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ROBERTSON DAVIES: LIFE AND CAREER

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CHAPTER I
ROBERTSON DAVIES: LIFE AND CAREER

1.1 INTRODUCTION:

Robertson Davies, a distinguished modern writer of Canadian literature, has won worldwide recognition, which led him to be called Canada’s best novelist and provoked Anthony Burges, a well-known critic, to recommend Davies for the covetous Nobel Prize. In 1986, Davies was shortlisted for two of the most prestigious literary awards in the world – the Nobel and the Booker Prize for literature. He received a number of awards and significant recognition as one of Canada’s best literary talents.

1.2 BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:

William Robertson Davies was born on August, 1913 in the village of Thamesville, Ontario, Canada. He came from a very old and prominent family. The family of his mother, Florence Sheppard Mckay Davies, had moved to Canada from England in 1785. His father, William Rupert Davies, hailed originally from Wales, but made his name as a Canadian publisher and politician.

At the age of three, Robertson made his stage debut in the opera Queen Esther. When Davies was five years old, his family moved to Renfrew, Ontario, a rural village in the Ottawa Valley. He spent his
childhood years attending country schools and living the life of a typical country boy. When Davies was twelve, his family shifted again, this time moving to the city of Kingston. In this way, Davies gained his intimate knowledge of urban and rural life in Canada. From 1928 to 1932, he attended Upper Canada College in Toronto. His favourite activities during this period were music, theatre, and editing the school newspaper.

Davies then moved on to Queen’s University in Kingston where he spent three years participating in the Drama Guild. As he was poor in mathematics, he preferred to go to Oxford. To quote him:

You see, I never was able to pass my matriculation in mathematics, and in my day, you had to pass your senior matriculation in twelve subjects, two of which were mathematical. I could never do it. It was very, very depressing. I never made more than a zero on a mathematical examination. It was very, very disagreeable. You know, I tried hard enough but if I were to get a degree at all I had to go somewhere where they didn’t care so much about mathematics. (Cook 129-130)

He completed his higher education in 1938 at Balliol College, Oxford, where he earned a literature degree. During his pretty job of stage manager, he fell in love with Australian-born Brenda Matthews, whom he married on February 2, 1940. The couple honeymooned in Wales, then returned to Canada. The couple had their first child in December of 1940.
He served as a visiting professor at Trinity College from 1961 to 1962 and was named to the Master’s Lodge at Massey College, a graduate wing of the University of Toronto, in 1963. He quit his newspaper post at the *Examiner* in 1962 to concentrate on these teaching endeavours.

Davies retired from teaching in 1981, but maintained his membership in various literary and academic societies as he worked on his various novels. He died of a stroke on December 2, 1995. His last book, a collection of non-fiction essays entitled, *The Merry Heart: Reflections on Reading, Writing, and the World of Books*, was published posthumously in 1997.

### 1.3 ROBERTSON DAVIES’S CAREER:

Robertson Davies has had a long and distinguished career, not only as a novelist, but also as theatrical director, playwright and academic. He is one of Canada’s most distinguished men of letters.

Davies was a writer of grand ideas and fertile imagination who excelled in a variety of disciplines. From his childhood, he was fond of Shakespeare and his plays. He developed a keen interest in drama early in his life. In his very young age, he made his stage debut in the opera *Queen Esther* (1937). He maintained a diary throughout his school years in which he wrote on the reactions to the stage performances he saw. He wrote a dissertation entitled *Shakespeare’s Boy Actors* (1939). The thesis
attracted the attention of Sir Thyrone Guthrie, a legendary drama teacher. Guthrie hired Davies to work with him at London’s famous Old Vic theatre. He gained valuable stage experience on productions of Shakespeare, working alongside world-renowned actors including Ralph Richardson and Vivien Leigh.

The 1940s were a fertile period for Davies. Besides his weekly columns, he was also writing and directing plays at the Peterborough Little Theatre. In 1946, his one-act comedy *Overlaid* was awarded a prize by the Ottawa Drama League. The fantasy *Eros at Breakfast* (1948) won the Gratien Gelinus Prize for best Canadian play at the Dominion Drama Festival. Other one-acts Davies published during this time were *The Voice of the People* (1948), *At the Gates of the Righteous* (1948), and *Hope Deferred* (1948).

The year 1948 saw the production of Davies’ first full-length play, *Fortune, My Foe*. *Fortune, My Foe* deals with the plight of the Canadian artist and was awarded the Gratien Gelinas Prize at the 1949 Dominion Drama Festival. Another three-act, *At My Heart’s Core*, deals with similar themes. It was set in provincial Canada in 1837 and shows Davies’ growing mastery of historical material.

Davies was much interested in the stage. He helped found the Stratford Shakespeare festival, served on its Board of Directors, and hired
Tyrone Guthrie as creative director. In 1960, Davies adapted his novel *Leaven of Malice* (1954) for the New York stage. Directed by Guthrie using experimental techniques, the play failed and folded after six performances. Davies also wrote *A Jig for the Gypsy* (1954), and *Question Time* (1975).

As a playwright, Davies set out his theory of acting in his *Shakespeare for Young Players* (1947) and then put theory into practice when he wrote *Eros at Breakfast* (1948), a one-act play which was named best Canadian play of the year by the 1948 Dominion Drama Festival. Davies tried his hand as stage manager and actor and was a prolific playwright.

As it is noted that Davies started his career as a playwright, he realised that he was unable to produce his plays outside Canada. Hence, he switched on to novel writing in the 1950s. His first novel *Tempest-Tost* (1951) is set in the small Canadian town of Salterton, the novel details the reactions of townfolk to a troupe of Shakespearean actors in their midst. *Leaven of Malice* (1954), is set in the same locale, and revolves around the confusion that ensues when an erroneous engagement announcement is printed in a local newspaper. The final book in *The Salterton Trilogy, A Mixture of Frailties* (1958), deals with a young girl who returns to the
town after a sojourn studying music in Europe. The novels received many positive critical notices and established Davies’ reputation as a novelist.

In 1970, Davies published a new novel, *Fifth Business*, the first instalment of his *Deptford Trilogy*, *The Manticore* (1972) and *World of Wonders* (1975) are the two next novels of the trilogy.

In the 1980s, Davies completed another trilogy of novels, revolving around the biography of Francis Cornish. *The Rebel Angels* (1982), *What’s Bred in the Bone* (1985), and *The Lyre of Orpheus* (1988), are the three novels of the next trilogy. The trilogy brought him name and fame. *What’s Bred in the Bone* (1985) brought him Canadian Author’s Association Literary Award for best fiction, as well as the New York National Arts Club’s Medal of Honour for Literature.

Davies also wrote novels outside the trilogy format. These novels are – *Murther and Walking Spirits* (1991), and *The Cunning Man* (1994). *The Cunning Man* is a novel in the form of a memoir by an aging physician.

When Davies returned from Wales to Canada, he took a job as literary editor of the Toronto magazine *Saturday Night*. After two years with *Saturday Night*, Davies took a position of literary editor at the magazine *Peterborough Examiner* in the small city of Peterborough, Ontario, northeast of Toronto. He remained with that paper for the next
20 years. In the early days, he wrote a whimsical column under the guise of “Samuel Marchbanks.” These witty observations were later collected into the books *The Diary of Samuel Marchbanks* (1947), *The Table Talk of Samuel Marchbanks* (1949), and *Marchbanks’ Almanack* (1967). Another of his regular columns “A Writer’s Diary”, consisting of observations on the literary scene, helped establish Davies as a major new voice in criticism.

Davies quit his newspaper post at the *Examiner* in 1962 to concentrate on teaching endeavours. As a journalist, his humorous observations about life amused newspaper readers over two decades.

Soon after resigning from the newspaper post, Davies joined Trinity College at the University of Toronto, where he taught literature until 1981. The following year he published a collection of essays on literature – *A Voice From the Attic* (1960), *Stephen Leacock* (1970), *One Half of Robertson Davies* (1979), and *The Well Tempered Critic* (1981). Davies was awarded the Lorne Pierce Medal for his literary achievements.

During his stint as Master, he initiated the tradition of writing and telling ghost stories at the yearly Christmas celebrations. His stories were later collected in his books, *High Spirits* (1982), *Libretti, Dr. Canon’s Cure* (1982), *Jezebel* (1993), and *The Gold Ass* (1999).
In regard to criticism, Davies expresses his opinion when John Milton Harvard asked Davies in an interview, the skill required by a literary critic: No skill at all is required. He does not need to know how to use his tools. With Margaret Atwood it has become fashionable for critics to say that she is not as good as she used to be. Many music critics will sit in an auditorium and defiantly demand great music (Harvard 238).

The next question Harvard asked him about helping of literary critics to an author. Davies responds to him:

No. Creative writing and literary criticism are two different forms of art. A great many people are afraid to change, to grow as people. If you open yourself up to a work of art you will change. Many critics will jump on a piece of art because they go to it demanding to be moved. They are too egotistical and feel that they know it all before they even see it. A critic should approach a work of art with sympathy and respect. (238)


In addition to these, Davies was a good and hilarious conversationalist, and a letter writer. His hilarious articulations are aptly captured in Conversations with Robertson Davies, a book edited and published in 1989 by J. Madison Davies. His letters are published in two volumes – For Your Eye Alone (2000) edited by Judith Skelton Grant, Discoveries (2002) edited by Judith Skelton Grant.

Davies, for his long career, became famous not only as a novelist, critic, and a man of letters, but as a compelling performer of literature: his readings and lectures were always given for publication. The long career resulted in – Robertson Davies’s entry in The Canadian Encyclopedia (2002), Robertson Davies at the Internet Book List, Robertson Davies at the Internet Movie Database, Massey College in the University of Toronto, and Robertson Davies’ Personal Library (Queen’s University at Kingston).

1.4 FORMATIVE LITERARY INFLUENCES:

Robertson Davies did not heartily accept or confess the influence of other writers on him. He tried to dissuade the interviewers whenever they asked him about the influence of the writers. Elizabeth Sifton asked
him about the influence of the writers. Davies hesitantly responds to Sifton:

Well, I don’t know. I’m quite often asked about the influences and I don’t know of influences. I can’t recognize them, and if I could recognize them I would be terrified that I was copying someone else and they are inimitable. The narrative energy of Dickens and Balzac, the many-layered irony of Thomas Mann – wondrous to admire and dangerous to imitate. (31)

Like Elizabeth Sifton, there are a number of interviewers like Roper John Cunningham, Tom Harpur, Peter Gzowski, John Milton Harvard, Michael Hulse, Robert Fulford and Raymond H. Thompson who have recorded in their interviews the similar opinions about the influence of the writers. However, Robertson expresses his feelings about the influence of two writers in the following words: “The only influence I can think of is . . . well, there are two, and they were both encountered when I was a child. One . . . was Daniel Defoe. . . . The other writer who immensely influenced me as a child, . . . is a writer named Johann Wyss who wrote The Swiss Family Robinson” (31-32).

Davies received a formidable influence not only from his parents but also from his contemporary playwrights, novelists, thinkers, philosophers, psychologists and a host of others. From his childhood, he was immensely interested in the work of journalism, and the plays of
William Shakespeare. As his father was a newspaper businessman, he learnt from his father the art of writing reviews in newspapers. With regard to early newspaper experience, he states that the influence of his father was immense and hence he observes:

It’s influenced my writing immeasurably more than I could possibly define. When I was a boy, my father was a newspaperman, my two brothers were newspapermen, my mother was intensely interested in newspaper work, and I heard newspaper talk at every meal. In a newspaper family you learn not only all the news that’s fit to print, but all the news that is not fit to print and you acquire an insight into human nature and the essence of a community that is very hard to acquire, I think, in any other way. (23)

In his very young age, he took keen interest in Shakespeare and his plays. Davies started his career as a playwright. He wrote plays, directed and acted as a manager. He wrote a dissertation on *Shakespeare and His Boy Actors*. The family from Davies hails plays a vital role in influencing the career of Davies. The contribution of the Welsh family background in enhancement of his career is greater. Davies observes:

My family background was Welsh, and the Welsh are very, very fond of storytelling and tend to be rather good at it. They are also fond of children, but they are not, in the modern way, infinitely tolerant of children. They think children need to be taught and they teach them. They teach
them very often through stories. I feel that this quality of storytelling is basic to the novelist’s art. (29)

Davies learnt the art of storytelling from the influence of Welsh family.

Not only Robertson’s family and parents, but also a number of outstanding writers of most of the continents inspired and influenced him. Some are his favourite writers about whom he says:

I’m very fond of Victor Hugo, and a book that I read when I was eleven years old and have reread many times through my life and admired enormously is *Notre Dame de Paris*. . . . Or a great nineteenth-century novelist like Balzac – infinitely enchanting . . . You cannot stop reading Balzac. You cannot stop reading any of the great Russians. The great English writers: Dickens more than Thackeray, but Thackeray is much finer than some people are prepared to admit. Trollope is endlessly gripping, . . . Nobody praises Dickens’ style, but who can resist his enchantment? Only professors and only some of those. (30-31)

Davies also read some of the British novelists who have the enchanter-quality. Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, and J. B. Priestly “had extraordinary *shamanstvo*, the quality of enchantment” (31). The place, where Davies began to serve as professor, had also strong influence on Davies. He writes about them: “it was a great pleasure to work with them and to talk with them, and to hear their opinions about everything” (24). In his interview with Michael Hulse, Davies states the influence of the
Canadian writing, the influence of some of the contemporary American writers like Peter de Vries, and the British writers like Graham Greene, Anthony Powell, Anthony Burges, and John Fowles (Hulse 135-136).

The critics who often analysed his novels in the light of the theories of Freud and Jung note in their analysis and assessment the influence of those great psychologists. Davies’ works were highly influenced by these psychologists. To quote him:

. . . I discovered that Freud’s attitude toward life was what is called in the lingo of psychoanalysis “reductive.” . . . As I read Freud and about French, I discovered that there were very few people who discussed Freud without taking a fearful swipe at somebody called C. G. Jung. . . . I became a great devotee of Jung without ever rejecting or phoo-phooing Sigmund Freud, who is one of the great liberators of the human mind. (Sifton 32-33)

Thus, Davies was influenced by a number of writers, but within the scope of a dissertation like this, one cannot make a comprehensive examination of every influence. The list of his influences is so long that it cannot be given here for want of space.

1.5 ROBERTSON DAVIES : HIS NOVELISTIC STRATEGIES:

Robertson Davies is a many-sided genius. He was a writer of grand ideas and fertile imagination who excelled in a variety of literary disciplines. He was a great modern Canadian novelist. Writing novels or

No other Canadian novelist is appreciated and read as widely outside his homeland as Robertson Davies. He started his brilliant career with dramatic activities. He was active in the Stratford (Ontario) Shakespeare Festival and received his greatest theatrical disappointment when his adaptation of the novel *Leaven of Malice* failed on Broadway in 1960. He fell in mental confusion and stated, “I am a playwright who writes novels . . . I am a novelist who writes plays” (Davis x). For the next couple of years, he stopped writing and acting in plays, and switched on to writing the novels.

Davies was very particular about the craft of writing novel. He describes the process of writing novel as,
I make very, very careful plans and a great many notes – so many notes indeed that sometimes they are as long or longer than the eventual book. And sketches of characters and suggestions and references to things that will be useful. All that takes a long time. (Sifton 19)

If a new novel is undertaken for writing, he feels its intricacies. As he notes: “Getting to work on a new novel is a dismal business, for the beginnings never seem to get any easier with the passing of time. I toil like a swimmer who feels himself about to sink beneath the waves at any moment” (19). When he was writing the novels of the third trilogy – *What’s Bread in the Bone, Rebel Angels, and The Lyre of Orpheus*, he describes the struggle that he faced:

Like all my novels, this one began with quite a simple idea, but as I work on it a mass of complexities assert themselves, and I have to struggle to keep from being overwhelmed by extraneous detail. . . . When you begin to write, you can write quite briskly because you have done all the preparatory work beforehand. . . . But with novels, like cakes, you never know. Even when I finish a book, I’m never sure whether it is good or rubbish. . . . My books come in threes, and though not really trilogies or series, they are linked by characters and a point of view. But they are tedious about chronology: *What’s Bred in the Bone* leaps backward in time from *Rebel Angels*, and this third book – its name is *The Lyre of Orpheus* – moves forward in time. If I planned them, this would not happen, but I don’t: they just occur. (*ibid*)
With regard to the subject matter of the novel, it is to be noted that Davies has his own theory. Raymond H. Thompson in his “interview with Robertson Davies”, asked Davies about his subject and the Arthurian references. Davies responds to him steadfastly:

I write novels that I hope will be interesting just as stories, but they also have implications and byways which I think would, interest people who have more information. . . . I get awfully tired of people who talk about real life as though it had no relation to the life of the imagination and the life of legends and myth. (Thompson 7)

When he told people that his novels “explore the passionate underlife of the Canadian people” (Charles True Heart 1). David said that people always laughed. They would say to him, “Oh, we haven’t got any passionate underlife. Look at all that snow” (ibid), as he told the story. “But you just go to a party and you get more passionate underlife than you can deal with in about two hours” (ibid). Davies explores ideas of good and evil, history and identity, truth and illusion, art and mysticism, and much more. Having made a careful study of his novels, Nora Foster Stovel regarded Davies as a regionalist. Novelists like Davies, Margaret Laurence, and Alice Munro wrote novels in the tradition of novelists such as Walter Scott, Thomas Hardy, and William Faulkner – who created their fictional kingdoms of Waverley, Wessex, and Yoknapatawpha County. Davies, Lawrence and Munro each create a fictional microcosm
in Manawaka, Deptford, and Jubilee based on their actual hometowns of Neepawa, Manitoba, and Thamesville and Wingham, Ontario respectively that encapsulates in miniature what they see as defining features of a typical Canadian community.

Davies Laurence, and Munro all convey the social stratifications of other microcosms through a delineation of their respective town’s religious demonstrations: in Davies’s *Deptford Trilogy – Fifth Business*, *The Manticore*, and *World of Wonders*. Davies wrote about the Canadian experience in his novels.

Davies has written extensively about postmodern literary techniques, sometimes illustrating his theory with examples from his own fiction. Like E. M. Foster, he believes in the story element. He is indebted to his Welsh family, which provided him with the art of story telling, and the art of conversation. 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 Davies’s propensity for sound and rhythm, and perhaps his great, life-long love of the theatre itself. In fact, he regularly told himself stories in bed until he began to write in earnest when he was eighteen. As a correlative to this oral
tradition, Davies’s parents emphasized the art of conversation, focusing not only on the content, but on the proper use of grammar, syntax, tone and the astute use of the correct word. In 1963, he became the Master of Massey College, the University of Toronto’s new graduate College. During his stint as Master, he initiated the tradition of writing and telling ghost stories at the early Christmas celebrations. His stories were later collected in his book, *High Spirits* (1982).

When Elizabeth Sifton asks whether he aims at surprising the readers, Davies explains:

I do know the story when I begin, but I don’t know how it’s going to end. I know about two-thirds of it, and then the end emerges as I go on. I shrink from saying this, but I’ve agreed to come here and talk about it, and it’s true : I hear the story, I am told the story, I record the story. I don’t pretend that some remarkable person somewhere else is whispering in my ear, or that a beautiful lady in a diaphanous garment is telling me what I should write. It is just a part of my own creative process that I am not immediately in touch with and certainly not in full control of. And so the story emerges.

(21)

Davies wrote novels to convey a certain message. He has often said that art must entertain or provide delight. He has made his intentions clear in his interview with Robert MacNeil:
I’m trying to deliver a coherent, moral message, but it’s not perhaps what a great many people would think of in that way. I am not preaching. I am not saying you do this, or you’ll get yourself in trouble. I am just saying it looks very much as if certain kinds of behaviour led to certain results, and if you put your hand in the fire, you will be burned, and if you behave in a way that is an attempt to be just and decent and good toward your contemporaries, various things will happen to you, not necessarily all of them good. But what I’m really trying to do and what I think a moralist generally does is to point out patterns in human behaviour which are inexorable; they are archetypes of behaviour, and I’m not saying that they’re either good or bad. I am simply saying they are so. (1-2)

Davies further says, ‘If I am a moralist – and I suppose I am – I am certainly not a gloomy moralist.’ Davies wrote a number of humorous essays. His novels are thick and rich with humour. As a journalist, his humorous observations about life amused newspaper readers over two decades. His comic plays addressed the plight of the Canadian artist to great effect. With his bushy white beard and flowing mane of hair, Davies looked the part of a grizzled, ancient storyteller, which to his millions of devoted readers is exactly what he was. Collections of essays like A Voice from the Attic and One Half of Robertson Davies are full of humour. Davies writes: “Nobody but a fool wants to fail when he sets to work to write a novel, and it is the hope that he may succeed where others– in so
many ways his better – have failed that keeps him going” (A Voice from the Attic 2). In another essay One Half of Robertson Davies, Davies writes about humour and humorist: “Never be deceived by a humorist, for if he is any good he is a deeply serious man, moved by a quirk of temperament to speak a certain kind of truth in the form of jokes. Everybody can laugh at the jokes; the real trick is to understand them” (One Half of Robertson Davies 3).

Davies used humour in his novels. He says: “I have never consciously “used” humour in my life. Such humour as I may have is one of the elements in which I live. I cannot recall a time when I was not conscious of the deep, hearing, rolling ocean of hilarity that lies so very near the surface of life in most of its aspects” (43).

Davies carefully distinguished between novel writing and play writing. He gives preference to novel writing. In his interview with Elizabeth Sifton, he made this distinction clear. Of playwright, he observes:

Anybody who has been a playwright, unless he’s a playwright of well established reputation, knows that his position in the theatre is a very weak one, and that the wish of the director, or some important actor infinitely outweighs his; and the opinions of the many people, who always want something that’s already happened to happen again, are very important. You’re perpetually subjected to governance by
people who haven’t written the play and are trying to make it as much like some previous success as possible. That’s very tedious and you get sick of it. (26)

On the other hand, the position of the novelist is different one. The novelist will not encounter as many difficulties as the playwright does. Of novel writing, he observes: “When you are a novelist, you’re writing a play but you’re acting all the parts, you’re controlling the lights and the scenery and the whole business, and it’s your show. When it’s done, one turns it over to the editors and they are delightfully kind about it and away you go” (ibid).

Davies employed a technique that hints at “magical realism”. Magical Realism is an international tendency in the graphic and literary arts, especially painting and prose fiction. The frame or surface of the work may be conventionally realistic, but contrasting elements – such as the supernatural, myth, dream, fantasy, – invade the realism and change the whole basis of the art. Magical realism in literature enjoyed popularity in many parts of the world just after World War II. Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez from south America, Gunter Grass from Germany, Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco from Italy, John Fowles, John Barth, Emma Tennant, Don DeLillo and Salman Rushdie from England practised magical realism in their novels. Davies in his novels like Fifth Business, The Manticore, and World of Wonders explored ideas of good
and evil, history and identity, truth and illusion, art and mysticism. 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 a mythical or magical world that exists within the confines of ordinary, rationalist, desacralized modern society. The Deptford Trilogy – Fifth Business, The Manticore, and World of Wonders – is a richly plotted study of three individuals’ journeys to self-discovery that mingles with humour, mystery, magic, grotesqueries, and the Jungian theory of archetypes.

Davies created a galaxy of characters. His plays, novels, short stories are full of major and minor characters that attract our attention. Some of the major characters are – Dunstan Ramsay, David Staunton, Magnus Eisengrim, Francis Cornish, Simon Darcourt, Hulda Schnakenburg, Sir Benedict Domdaniel, Monica Gall, Hector Mackilwraith and a number of others. Once the stage has been set and his characters introduced, Davies chronicles the many difficulties, both logistical and psychological. The names of the characters are fascinating. The names of the characters are such that people will remember. In respect of his minor characters, Davies, like Dickens, had a flair for the dramatic and could sketch a secondary character in just a few lines. It can be observed in his Fifth Business where he draws the portraits of Rev.
Leadbeater, Orph Wettenhall, and Boy’s stepdaughter Lorene in just a few lines. But he was more daring in his experiments with form than he is often given credit for, and his novelistic objectives are decidedly modern rather than Victorian. As Mickiko Kakutani wrote in *The New York Times*, Davies:

has created a rich oeuvre of densely plotted, highly symbolic novels that not only function as superbly funny entertainments but also give the reader, in his character’s words, a deeper kind of pleasure – delight, awe, religious intimations, a fine sense of the past, and of the boundless depth and variety of life. (6)

In regard to the developing process of character, Davies observes:

The character arises in your imagination and then you go ahead. I know this sounds terribly pompous and grandiose, but you don’t really do it; it’s something that happens and you write it down. You can’t sit down and say, “Now, I think I’ll think up a funny Jesuit”, and do it because you’ll get a mass of eccentricities; you won’t get a live person. But if one arises in your mind, and he’s got all his oddities and you see him hopping around and doing things, then you just write down about it. This is what the imagination is. It’s not invention, you’re more passive than that. You listen to your ideas; you don’t tell them what to do. (Heatherington 116)

These views of Davies, which are quite revealing, are significant to note as they help us know the novelistic strategy adopted by him. It is pertinent to see that Davies is very seriously committed to the art of novel
in the context of contemporary literary scene, in Canada in particular and mainstream literature in general. Various issues discussed at this stage will be taken up later when Davies’s novels will be analyzed in detail in subsequent chapters.

1.6 REVIEW OF CRITICAL LITERATURE ON ROBERTSON DAVIES:

Review of literature helps in designing the study and also in finalizing the methodology for collecting reliable data. It provides a good outline for carrying for the study and the gaps remained in the studies.

The extensive work had been done on the topic under study, but in very few studies, Jung and his archetype are studied exhaustively. Therefore, the present study might help in bridging this gap. Some of the relevant studies done in Canada and outside Canada are reviewed here. With this perspective at the back of mind, let us see how Davies and his works have been studied by the critics.

Davies was a very careful reader and wrote prolifically. There are more than twenty-one books to his credit. As a novelist, he published *The Salterton Trilogy* (*Tempest-Tost, Leaven of Malice, A Mixture of Frailties*), *The Deptford Trilogy* (*Fifth Business, The Manticore, World of Wonders*), *The Cornish Trilogy* (*The Rebel Angels, What’s Bred in the Bone, The Lyre of Orpheus*), *The Toronto Trilogy* (*Murther and Walking Spirits, The Cunning Man*). As a playwright, he published *Overlaid, Eros*
as a short story writer, there are five collections of short stories to his credit – *High Spirits: Ghost Stories*, *Libretti*, *Doctor Canon’s Cure*, *Jezebel*, *The Golden Ass*. As an essayist, Davies published – *The Diary of Samuel Marchbanks*, *The Table Talk of Samuel Marchbanks*, *Samuel Marchbanks’ Almanack*, *The papers of Samuel Marchbanks*. As a critic, Davies wrote a number of essays, which express his opinion on a number of things. Some of his critical books are published by J. M. Davis, and some are edited by Judith Skelton Grant, Tyrone Guthrie, Jennifer Surridge and Branda Davies. These works are – *Shakespeare’s Boy Actors*, *Shakespeare for Young Players: A Junior Course*, *Renown at Stratford*, *Twice Have the Trumpets Sounded*, *Thrice the Brindled Cat Hath Mew’d*, *A Voice from the Attic*, *A Feast of Stephen*, *Stephen Leacock*, *One Half of Robertson Davies*, *The Enthusiasms of Robertson Davies*, *The Well-Tempered Critic*, *The Mirror of Nature*, *Reading and Writing*, *The Merry Heart*, *Happy Alchemy*. Davies also wrote a number of elegant and interesting letters. Judith Skelton Grant published his two collections of letters – *For Your Eye Alone*, and *Discoveries*. In addition to these, a number of books on Davies were
edited and published. For his tremendous output, he received a number of awards and significant recognition as one of Canada’s best talents.

Before launching his career on novel writing, he had a profound knowledge of dramatic literature – acting, directing, and writing plays. What is more, he wrote editorials and book reviews. Because he had a number of ideas that suited neither journalism nor the stage, the novel beckoned and Davies began the 1950s with the publication of _Tempest-Tost_. As Graham McInnes writes, “He has written full-length plays, continues to work at them, and hopes that they will be produced in England. If, by the age of 40, he has not achieved this aim he says he will turn to novels” (2). It is in the novel form that his writing has become best known, though it would take nearly another twenty years before _Fifth Business_ would raise him to global claim. Davies’s three novel trilogies deal with life in fictional Ontario villages. _The Salterton Trilogy_ – _Tempest-Tost, Leaven of Malice_ and _A Mixture of Fraillties_ – is a satiric romance that explores Canadian life and culture.

When the first novel of his _The Salterton Trilogy_ was published, most Canadian critics welcomed it as new evidence of Davies’ broad talents. The critics admired his ability to create character and telling situations and enjoyed his “wit, humour, and cogent observation” (Grant 333). William Arthur Deacon in the _Globe and Mail_ was one of the few
hostile assessors. But his estimate of the novel as “no more than a casual fragment of impressionistic reporting” without “solid core” or “serious purpose” did not prevent strong sales (334). More than 5,000 copies were sold in Canada alone. When the novel was published in America, the American reviewers liked it too, although their notices were briefer. Chatto and Windus’ British edition attracted even less attention. No other Canadian novelist is lauded and read as widely outside his homeland as Robertson Davies. His characters fascinate, and his gentle, graceful style makes no demands on the reader.

Where *Tempest-Tost* reflects Davies’ youthful delight in Kingston’s history and architecture, and especially its amateur theatre, *Leaven of Malice* celebrates the civilizing influences he had come to appreciate as a young man: the newspaper, the Anglican Cathedral, the university. Canadian reviews relished its gallery of distinctive characters, the comic situations, the wit and well-honed style. Comparisons with Stephen Leacock were frequent. When *Leaven of Malice* won the Leacock Medal for Humour in 1954, Davies was introduced at the awarding ceremony as “the man of many faucets” (343). When *Leaven of Malice* appeared in Britain in February and in the United States in July 1955, the critics in both countries paid serious attention. They compared Davies’ work to that of Trollope, Joyce Cary, Evelyn Waugh, J. B. Priestley and Sinclair Lewis. In England, the book attracted substantial
reviews from Nigel Nicolson and Elizabeth Bowen and in America from the major New York papers. *The New York Times Book Review* recommended it for seven weeks. American hard cover sales rose to about 7,000, the best achieved by any of the Salterton novels on first publication. The plot of the novel became the subject of criticism. *The London Free Press* writes, “Its plot may be slight . . .”; the *Hamilton Spectator* observes “. . . it is scarcely a plot . . .”; the Cornwall Standard Freeholder writes, “the plot is slight enough”; the *Kingston Whig-Standard* observes, “There is little or no plot. . . .” (*ibid*). Davies was annoyed by these complaints. He told a correspondent:

I cannot say that I think very much about plot myself, for the lives of the most people appear to me to be plotless. However, I am always happy to oblige my critics and I am hoping to cram in enough plot into the next book to fulfil their needs for a long time; I shall then be able to write any subsequent books without any plot at all. (*ibid*)

*A Mixture of Frailties*, the last novel of the trilogy, was published by John Gray of Macmillan in April, 1958. Chatto and Windus disliked the new novel and rejected it; in the end, Weidenfield and Nicolson published it in England. Scribner welcomed it warmly in the United States. When the book appeared in Canada, England and the United States, the reactions of newspaper reviewers were much more mixed than for *Leaven of Malice*. Many liked some things and disliked others. They
contradicted one another; some thought the characters were two-dimensional and unbelievable, others thought them richly realized; some relished the comic opening and disliked the rest of the book, others the opposite. Monica’s affair with Giles Revelstoke aroused disapproval in some quarters. Many sensed an archetypal pattern behind her story and compared her to Cinderella or Galatea. American reviewers were most frequently capable of enjoying the novel as a whole, possibly because they viewed the Canadian and the British parts of the book from an equal distance. They and a few Canadian reviewers recognized A Mixture of Frailties as a work larger in scope and richer in conception than its two precursors, leading them to expect good things from Davies’ pen in the future. On reading the thoughtful notice in the Montreal Gazette, Davies was moved to write: “I think and hope that at last I may be getting my rightful place in Canadian letters, as the most serious writer they have and more truly of the country than the ‘sincere’ boys – whose sincerity is perhaps more accurately described as naiveté” (369).

The next trilogy The Deptford Trilogy – Fifth Business, The Manticore, and World of Wonders is drawn on Davies’ interest in Jungian psychology to create Fifth Business, a novel that draws heavily on Davies’s own experiences, his love of myth and magic and his knowledge of small-town mores. The narrator, like Davies, is of immigrant Canadian
background, with a father who runs the town paper. The book’s characters act in roles that roughly correspond to Jungian archetypes.

In the beginning, the novel was not warmly received in Canada. Davies writes:

. . . in the beginning this story was not warmly received in Canada. But when it gained very warm commendation in the United States and elsewhere, Canada changed its opinion. Many Canadians began to see in the tale of Dunstan Ramsay some relevance to themselves and to their country. (483)

Toronto’s two major papers, Globe and Mail took the novel seriously and reviewed it positively. The Gazette in Montreal thought it should take the Governor General’s Award for fiction, and enthusiastic reviews had appeared in at least four other major Canadian newspapers before the U.S. publication on November 23. Canadian reviewers wrote of Davies as a man of surprisingly diverse accomplishment and saw the novel as an advance over his earlier work. Many influential publications in North America were full of praise for his novel: the New Yorker described Fifth Business as “elegant”; the New York Times wrote of it as “a marvellously enigmatic novel... driven by irresistible narrative force.” Esquire described it as “as masterfully executed as anything in the history of the novel”; the Washington Post and the Chicago Tribune declared the novel
“a mature, accomplished and altogether remarkable book one of the best of this or any other season, and it simply cannot be ignored” (484).

In Canada, these astounding U.S. reviews made the novel a sensation. Toronto Daily Star (January 9, 1971) gave the first place to Fifth Business in “National Bestsellers” list. The book remains on the chart for forty-two weeks. In June, commenting on the book’s manifest success, Patrick-Scott declared that Fifth Business “could only have been written by a Canadian. It is so indigenously Canadian in every respect – and evokes so stunningly the Canadian character and scene – that it stands as a very definition of Canadian content” (ibid). The hard cover sold 5,000 copies, and 15,000 more through the Book-of-the-Month Club.

The novel brought him the prestigious Governor General’s Award. Davies was ranked with a number of writers such as Ernest Buckler, Morley Callaghan, Hugh MacLennan, W. O. Mitchel, Sinclair Ross, Margaret Atwood, Timothy Findley, Hugh Hood, Robert Kroetsch, Margaret Lawrence, and Alice Munro. Internationally renowned authors Saul Bellow, John Fowles, and Anthony Burges praised Fifth Business to the skies, with predictable results. Davies became a celebrity and his novel a bestseller.

Davies built on the success of Fifth Business with two more novels: The Manticore and World of Wonders. The novel – The Manticore – was
set amongst the Canadian upper classes. The novel is about David Staunton, an alcoholic attorney, who is on a spiritual odyssey of self-discovery. Davies’ dry, analytic style put off some readers, while others found his command of symbols and allusions masterful. *The Manticore* received the Canadian Governor General’s Award for excellence.

The novel was greeted with a slew of positive reviews. While the *Globe* and *Mail* found the book tedious, the *Toronto Star*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *New York Times*, *News Week* and a large number of other papers extolled the novel. Like *Fifth Business*, it sold exceptionally well, for a literary work, and earned Davies a number of prizes and honours. *The Manticore* appeared in Curtis Books in 1974. *Toronto Star* article asserts that *The Manticore* had at that point sold 50,000 paperback copies in Canada alone.

*World of Wonders* appeared in October 1975. Again, the critical response was overwhelmingly positive. Some critics believed that Davies had accomplished the impossible and surpassed the first two volumes of the *Deptford Trilogy*. He was referred not only as the finest living Canadian novelist but also as one of the most accomplished novelists of his generation. Book sales were prodigious, not only in the English-speaking world, but across Europe as a whole, as the trilogy was translated into a variety of languages. Despite the complexities of his
plots, his puzzling references to an arcane body of knowledge, and his appeal to art and mysticism and disavowal of reason – or perhaps because of these same elements – the demand for his work was insatiable. Hardcover sales followed the pattern established by the other two books – 14,311 in Canada, 7,760 in the United States, and 1,200 in Britain.

With the publication of the *Deptford Trilogy*, many Canadians began to accord Davies the status of a national treasure. This manifested itself in a startling manner at the opening of the Stratford Festivals in 1977. A crowd of about two hundred people had assembled to watch the arrival of the first-night patrons. As Davies approached the theatre, a large woman lunged out of the crowd and pulled at his beard: “Oooh, it’s lovely, isn’t it?” she said, as her fingers clutched the learned whiskers. . . . To which Davies responded: “And you, Madam. Who the devil are you?” (Grant 518).

In the 1980s, Davies completed another trilogy of novels, revolving around the biography of Francis Cornish. *The Cornish Trilogy* – *The Rebel Angels*, *What’s Bred in the Bone*, and *The Lyre of Orpheus* – was another dense, erudite chronicle of upper class Canadian life. In each novel, Davies looks at how underlying medieval patterns surface in modern lives.
The first novel that was published in 1981 by the MacMillan in Canada was the result of university life that strongly influenced Davies. Davies decided to write a novel in which it would function as setting and theme. He viewed it as one of the great institutions of Western civilization, proceeding in a direct path from the middle ages and preserving in large part an atmosphere steeped in alchemy, mystery, and the rarefied pursuit of knowledge. *The Rebel Angels* was the first university novel. As with the previous trilogy, issues fundamental to Davies such as individuation, myth, knowledge, the collective unconscious and artistic creation were of supreme importance, but were amplified and treated from very different perspectives than in the Deptford works.

*The Rebel Angels* follows several faculty and staff of the fictional College of St. John and Holy Ghost. Perhaps due to its university setting, it did not quite attain the popularity of the *Deptford Trilogy*, but it is generally considered to be among his best books.

The critical response to *The Rebel Angels* was for the most part positive. Some critics felt that Davies was overly pedantic, that his dialogue was designed more to illustrate Davies’s personal interests than to capture the inner workings of his characters, and that there was too much talk of excrement. Other reviewers strongly disagreed. John
Kenneth Galbraith, the renowned Canadian economist, extolled The Rebel Angels in a long article in a New York publication, while Anthony Burges, the British writer best known for his novel A Clock Work Orange, expressed the belief that Davies should receive the Nobel Prize. Burges subsequently included The Rebel Angels in 99 Novels (1984). The hardcover edition of The Rebel Angels sold 13,595 copies in Canada. 12,101 in the United States, and 2,959 in Britain.

David Lodge, the British novelist and critic, wrote an essay on ‘Robertson Davies and the Campus Novel’ (1982). Lodge concludes his essay:

_The Rebel Angels_ is one of those novels that impart a good deal of information in this case rather esoteric information – as well as entertainment to the reader. Its flavour will be a little too gamy for some tastes, its high spirits too redolent of high table; but as the production of a writer in his sixty-ninth year, it is a work of impressive vigour and vivacity, which no addict of the campus novel will want to miss. (Lodge 173)

_The Rebel Angels_ paved the way for the coming campus novelists.

The next novel of the Cornish Trilogy is What’s Bred in the Bone. Once again, the reviews were glowing. Some critics complained that the plot was contrived and, again, that Davies was a die-hard elitist, but most reviewers appreciated the novel’s many strengths, its description of early
Canada, its parade of characters, the attention paid to the technical aspects of painting, and the attempt to reflect the artist’s commitment to the act of discovery, not to mention a fascinating plot. Davies’ handling of a central theme, too, that art is ultimately an act of deception but one that reveals crucial, universal truths, was consummately handled. The Times Literary Supplement credited him with ‘five brilliant novels’ over the past fifteen years, the Daily Telegraph saw him as “Canada’s cleverest novelist” and the London Sunday Times called him “one of the great modern novelists, and probably the most important to have emerged in Canadian fiction” (Grant 572-73). The novel was on the Canadian bestseller lists in Maclean’s magazine for thirty-two weeks and in the Toronto Star for thirty, and on those published in the New York Times and the Washington Post for nine and fourteen weeks respectively. This translated into hardcover sales of 21,795 in Canada, 40,759 in the United States and 5,995 in Britain.

Davies’s reputation as a front rank writer was brought home to him again by strong, international reviews, the translation of his books into a multitude of languages, and the impressive number of sales he registered. He had also been invited as a special guest to the 48th International PEN Congress (Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists, Novelists), and had won the National Award from the Banff Centre School of Fine Arts. Although
What’s Bred in the Bone was nominated for the Booker Prize, the Booker had been won by Kingsley Amis. The Nobel Prize, too, eluded him: it fell to Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian poet and playwright. Davies was not so much disappointed. He started to complete his third novel of the trilogy that is The Lyre of Orpheus.

The Lyre of Orpheus appeared in bookstores in 1988. It received the usual critical acclaim and sold exceptionally well in Canada, England, and the U.S. with some exceptions, the reviewers celebrated it as a fitting finale to one of the great fictional enterprises of the decade. Hardcover sales soared to a new high – 31,943 in Canada, 53,916 in the United States, and 6609 in Britain. The book moved quickly to best-seller status, staying on the Maclean’s magazine list in Canada for thirty-three weeks, on the Toronto Star’s for thirty-six weeks, the New York Times’ for eight weeks and the Washington Post’s for ten weeks.

To add to these, a number of books, articles, dissertations, biographies etc. are also attempted in this direction. Nicholas Maes wrote on Robertson Davies: Magician of Words (1960) which throws a flood of light on different aspects of his career. In the closing of the book, Maes has given “Chronology of Robertson Davies” (1913-1995). Some of the popular books are – Robertson Davies (Buithenhuis-Cameron, 1972), Robertson Davies: An Appreciation (Cameron Elspeth, 1991), Robertson
Robertson Davies: Man of Myth (Grant, Judith Skelton, 1994), Robertson Davies: A Mingling of Contrarities (Camille La Bossiere, 2001), Robertson Davies and His Works (John Mills, 1984), Robertson Davies (Patricia Morley, 1977), Robertson Davies (Michael Peterman, 1986), Robertson Davies: A Portrait in Mosaic (Val. Ross, 2008) and a number of others.

On the whole, it is to be noted that this brief overview of the relevant literature reveals that many books have made an attempt to explore either the relations between the artist and the art or the cultural document or Davies’ use of language. However, there is hardly any exhaustive work regarding the use of archetype in Davies’ novels. In the light of this discussion, it becomes obviously clear that the present study is an attempt to make a significant contribution to the criticism of archetypal approach in general and Canadian psychological fiction in particular.

1.7 RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

The review of the recent Canadian fiction indicates that there is a wide scope for its study. Robertson Davies, selected for present study, belongs to the post-modern era of Canadian fiction. His all eleven novels are internationally acclaimed. He is the best selling author in the post-modern Canadian novel. In the words of Malcolm Bradbury “Robertson Davies is one of the great modern novelists” (The Sunday Times 1). The
Observer comments: “Robertson Davies is a novelist whose books are thick and rich with humour, character and incident. They are plotted with skill and much flamboyance” (The Observer 2).

Besides awards, prizes, and publicity, Davies is known for qualitative and experimental writing. The description of everyday life in Davies’s novels is comparable to that of Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro. In the words of Nora Foster Stovel: “Davies, Laurence and Munro all convey the social stratifications of their microcosms through a delineation of their respective town’s religious denominations” (Sifton 37). Davies experimented with the narrative technique, language, theme and characterization. Davies has his unique style of writing. His contribution to the Canadian fiction is not less than that of Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro. As there is little work done so far on the novels selected for this study, there is great opportunity and wide scope for researcher to do qualitative research in order to focus on the archetypal context of Davies’ works. The approach of this study is basically analytical but wherever relevant, aspect of form, narrative technique and language will be taken into consideration if necessary.

1.8  HYPOTHESIS:

The present study assumes that Davies has profound influence of Jungian psychology. He proposed that the human psyche could be best
understood not only through a study of dreams but through world religion, mythology, art, and philosophy. Religion and mythology could reveal a great deal about humans because, according to Jung, human souls not only had a personal unconscious but a collective unconscious as well. The key component of the collective unconscious was the “archetypes” – religions, and spiritual emotions and experiences that were common to all societies, past and present. Examples of such archetypes would be the Wise Old Man, the Great Mother, the Trickster, the Eternal Youth, and other such figures that, according to Jung, recurred in all mythologies and literatures.

In the present study, the researcher intends to analyse the selected novels of Robertson Davies in the light of Jungian archetypal theory.

1.9 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The prime objective of this study is to examine the archetypes used by Robertson Davies in his novels with particular reference to the theory of Archetypes in order to explore the complex novelistic vision of Robertson Davies. It also aims at analyzing various characters and the patterns of human behaviour by referring to the primary and secondary sources selected for the present study.
1.10 SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS:

Robertson Davies, as mentioned earlier, is prolific writer who wrote plays, novels, short stories, essays, letters etc. He was acknowledged as an international author for his tremendous literary output. However, the researcher intends to study only the selected novels of Robertson Davies in the present study. This naturally delimits the undertaken research study. Due to time and space constraint, the researcher has to delimit his study to some of the most representative novels that are going to be analysed in the light of archetypal theory. The researcher intends to analyse and assess the novels in the light of Jungian psychology. Secondly, the novels written in the early period, and the novels written at the later stage are seen in different perspectives.

1.11 METHODOLOGY:

As it is an interdisciplinary research, which deals with archetypes and literature simultaneously, it naturally adopts interdisciplinary approach in its treatment of characters and themes depicted in the novels of Davies. The methodology used for the present study is that of literary review followed by analytical, explanatory, interpretative and comparative methods. To begin with, the first chapter discusses the life and career of Robertson Davies. The researcher has opted the three trilogies of Davies to analyse and assess the novels in the light of
archetypal theory. But since the first trilogy – *The Salterton Trilogy* does not bear out archetypal patterns, the trilogy is not taken into consideration. Only Freudian elements could be noticed in a novel like *Leaven of Malice*. In this connection, Judith Skelton Grant in her book, *Robertson Davies: Man of Myth* (1994) observes:

> Not until *Fifth Business* and *The Manticore*, after Davies had reached his late fifties and absorbed the thinking of C. G. Jung, was he ready to pursue characters like Mackilwraith through their mid-life crises to the painful realignments that would allow them to meet the challenges of the second half of life successfully. (331)

It was ultimately C. G. Jung who opened his eyes. In the 1950s when he first began to read Jung, he saw him primarily as a professor of insights that might assist his ongoing voyage of self-discovery. In the first trilogy, Davies has not seriously focuses on the use of mythic themes, symbols and archetypal patterns to structure the narrative and illuminate the development of the characters. Chapter III and IV analyse the novels selected for the study. While analyzing them, a care is taken to apply the parameters that are listed and explained in the second chapter. These chapters also adopt the method of interpretation and explanation. Comparison between novels is done where it is necessary to make the analysis more relevant and contextual. The last chapter records the findings of the researcher based on the novels analysed. Comparative method is adopted in this chapter to arrive at a satisfactory and reliable
conclusion. Regarding the style sheet, the study follows the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers (7th edition)* published by EWP, New Delhi, 2009.
REFERENCES


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