Fifth Business* (1970), *The Manticore* (1972) and *World of Wonders* (1975), out of which *Fifth Business* may be read as an analogy of the Canadian struggle for national identity and self-recognition.

Reception of *Fifth Business* at first was cool, until it gained recognition in the United States and other countries and many have started viewing it as a masterpiece of Davies. One of the most ambitious works of fiction of the twentieth century, Robertson Davies' *Deptford Trilogy* reaches from rural Canada to the Swiss Alps and introduces a cast of characters as

varied and fascinating as any in recent literature. It is a work of towering intellect, exploring ideas of good and evil, history and identity, truth and illusion, art and mysticism, and much more. But at the centre of each of the three novels, *Fifth Business*, *The Manticore*, *World of Wonders* is a theme that connects the trilogy's many intertwining stories. The need to recover a genuine experience of the marvellous, a sense of wonder in a world from which it has been all but banished. Each of the main characters in the three novels, Dunstan Ramsay, David Staunton and Magnus Eisengrim narrates his life story. And "in the course of each of these interrelated stories, we find a common desire for mythical or magical work that exists within the confines of ordinary rationalist, desacralized modern society" (64).

In *Fifth Business*, Dunstan Ramsay, history teacher and hagiographer, finds access to the marvellous through his study of saints and their miracles. He delights in "pointing out the mythical elements that seem to underlie our apparently ordinary lives" (*Fifth Business* 38) and feels certain that Mrs. Dempster, the mother of Paul Dempster whom others consider morally degenerate and mentally deficient is in fact, a saint. David Staunton, a highly successful criminal lawyer, embodies a thoroughly rationalist belief system. As a law student, he takes his teacher's advice and puts his emotions in old storage. He eliminates from himself all the messy feelings that so often get his clients into trouble. Nevertheless, after his father's sudden and mysterious death, he undergoes Jungian analysis and a perilous descent to the underworld to reconnect both with his emotions and with humanity's mythic past.

Davies drew on his interest in Jungian psychology to create what was perhaps his greatest novel: *Fifth Business* (1970), a book that draws heavily on Davie's own experiences, his love of myth and magic and his knowledge of small-town moves. The narrator like Davie is of immigrant Canadian background with a father who runs the town paper. The characters of the book act in roles that roughly correspond to Jungian archetypes according to Davie's belief in the predominance of the spirit over the things of the world. In this first book of Davies trilogy, a snowball aimed at Ramsay by his childhood friend Percy Boyd Staunton hits the pregnant Mrs. Dempster. Mrs. Dempster gives birth to Paul prematurely and Ramsay finds himself feeling guilty over Paul's condition and Mrs. Dempster's subsequent decline. Ramsay develops an obsession with the Dempsters, although he seems unable to help them. Eventually, Paul Dempster runs away. Ramsay also leaves the small Canadian town where he grows up. He fights in the war and returns to teach. He develops an interest in hagiography and travels the world in search of icons of saints. In his travels, he encounters the unusual heiress Liesl and a famous illusionist. Ramsay's childhood friend Percy Boyd Staunton has become an important and powerful man in Canada, although it is clear that both he and Ramsay still hid secrets and buried pain from the past. As Ramsay uncovers his own history, he also finds the true cruelty and true vulnerability of Staunton.

*Fifth Business*, told in the form of a letter to the school master, begins with a snowball that young Percy Boyd Staunton throws at Ramsay. The stone-in a snowball misses Ramsay but hits Mary Dempster, causing the premature birth of Paul Dempster. Paul grows up to be Magnus Eisengrim, a mysterious and graceful magician. Tormented by his guilt of avoiding the snowball, Ramsay makes Mary his personal saint and is weighed down by his conscience until Mary's eventual death in an asylum. On the eve of becoming the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, boy Staunton is found dead in the Toronto harbor with the fateful stone in his mouth. Though the adventures that Dunstan embarks on in *Fifth Business* are that of the spiritual nature, make no mistake. This is not an occult novel that attempts to lure one into a religion, but a magnificently told tale of maturation. It is a story of revenge, of redemption of becoming.

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With depth and breadth of knowledge in Jungian concepts, Robertson Davies draws us fathoms beneath the surface to the human personality. The audience is not left grasping for breath, but is enraptured by the rich dualism in this fantastical world of Dunston, Ramsay. Good and evil, illusion and reality, history and myth, the shadows and lights of the world are exposed and explored. These juxtaposing elements are never revealed under a glaring light, however. Davies uses prose that is nothing short of elegant and weaves a mythical tale that is imbued with much realism. Real life incidents are transfused with many amazing coincidences, paving the path to surrealism. Surprisingly, although it is interspersed with devils and saints, there is little theology in *Fifth Business*. Ramsay's fascination for myth and for magic does not make the story dull, but enlivens it. With its strong psychological framework, this novel is reminiscent of Jostein Gardner's *Sophie's world* in which one can't help but love what the main character loves, no matter how shallow our knowledge of the character's hobby may be. Robertson Davies has made Ramsay memorable, not only as *Fifth Business* in the life-dramas of other, but also as a principal actor in his own. His journey into the state of wholeness fascinates and entertains. Yes it definitely entertains. Loaded with humour and witticism, *Fifth Business* is a relentless drama of fast paced action. It is a Canadian novel, but Ramsay's "big spiritual adventures" also take us to Europe and Central America. The colourful characters whose lives intermingle with Ramsay's are endearing and they can be quite exotic.

Davie's descriptions of the war from the front lines are especially vivid. Sticking to the Bollandist tradition of seeing the light as well as the shadow's, Davie's does not mince the horrific details of trench warfare. The pain and confusion that Ramsay feels are real and so are the shocked reactions of the soldiers when they discover that the Bible reading Ramsay can tell dirty jokes as well as interestingly, Davies was confident in weaving the crucial plot of the Bollandists into the story, even though, he had never before come into formal contact with Bollandists. Like the theme of story, "the novel is a refined work of dualism" (Klink 29).

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