

The role of guilt in fifth business

Business



Guilt is a human emotion experienced when one has done something they normally would judge to be wrong and morally incorrect. Throughout the novel, the author, Robertson Davies, demonstrates how guilt can stick with you for many years and how it could affect your life. Guilt plays an enormous role in the novel titled Fifth Business, as it reoccurs all throughout. The author Robertson Davies demonstrates the role and importance of guilt in the novel through the characters named Dunstan Ramsay (Dunny), Paul Dempster and Percy Boyd Staunton (Boy). Dunstan Ramsay's (Dunny) guilt was caused by an incident that happened when he was younger.

The author began the novel by giving a vivid image of Dunny and Percy Boyd Staunton (Boy) sledding. Boy had lost and was both surprised, and humiliated. Dunny then states "When Percy was humiliated he was vindictive" (Davies 3), meaning he was a sore loser, and sought revenge. This led to Percy attempting to fight Dunny. However instead of fighting Boy, Dunny began to walk home where Percy continued to harass, and follow him. Dunny being mature, and ignoring him made Percy frustrated and angry, and that's where "The unforeseen took over" (Davies 4).

Percy Boy being vindictive threw a snowball aiming for Dunny, however he ducked and it hit Mrs. Dempster; the pregnant wife of Reverend Amasa Dempster. This snowball incident led to Mary Dempster going insane, and Paul Dempster's premature birth. Right after the incident happened; Dunny confronted Boy the next day and said "... You threw that snowball" (Davies 17) and boy portrayed as an ignorant, heartless young child chooses not to admit his fault and replies that "I threw a snowball at you" (Davies 17). Dunny feeling really guilty, now feels guiltier.

The guilt continued to bother Dunny, as stated in the novel “ So I was alone with my guilt, and it tortured me” (Davies 17). This shows that even if Percy were to admit his fault, Dunny would still feel guilty because he had ducked in front of Mary Dempster. Therefore just like any other kind hearted human, Dunny felt obligated to care for Mrs. Dempster, and her child, Paul Dempster, to lessen his guilt. This obligation drastically changes into a personal commitment of his, and begins to love and care for Mrs. Dempster all resulting from his guilt.

Prior to Dunny joining the army and escaping Deptford, he states, “ She did not know how much I loved her and how miserable it made me to defy her, but what was I supposed to do” (Davies 57). Here Dunny is admitting his love for Mrs. Dempster, and he is stating that he feels guilty for both disobeying her, and leaving her for the army. Secondly, the author shows the importance of guilt in the novel through a character named Paul Dempster. Paul was the premature baby that Mary Dempster was pregnant with when she had been struck with the snowball at the very beginning of the novel.

The author portrays Paul Dempster as a young innocent boy who does not know the issues he is surrounded by. However as Paul grows older, he gains a better understanding of the things, and people he’s surrounded by. This results in him constantly blaming himself for his mother’s current insanity. He believes that his mother is insane and simple in the mind because of his birth and that if she was not pregnant with him she would be fine. Paul, already feeling guilty, began to feel even more guilt later in the novel due to the townspeople isolating him.

“ Paul was not a village favourite, and the dislike so many people felt for his mother- dislike for the queer and persistently unfortunate” (Davies 34). Paul was not liked by most of the people in the village because people thought of his mothers’ insanity as a joke. He states “... I had to bear the cruelty of people who thought her kind of madness was funny- a dirty joke” (Davies, 140) One of the people who influenced this guilt upon him was his father Amasa Dempster at such a young age. “ My father Always told me it was my birth that robbed her of her sanity” (Davies, 139).

All of these factors made Paul want to escape his guilt, which he believed running away from home to join a circus, and become a magician named Magnus Eisengrim was his solution. Later, Paul states “ She is part of a past that cannot be recovered or changed by anything I can do now” (Davies, 139). He feels that he escaped his guilt and that he would leave all of that negativity of his mothers’ insanity in the past. Lastly, the author continues to show how guilt has a big role through one of the main characters, named Percy Boyd Staunton (Boy).

However the difference between; Boy, Dunny, and Paul is that, both Paul and Dunny had dealt with their guilt from a young age to old. Unlike Paul who was very ignorant and vindictive at a young age, and had forcefully faced his guilt in his early 60s. Everyone had forgotten about the snowball incident where Mrs. Dempster had been accidentally hit by a snowball causing her to be simple in the mind (insane) especially Boy. Until Dunny had confronted him 50 years later after the incident occurred “ It is the stone you put in the snowball you threw at Mrs Dempster” (Davies 254).

Dunny shows Boy the stone, and states “ The stone in the snowball has been characteristic of too much you’ve done for you to forget it” (Davies 254). Here Dunny is basically telling Boy to own up to his fault and that he cannot live without knowing what he has done in the past. However Boy feels offended and shocked that Dunny would even mention this, after everything he has done for him. Percy begins to ramble “ One thing I’ve done is to make you pretty well-off for a man in your position” (Davies, 254).

This shows that the truth of the incident was too much to handle for Percy, and that he does not know how to feel about this. Dunny then goes on and explains that he is trying to make him face his wrongs, and live by his morals as he states “ Need we go on with this moral bookkeeping” (Davies, 254). The author then portrays Percy Boy as an immature child, even though he is early in his sixties, because he begins to point fingers, and get off topic mentioning how he stole Leola from him.

The subject of the conversation does not go back to the stone in the snowball; neither does it go forward to any subject. Instead it ends when Eisengrim (Paul Dempster) offers Percy a ride home. We are last left with Percy showing signs of anger and guilt towards Dunny. We then figure out that Percy has mysteriously died, and his body was found in a car later that night, people seem to believe that it was suicide, “ He was killed by the usual cabal: by himself first of all” (Davies, 256).

However to the reader it seems that Paul Dempster’s guilt has not been left in the past and that it led him to murder Percy Boy Staunton because of what he had done to his mother Mary Dempster years ago. In conclusion the author has shown the importance of guilt and how it has such an enormous

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role throughout the novel. He has demonstrated the effect and importance it played in the novel through the following characters; Dunstan Ramsay (Dunny), Paul Dempster, and Percy Boyd Staunton (Boy). He has shown how one's life plays out when dealing with the guilt, and when hiding from it.