

The role of dark pasts on the development of an individual



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

It is very common in literature, both in the past and modern-day, for characters to have dark backgrounds. Many authors choose this approach because it creates an approachable character with whom the reader can identify, and provides the reader with an admirable protagonist. This darkness is usually the result of one or many traumatizing events, such as abuse. Abuse may come in multiple forms, including emotional and physical. In *Fall On Your Knees*, Ann-Marie MacDonald explores some main types of abuse within the family. Similarly, in Michael Thomas' novel *Man Gone Down*, the same types of abuse consume the narrator's past, and in some cases, his present. The three types of abuse that both novels portray are physical, mental and even racial. Not only do the characters have dark pasts, but it is these moments and events in their history that develop the individuals and determine the persons that they become.

Physical abuse can cause serious damage to an individual that may have long-lasting effects; such abuse within families in *Fall on Your Knees* is very prominent, and is seen again and again as the generations pass. Most of the abuse comes from James, who focuses his anger in large part on his wife, Materia. Once they settle into their marriage, James becomes a man that Materia begins to resent. He is very harsh with her physically, and violently lays his hands on her more than once. After their first baby is born, James comes home one day and, "took the stairs two at a time and dragged [Materia] down to the kitchen, whinging and whining every step of the way" (MacDonald 39). This abuse drives Materia to detach herself from her husband, and eventually from her eldest daughter, Kathleen. Due to the fact that Kathleen is the offspring of James, Materia feels she cannot connect with

her and even goes so far as to have feelings of hatred towards her. Her character, while happy and content at the beginning of the novel, falls into a period of depression. Physical abuse in *Materia's* past takes a toll on her life later on. In addition to *Materia*, James' daughter, *Frances*, also experiences physical abuse at his hand. On many occasions, *Frances's* smart remarks result in a beating from James, such as when he takes her out to the shed to teach her a lesson. MacDonald portrays the scene as if it is an orchestral performance, "The upbeat grabs her neck till she's on point, the downbeat thrusts her back against the wall [...] knuckles clatter incidentally [...] Cue finale to the gut. *Frances* folds over till she's on the floor" (MacDonald 325-326). She accepts this abuse, because she believes that she deserves it, and in some way, feels that it lets her get back at her father. *Frances* even comes to expect her regular beatings, as she says to her sister, "It's the way it is, Mercedes. You can't change the way it is" (MacDonald 327). This causes *Frances* to rebel against her father and family, by sneaking out of the house at night to partake in acts of which James does not approve. This shows how physical abuse has a part in shaping *Frances* into the individual she becomes. She believes that her body no longer has value, and therefore does not feel like she has anything to lose by giving it up to strange men at a pub. Similarly, in *Man Gone Down*, the physical abuse at the hands of both the narrator's mother and his father taint his childhood.

In *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, Steven Pinker stresses that genes do not define a person, and counters the idea that, "innately violent parents have innately violent children" (Pinker 437).

In *Man Gone Down*, Michael Thomas describes the same concept, through

<https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-dark-pasts-on-the-development-of-an-individual/>

the life of the narrator. The narrator discusses his childhood, and the abuse he remembers facing as a child. He briefly mentions his mother and father beating him, and the turmoil it brings upon him for the rest of his life. He mentions an evening with his father that he still remembers to this day. The narrator says, “‘ He hit me once [...] I couldn’t have been much older than eight.’ [...] I was just about to pick up my fork when all of a sudden I was on the floor. My cheek was numb. He was staring at me — cold” (Thomas 56-57). While recounting the story, the narrator can recall even small details of this night. This shows how deeply he feels the impact of his father physically abusing him as a child. The narrator also continually refers to his mother participating in the same kinds of actions, particularly after his father walks out on them. Although he does not directly speak of the incidents with his mother, he alludes to them throughout the novel. Oftentimes throughout the novel, current events remind him of his past, such as when, “[Claire] slapped me. I could see it coming. [...] And when she finally did let go, it was the most noncommittal blow I’d ever received. It wasn’t like my mother’s eighty-foot iron tentacle slap” (Thomas 68). He remembers the power behind the beatings from his mother, which ultimately scar him for life. It is this physical abuse that pushes the narrator to give his children a childhood they will want to remember. In order to do this, his wife and children move away for the time being, while he stays back and struggles to accommodate them and pay for his son’s school tuition. This shows his devotion to his family, and his deep desire to be a better parent than his own, thus proving that his genes do not define him. In this case, his dark past provides him with hope for a brighter future, whereas the physical abuse that Frances experiences in *Fall on Your Knees* sends her down a considerably darker pathway. In each novel, <https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-dark-pasts-on-the-development-of-an-individual/>

Ann-Marie MacDonald and Michael Thomas contrast each other's ideas of the effect of physical abuse in one's past. Thomas views one's history as a way to learn for the future in order to better themselves and those around them. MacDonald, on the contrary, shows how one's past may damage them infinitely in the future and can also impact their mental health, as seen in *Fall on Your Knees*.

Poor mental health can victimize anyone, and can be the result of one or many different unfavourable circumstances. Throughout *Fall on Your Knees*, James inflicts mental abuse on Frances, from which she suffers gravely. A specific example is when James favourites one child over another. Each of the children understand that James' favourite daughter is Kathleen, and following her death, Lily. When Frances is talking to Lily, she says: "Cause even though you're not his, he loves you more than the rest of us." "He loves you too, Frances." "Yes, but he loves you the most." "I want him to love you to the most too." "It's all right, Lily, it's supposed to be this way." (MacDonald 312) By picking a favourite, the rest of his daughters cannot help but to feel and think less of themselves. In each case, there are negative impacts on the characters and their development throughout the novel. For instance, after Frances' period of prostitution, she fixates her mind on the life her older sister, Kathleen, who is no longer alive. In a subconscious attempt to prove herself to her father, she mimics Kathleen's life, starting at the time when Kathleen moves away to New York City. Frances convinces herself that in order to gain James' approval, she must be exactly like Kathleen, and so she begins to stalk her grandfather's maid's brother, Leo. After some time, she seduces him and he impregnates her. This instance illustrates the impact

that mental abuse has on Frances, as she begins to obsess over something she thinks is very important, and becomes mentally ill over it. Her baby is pronounced dead at birth, and this sends Frances into a depression not unlike her mother's. Before her own death, Materia experiences extreme depression in relation to her life with James and Kathleen. This is due to all the emotional abuse James lays on her throughout their years of marriage. She becomes mentally unstable, and eventually commits suicide when she can no longer bear the load, much like the narrator in *Man Gone Down*.

In many cases, the emotional trauma one experiences throughout childhood will linger long into later years. In *Man Gone Down*, the main character carries around his own emotional load, and suffers greatly from it throughout his life from childhood to adulthood. Most of this burden is a result of his father leaving him and his mother. As a young boy, the absence of a father figure in his life significantly impacts his adolescence and his life as an adult as well. When he describes how his father left, the narrator says: My father ran out on us when he was the age I am now but he didn't have the heart to just go. First he went to the couch, then to the Ramada, and only after a decade of coming in and out of my life did he finally allow himself to completely disappear. [...] I hadn't seen him in six years and in that time he'd lost his hair, his teeth, and I thought any claim to me as a son."

(Thomas 50)The narrator believes that the departure of his father is because he no longer wants him as a son. He even says that after the six years without seeing his father, he believes his father no longer sees his as his own child. This is the underlying cause for the narrator's emotional illness, and the reader can see the deep scars that still remain from this traumatizing

event. He often criticizes himself and finds himself wondering whether he is too unstable. The narrator subconsciously distances himself from his family and friends because he thinks they cannot handle his emotional instability. He constantly asks himself this question, which shows how his past mental abuse develops his insecurities throughout his life. He then speaks about a time in his teens when he tries to get sober, and turns to his father for moral support. He says, “ I went to my father, and I don’t know why I expected him to be anything besides a stranger” (Thomas 71). Beforehand, the narrator considers others he can talk to, but his final decision is to seek out his father’s advice. All he finds, however, is disappointment. The lack of concern from both of his parents drives the narrator to turn once again to alcohol and drugs. In this way, his dark past leads to his dismal teen years. In both novels, the characters involve themselves in delinquent activities, in an attempt to find comfort. For Frances in *Fall on Your Knees*, she looks to strangers for validation, while the narrator in *Man Gone Down* tries to forget his problems by drinking. Both authors portray the teenage years as a very low point in the characters’ lives. Even still, Thomas keeps a relatively positive mindset when writing *Man Gone Down*, for as the narrator thinks about his past, he still has hope for his future. Frances, on the contrary, falls into a deep depression from which she will not escape for the rest of her life. This chronic depression, however, is not the only thing that is inescapable for the characters.

Oftentimes, even in the world today, racial discrimination is inevitable. In *Fall on Your Knees*, Ann-Marie MacDonald consistently acknowledges the issue of racism and racial abuse through the portrayal of the Piper household. The

victim, especially near the beginning of the novel, is Materia. James constantly judges his wife and her skin colour. Although her dark skin does not bother him at first, he begins to resent it as they progress into their marriage. James begins to feel embarrassment when he goes out with her in public. It is as if he only notices her colour after they say their wedding vows, and this is the turning point, when it becomes a real issue in James' eyes. Not only is she not living up to James' expectations as a wife, but, " on top of everything else, Materia was dark. He tried not to see it, but it was one of those things that was always before his eyes, now that the scales had fallen from them" (MacDonald 45). Throughout the novel, James experiences feelings and thoughts of disgust towards Materia because she has darker skin. These feelings, however, are not always kept to himself. Materia feels the hostility between her and her husband, and knows that he disapproves of her as a wife. James sometimes regrets marrying her, and worries that others will think his spouse is a child, because she does not act like a typical housewife. At the beginning of the marriage, Materia is only thirteen years old, and has tendencies to act her age. She avoids cooking and cleaning, and instead chooses to go for strolls during the day, and play the piano. James also disapproves of her because of her Lebanese background. He resents her old country and her language, which is seen when the author writes, " What James resented most was that enklese nonsense. [...] he was Scottish and Irish, like ninety percent of this God-forsaken island, not to mention Canadian. Filthy black Syrians" (MacDonald 22). James has a racist mindset, even towards his own wife. He degrades her culture and language consistently, especially once they have children. James forbids Materia to speak anything but English when around their children. When he catches her

<https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-dark-pasts-on-the-development-of-an-individual/>

speaking her mother tongue to their daughters, he says, “‘ I don’t want her growing up confused. Speak English.’ ‘ Okay’” (MacDonald 42). When James puts her down like this, Materia simply accepts it and moves on. She expects these insults, and although it seems as though they do not affect her, the continuous degradation of her race eventually leads to her depression and her death.

Racism is not only an occasional issue, but is present in and dominates the lives of many. The basis of the novel *Man Gone Down* is racism, and how this discrimination and abuse affects the narrator throughout. The abuse he experiences due to his colour begins at a very early age, and continues to be an issue throughout the rest of his life. He discusses a time, “ How at the age of six I’d been treed by an angry mob of adults who hadn’t liked the idea of Boston busing. They threw rocks up at me, yelling, “ Nigger go home!”” (Thomas 9). Because of the use of these derogatory terms, the narrator grows up already with the notion that he has less worth than white people, but tries his whole adult life to change that. He knows, however, that he is a black man trying to earn a living in a white man’s world, and often circles back to the thought that all of his problems are because his wife is a white woman. He not only battles his own private thoughts, but his acquaintances constantly remind him of the same worry. He runs into one of his old friends, Shake, who tells him, “‘ I didn’t tell you to marry a white woman’ [...] But [Claire] thinks, everybody thinks, whether they admit it or not, that the skin is the thing’” (MacDonald 271-272). This illustrates the racist thoughts that the characters in this novel possess. Shake belittles not only the narrator’s wife, but the narrator himself, because he is the one whose wife is white. In

this case, the racial abuse indirectly affects the narrator, but directly causes him to reevaluate his life. For the duration of the novel, the narrator works extremely hard to provide for his family, but after the conversation with Shake, he makes the decision to leave his wife for both of their benefit. Proceeding this exchange between the two, the narrator goes and purchases a gift for Claire as his way of telling her goodbye. This series of events illustrates that the racial abuse the narrator faces causes him to make serious life decisions, solely on the basis of the racial opinions of others. At the end of the novel, when the narrator gives the gift to his wife, he is also giving away the last remnants of his previous hope. Now the author is saying that his damage is beyond repair, and the past that the narrator works so hard to change eventually catches up to him. The same happens to Materia in *Fall on Your Knees*. The characters from both novels realize the gravity of their situations, and feel the pain of their past is too difficult to overcome. It is for this reason that they find ways to escape their situations; Materia, in *Fall on Your Knees*, by committing suicide, and the narrator, in *Man Gone Down*, by leaving his family.

When in a difficult situation, one may try to escape in whatever way they know how. This is the fight or flight survival instinct, in which many may choose the safe route and flee whatever predicament in which they find themselves. In many cases, the first step is realizing the issue is much greater than it seems, and too far beyond repair. In *Fall on Your Knees*, Frances comes to the understanding that her father will never love her or care for her as he does her sisters. In the same way, Materia realizes that James is not the man she originally thinks he is, and she cannot bear to live

with him and her state of depression any longer. He puts her down in many ways, including verbally when he says, “‘ You’re too fat.’” Materia looked at James from afar and said, “ Okay’” (MacDonald 45). With these constant insults, Materia looks for a way out, and the only one she can foresee is to take her own life. Similarly, the narrator in *Man Gone Down* runs away from his familial issues. He realizes that his family is too broken to mend when he says, “ And while my mother never tried to hide the fact that we, as a family, had been pre-selected for failure, he did” (Thomas 77). Because of things his mother tells him as a child, the narrator understands that his family is not, and can never be the ideal family. Even though he spends his life trying to change his past, in the end, he cannot escape. This hopelessness drives him to make the decision to leave his wife and children. Because the characters in both novels react to their unfortunate circumstances in much the same way, both MacDonald and Thomas agree that regardless of one’s best efforts, sometimes the darkness in one’s past is too difficult to overcome.

In *Fall on Your Knees* and *Man Gone Down*, both Ann-Marie MacDonald and Michael Thomas decide to incorporate dark pasts in the histories of their protagonists. Not only do these characters have dark pasts, but it is these moments in time that determine the person they become later on in life. The darkness, in this case, is the result of the infliction of many forms of abuse. Three specific forms of abuse that the authors describe in detail are physical, mental and racial. In both novels, the portrayal of the development of the characters is shed in a negative light, where the characters never truly overcome their pasts. For the majority of the characters, such as Frances and Materia in *Fall on Your Knees*, their futures are parallel to their pasts. In

Man Gone Down, as well, the narrator seems to lose all hope by the end, and even makes the conscious decision to leave his family. At the conclusion of the novel, however, it is unclear whether or not the narrator follows through with his decision. This leaves the reader with a small sense of hope for a brighter future for the character. Moreover, this conclusion leaves the reader with the notion that one's past does not definitively define them as a person, but it is what they do to change their past that does.