

# Complexity between dunny and mrs. dempster



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Fifth Business fixates on Dunstan Ramsay, a man stricken with profound guilt that stems from a childhood accident. At only ten years old, he dodges a snowball aimed at him, that instead strikes Mary Dempster, the young, pregnant woman next door. Consequently, her baby is born prematurely, and she is left with a simple state of mind. As a result, Dunny's mother takes over the household and acts as the mother of the baby. Dunny, in turn, builds a flourishing relationship with Mrs. Dempster. This complex relationship becomes a way for Dunny to eradicate his chronic guilt. This multi-layered relationship develops into his most extensive internal conflict, as Mrs. Dempster plays four roles in his world: a child, a wife, a mother, and a saint. The intricacy of this relationship, along with Dunny's love for Mrs. Dempster, causes him to constantly feel inadequate, which only amplifies his guilt.

In the aftermath of the snowball incident, Mrs. Dempster is abandoned by both her husband and son, and ends up living with her Aunt Bertha. For several years, Dunny visits her, against Bertha's better judgement. After Bertha dies, Mrs. Dempster is truly left alone, which causes Dunny to immediately come running to her rescue. Due to her simple state of mind, he treats her as a child by constantly taking care of her, and assuming full responsibility of her. On page 150, right after Bertha dies, Dunny asks himself, "but what was I to do with her?" This diction, specifically the phrase, "to do with her," highlights the fact that Dunny sees her as a primary responsibility, similar to the responsibility a father feels to his child.

Additionally, he is unsure of himself, and doesn't know if he provides the care that Mrs. Dempster needs. Stemming from this inability to take care of

her properly he feels a sense of inadequacy, which worsens his guilt. At last, Dunny decides to send Mrs. Dempster to a public hospital for the insane. He does this with deep anguish, and on page 131 says, “ I dared not look back, and I felt meaner than I have ever felt in my life.” The hyperbole, “ I felt meaner than I have ever felt in my life,” emphasizes the profound difficulty Dunny has in leaving her at the hospital. He wants what is best for her, yet believes he is fundamentally unable to give that to her: this is the crux of the internal conflict. He believes he owes it to Mrs. Dempster to take care of her every need and provide the most comfortable life for her, since he was the one who robbed her of a normal life. The usage of hyperbole adds to Dunny’s role as a father, and more importantly, Mrs. Dempster’s role as his child, which further magnifies his guilt.

After Mrs. Dempster goes simple, Dunny’s mother spends a great deal of time caring for her and helping around the house. Subsequently, Dunny devotes the majority of his time at the Dempster household. The vast amount of time Dunny spends with Mrs. Dempster causes him to fall in love with her, and in turn heightens his guilt as he cannot rescue her from her toxic marriage with Amasa. When Dunny turned 16, he enlisted in the army, during The Great War. The idea of “ war fever” was especially common during these times, and is illustrated when Dunny says goodbye to Mrs. Dempster right before he leaves: “ When I had to leave she kissed me on both cheeks—a thing she had never done before—and said, ‘ There’s just one thing to remember; whatever happens, it does no good to be afraid.’” The mood created at this point in the book is one of passion that not only emphasizes the war fever motif, but highlights Mrs. Dempster’s role as a

wife. The close proximity of death heightens their feelings towards one another and allows them to surface, revealing the truth of Dunny's feelings: he's in love with her.

Because he is secretly in love with Mrs. Dempster, Dunny feels guilty that she is trapped in a destructive marriage with Amasa, who prays to God every night that He will take Mary away from him. After Mrs. Dempster is caught with the tramp, crowds of people would show up at her front door and bully her. On page 42, when Amasa did absolutely nothing to stop them, Dunny says, "I wish I could record that Amasa Dempster came out and faced them, but he did not." The formal diction used in this sentence implies that it is expected, and virtually required, that Amasa defends his helpless wife. Using a word like "record," suggests that Dunny is keeping score between him and Amasa, and Dunny is winning. Additionally, by using Amasa's full name, he highlights his responsibility as Mrs. Dempster's husband, and as a result, points out his inability and lack of desire to protect her.

The internal conflict that stems from Dunny's romantic love for Mrs. Dempster is that he, again, wants what's best for her, and wants her to be treated right, but cannot rescue her from her cruel husband and sham of a marriage. This internal conflict causes him to feel helpless, which subsequently deepens his guilt, because, once again, he cannot reverse what happened that night with the snowball. In addition to a child and a wife, Dunny regards Mrs. Dempster as a mother figure. When Dunny's real mother virtually abandons him for Mrs. Dempster's son, and begins spending more time at the Dempster's than at her own house, he becomes very vulnerable. These mommy issues, along with the amount of time spent at the

Dempster's, allow Mrs. Dempster to easily assume the role of his mother. On page 55, after Mrs. Ramsay notices Dunny's child-like affection for Mrs. Dempster, she "concluded by demanding that [Dunny] make a choice between her and 'that woman.'"

The diction Davies employs in this sentence, particularly the phrase, 'that woman,' highlights Mrs. Ramsay's insecurity in her relationship with Dunny and emphasizes Mrs. Dempster's maternal position. As the feeling of hopelessness returns, Dunny believes he could have served Mrs. Dempster better in his role as her son. Following Mrs. Dempster's death on page 230, Dunny says, "And then I begged forgiveness for myself because, though I had done what I imagined was my best, I had not been loving enough, or wise enough, or generous enough in my dealings with her." The repetition of the word 'enough' further emphasizes his insufficiency as a son to her. Although he acknowledges that he tried his best, Dunny will not let go of the feeling that he could've done more, or even that she deserved someone better than him as her 'son' and caretaker. Mrs. Dempster's role as a mother creates an internal conflict with Dunny: he believes she is too good for him, and he cannot serve her well enough. This once again affirms his feelings of inadequacy. His guilt is heightened as he believes he is unable to repay her for her "simple-mindedness" that he caused. \*\*\*

Mrs. Dempster's most significant role is Dunny's saint. His life goal is to verify Mrs. Dempster's sainthood to justify his profound survivor's guilt. He can use her sainthood for two things: an explanation for the unknown in his life and as vindication for her madness. When Dunny is fighting on the battlefield, he is wounded, and right before he blacked out, he sees Mrs.

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Dempster's face in a statue of the Virgin Mary on a church nearby. From this point on, after Mrs. Dempster both brought his brother back to life, and saved him on the battlefield, Dunny is convinced she is a saint, and is intent on confirming her sainthood. Several decades later, after spending his life searching for this Virgin Mary statue, he discovers it in a museum in Salzburg. Ecstatic, on page 237, Dunny says, " I needed no picture. She was mine forever." The syntax, specifically the short sentences that end the vignette, reiterates Mrs. Dempster's role as his saint, and the significance of confirming her sainthood. The fact that Dunny doesn't want a picture of this Virgin and Child statue contradicts his previous need for tangible evidence. For example, he keeps tangible evidence of the rock Boy threw at him that caused Mrs. Dempster's simpleness in order to remind him of his guilt. One would think that he would need tangible evidence of Mrs. Dempster's confirmed sainthood, but that is not the case. The fact that he does not want a picture indicates the profound significance of finding this statue: At last, Dunny is satisfied and completely convinced that Mrs. Dempster is a saint; so much so that he doesn't need evidence of it.

A branch of Dunny's chronic guilt is his survivor's guilt. It's assumed that if he had not ducked that one night in 1908, if the snowball with the rock had hit him instead of Mrs. Dempster, that he would be simple instead of her. On page 165, Dunny discusses this idea with Padre Blazon, who says, " Stop trying to be God, making it up to her that you are sane and she is mad." Padre Blazon uses this metaphor to compare him to God, illustrating Dunny's unrealistic ideals of power, along with his true motives behind searching for confirmation of Mrs. Dempster's sainthood. Padre Blazon points out that

Dunny does not have the power to confirm or deny Mrs. Dempster's sainthood, and is foolish to think so. He also blatantly states his true motives behind his search for the extent of Mrs. Dempster's sainthood: Dunny wants to justify her madness. He believes that if he can just prove that she is a saint, his guilt will disappear, because if she is a saint, God had a plan for her all along, that included her going mad.

As Dunny's guilt resulting from Mrs. Dempster's roles as a child, a wife, and a mother are all relatively similar, the guilt stemming from her role as a saint is slightly different. While seeing her as a saint, he doesn't as much feel inadequate, but longs to justify her madness. Once he realizes that he cannot prove her sainthood, he is hit with the realization that maybe her madness wasn't a part of God's plan for her, which only adds to his guilt. Dunny is wrecked because he cannot confirm her sainthood, and as a result, cannot justify her madness.

Every day, Dunny's guilt is intensified due to his multi-layered, complex relationship with Mrs. Dempster. Dunny desires to provide for her like a father, protect her like a husband, serve her as a son would, and confirm her sainthood as a true believer. Having to play so many roles, coupled with his relentless guilt, result in his inability to maintain a healthy relationship with Mrs. Dempster. Their relationship is abnormal, and hampers his ability to ever move into acceptance. As a child, Dunny never confided in anyone about the snowball incident. So therefore, there was never an opportunity for an adult to explain to him that it wasn't his fault, or to normalize his feelings of survivor's guilt. No child is equipped to channel such intense feelings in a healthy way on his own. This lack of understanding and comfort stunted his

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growth, turned him into a hyper- responsible adult, and forever changed the trajectory of his adult life.