

fifth business by robertson davies

Fifth Business by Robertson Davies is a profound exploration of the complexities of human relationships, the intricacies of identity, and the spiritual journey of self-discovery. This novel, which is the first book in Davies' acclaimed Deptford Trilogy, unfolds the life of its protagonist, Dunstan Ramsay, who narrates his story with the richness of a mythological framework. The narrative intertwines personal history with broader themes of guilt, responsibility, and the quest for meaning, set against the backdrop of the small Canadian town of Deptford.

Origins and Context of Fifth Business

Author Background

Robertson Davies (1913-1995) was a Canadian novelist, playwright, and essayist, recognized for his contributions to Canadian literature. His works often reflect his deep understanding of mythology, psychology, and the human condition. Davies' background in theatre and his extensive reading in literature and philosophy significantly influenced his narrative style, characterized by rich character development and intricate plots.

Publication and Reception

Published in 1970, Fifth Business was met with critical acclaim and has since become a staple of Canadian literature. It won the Governor General's Award for Fiction and established Davies as a leading voice in the literary world. The novel's exploration of archetypes and its psychological depth resonated with readers, ensuring its status as a classic.

Plot Overview

Fifth Business revolves around the life of Dunstan Ramsay, who recounts events from his childhood in the small town of Deptford, Ontario. The novel begins with a dramatic incident involving a snowball thrown by a classmate, which inadvertently causes a life-altering event. This incident serves as the catalyst for Dunstan's lifelong exploration of guilt and responsibility.

1. Childhood Events

- Dunstan's early life is marked by his close relationship with his mother and his fascination with saints and mythology.
- The accident involving the snowball leads to a pivotal moment in his friendship with classmates, particularly with Paul Dempsey and Leola Cruikshank.

2. Education and Transformation

- As Dunstan matures, he embarks on a journey of education, exploring themes such as war, religion,

and the pursuit of knowledge.

- His experience during World War I profoundly shapes his understanding of life and death.

3. The Concept of Fifth Business

- The title refers to a role in theatre, representing a character who supports the main action without being the hero or villain.

- Dunstan embodies this role throughout his life, influencing others while often remaining in the background.

Themes and Motifs

Fifth Business is rich with themes and motifs that enhance its narrative depth. Here are some of the most prominent:

Guilt and Responsibility

- Dunstan's life is heavily influenced by the guilt he carries from the snowball incident, which leads to a lifelong quest for redemption.

- This theme explores the moral implications of actions and the ways individuals cope with their past.

Mythology and Archetypes

- The novel is steeped in references to mythology, particularly the concept of the "hero's journey."

- Dunstan's encounters with various archetypes, such as the hero, the mentor, and the shadow, shape his understanding of himself and others.

Identity and Self-Discovery

- Dunstan's journey is also a quest for identity, as he navigates his roles in the lives of others and his own self-perception.

- The interplay between personal and collective identity is a recurrent theme, illustrating the complexities of human relationships.

The Nature of Evil

- The novel delves into the nature of evil through the character of Paul Dempsey, who embodies darker aspects of human nature.

- Dunstan's reflections on good and evil prompt readers to consider the moral ambiguity of human behavior.

Character Analysis

Fifth Business features a rich tapestry of characters, each contributing to Dunstan Ramsay's journey of self-discovery.

Dunstan Ramsay

- The protagonist and narrator, Dunstan is introspective and philosophical, often analyzing his experiences through the lens of guilt and responsibility.
- His connection to mythology and saints reveals his deep-seated desire for meaning and understanding.

Paul Dempsey

- Dunstan's childhood friend, Paul is charismatic but morally ambiguous, representing the darker side of human nature.
- His actions significantly impact Dunstan's life, forcing him to confront his own beliefs and values.

Leola Cruikshank

- The object of affection for both Dunstan and Paul, Leola's character embodies themes of desire and the consequences of choices made in the name of love.
- Her relationships with both men highlight the complexities of romantic entanglements.

Other Supporting Characters

- Figures like Mrs. Ramsay, the protagonist's mother, and Dr. Paul Dempsey add depth to the narrative, representing different facets of Dunstan's emotional landscape.
- Each character serves a purpose in Dunstan's journey, reflecting various aspects of his personality and growth.

Literary Style and Techniques

Robertson Davies employs a variety of literary techniques that enhance the richness of Fifth Business.

Narrative Structure

- The first-person narrative allows for a deeply personal exploration of Dunstan's thoughts and feelings.
- The non-linear timeline reflects the complexities of memory and the way past experiences shape one's identity.

Symbolism and Imagery

- The novel is laden with symbols, such as the snowball, which represents the unexpected consequences of seemingly trivial actions.
- Imagery related to saints and mythology evokes a sense of the sacred, contrasting with the mundane aspects of daily life.

Dialogue and Characterization

- Davies' use of dialogue captures the nuances of interpersonal relationships, revealing character motivations and conflicts.
- Each character is vividly drawn, with distinct voices that contribute to the novel's thematic depth.

Conclusion

Fifth Business is more than just a novel; it is a profound exploration of the human condition, intricately weaving together themes of guilt, identity, and the search for meaning. Through the character of Dunstan Ramsay, Robertson Davies invites readers to reflect on their own lives, the roles they play, and the impact of their actions on others. The novel stands as a testament to the power of storytelling, reminding us that in the tapestry of life, we each hold a role, whether as heroes, villains, or, like Dunstan, the essential but often overlooked fifth business. As a cornerstone of Canadian literature, Fifth Business continues to resonate with readers, offering timeless insights into the complexities of human nature and the journey toward self-understanding.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the main themes explored in 'Fifth Business'?

The main themes include the nature of guilt and responsibility, the concept of the 'fifth business' in storytelling, and the intersection of religion and psychology.

Who is the protagonist of 'Fifth Business' and what is his role?

The protagonist is Dunstan Ramsay, who serves as the narrator and reflects on his life and the influence of others, particularly exploring his role as the 'fifth business' in the lives of those around him.

How does the concept of 'fifth business' apply in the novel?

The term 'fifth business' refers to a character who is not the hero or villain but plays a crucial supporting role, often acting as a catalyst for the story's events, which is embodied by Dunstan Ramsay.

What role does religion play in 'Fifth Business'?

Religion plays a significant role, particularly through the characters' struggles with guilt, redemption, and the impact of Catholicism on their lives, as well as Dunstan's exploration of saints and spirituality.

How does 'Fifth Business' address the concept of memory and storytelling?

The novel explores how memory shapes identity and understanding, with Dunstan's recounting of his life story serving as a means to confront his past and the complex relationships that define him.

What is the significance of the character Boy Staunton in the story?

Boy Staunton represents the antithesis of Dunstan Ramsay; his success and moral failures highlight themes of ambition, guilt, and the consequences of one's actions.

How does 'Fifth Business' incorporate elements of magic realism?

The novel incorporates magic realism through its blending of psychological insights with the fantastical elements of Dunstan's experiences, such as his encounters with saints and the symbolic significance of the snowball incident.

What impact did 'Fifth Business' have on Canadian literature?

'Fifth Business' is considered a cornerstone of Canadian literature, showcasing Davies's unique narrative style and deep psychological insights, influencing subsequent Canadian authors and the development of Canadian identity in fiction.

How does the setting of the novel influence its characters?

The setting, primarily in the small town of Deptford, Ontario, reflects the characters' social dynamics and influences their development, with the town's constraints and traditions shaping their actions and relationships.

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