

Fifth Business Study Guide

Fifth Business by Robertson Davies

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Plot Summary

Fifth Business is a story masquerading as a memoir. Dunston Ramsay is a newly-retired headmaster who writes to the new headmaster to object to the dismissive tone in which his career was characterized by the speeches at his retirement banquet. Ramsay objects particularly to the article in the *College Chronicle*, which treats him as a doddering old school-marm who had not made any contribution to his field.

Ramsay therefore describes the history of his intellectual career, which was specifically focused on the history and culture surrounding saints. As he is telling the story of his interest and research in saints though, Ramsay also narrates the stories of Percy Boyd Staunton and Paul Dempster and his mother, Mrs. Dempster. Staunton and Paul Dempster were both childhood friends of Ramsay's and he tells the story of Staunton's rise to fame and fortune, and Paul Dempster's rise to prominence as a magician. In the end, their stories all intersect, and resolve a traumatic childhood episode. Percy Boyd Staunton had thrown a snowball at Ramsay, but it hit Mrs. Dempster, and caused her to go into labor prematurely, which had a lifelong effect on Paul Dempster, her son. By the end of the story, some retribution has been achieved and the author has defined something like a moral vision.

The subtext of *Fifth Business* develops out of the rivalry between Ramsay and Staunton. Staunton is the child of a wealthy family, while Ramsay is the son of strict Scots parents who run the local newspaper. Things come easily to Percy Boyd Staunton, but Dunston Ramsay takes things seriously and tries to be conscientious. When Mrs. Dempster delivers Paul Dempster early, Dunston takes it upon himself to look after the boy, and he looks in on Paul and his mother even when they have become scandalous characters in the town of Deptford where they all live.

When his mother forces Ramsay to choose between loyalty to her and his visits to Mrs. Dempster, he enlists, and ends up losing a leg in the battle of Paschendale in the Great War. Coming home with the Victoria's Cross, he learns to play the role of the hero according to other people's expectations, and he takes up the study of saints as a lifelong passion. This introduces him to Padre Blazon, an old Spanish monk who is very wise and can look at the history of religion as an optional vocabulary for his own personal experiences. He and Ramsay, who is a Protestant, discuss the possibility that saints might not be canonical figures but, rather, are regular characters in everyone's lives. They are simply the people who fill the need for the miraculous.

Devoted to saints, Ramsay lives slightly vicariously through Boy Staunton and his wife Leola, and their marital problems seem to put him off desiring marriage for himself. Ramsey prefers instead to be a secondary figure in other people's lives. This lifestyle is challenged when Ramsay meets Paul Dempster again, in Mexico. Paul is going under the name Magnus Eisengrim, and Ramsay has an encounter with Eisengrim's manager, an ugly but intelligent woman named Liesl Vitzlipützli. She tells him to confront his devils, and his devils' father, the Old Devil, and to live in accord with inner nature, even if it is conflicted.



Fifth Business concludes when Eisengrim meets Boy Staunton at Ramsay's school, and the three men have a combative meeting. Ramsay tells both men the story of Paul Dempster's early birth: it resulted from the snowball Percy Boyd Staunton had thrown at Dunston Ramsay. Ramsay even produces the stone that was in the snowball, which he had been using as a paperweight all these years.

After the meeting between Ramsay, Eisengrim and Staunton, Staunton gives Eisengrim a ride home, but presumably hypnotizes him along the way, because Staunton drove his car into Toronto Bay at high speed, and the stone from Ramsay's desk was found in his mouth. The murder is never solved, and the book ends with Liesl inviting Ramsay to come visit her in Switzerland for some high times. This, Ramsay says to the headmaster, is the last thing for him to tell.



Part 1, Chapters 1-6

Summary

The novel begins with straight narrative, as Dunston Ramsay describes the snowball fight that ends up causing Mrs. Dempster to deliver her baby eighty days early. Percy Boyd Staunton throws a snowball at Ramsay, but Ramsay ducks, and the snowball hits the preacher's wife causing her to go into labor and also to lose her sanity somewhat.

After the original anecdote, the reader discovers the novel is framed as a memoir comprised of Dunston Ramsay explaining to the headmaster of the school system he himself has just retired from. He is explaining why he feels slighted by the accolades heaped on him at his retirement party, which did not mention his publications or intellectual interests. Instead, Ramsay feels he has been treated as a doddering old academic. What he is narrating takes place in his past, as Ramsay recalls Paul Dempster's birth and childhood, and his own relationship with Paul Dempster. He also provides a group portrait of the main characters in Deptford, the small town in western Canada.

Resuming the narrative, Ramsay says his mother is a caring woman, something of a nurse and a midwife. She feels responsible for Mrs. Dempster, and tends to her and her premature baby with a devotion that left Ramsay at home with his father and brother. At one point, Ramsay confronts Percy Boyd Staunton with the consequences of their snowball fight, but Staunton makes it clear he refuses to see any such consequences from his actions.

When the baby begins to thrive, Dunston Ramsay is drawn to Mrs. Dempster, who is ten years older than he. Mrs. Dempster is someone with a knowing look in her eye, and no fear of anything. She is treated as something of a simpleton in the town, on account of her poor housekeeping, but Ramsay is fascinated by her air of acceptance and wise tolerance. She seems to be laughing at things other people take too seriously.

The consequence of Dunston Ramsay's attention to the Dempster family is a loss of popularity in school and the beginning of what becomes a reputation for being somehow 'off'. He seems to be interested in the wrong things, the spiritual and moral side of things, which people generally turn away from. Nevertheless, he is strong and can stand up for himself, particularly with his intellect. He has a penchant for 'good ones', zippy sayings putting people in their place.

Analysis

In Ramsay's narrative, readers can see the past told through the eyes of someone who understands what really happens is only the face of deeper more mysterious realities not seen until later in life. This launches the reader on a quest not for any particular event or discovery, but for the wisdom putting these events in perspective. The book is



in this sense a coming of age tale, and the reader follows Dunston Ramsay through his development as a person, waiting to see how these original origins will reveal the development that comes later.

Guilt is introduced as a strong motivator of Ramsay's actions. From the one night's snowball fight, Ramsay extrudes a lifelong devotion to Paul Dempster and his mother. This causes Ramsay to devote himself to the Dempsters (with the exception of the father) and he learns something about life from Mrs. Dempster: she is not fazed by anything. What others call simple, Ramsay calls wise and friendly. This casts him out of polite society, but he does not seem to mind much, as he is attuned to deeper experiences. Readers see this clearly in the juxtaposition of Ramsay's development and Percy Boyd Staunton's. Staunton is popular and rich and powerful, but there is a certain lawlessness and excess in his character. The plot seems to revolve, in these early stages, around how the personalities will play out as they develop.

Ramsay is drawn to the freedom he sees epitomized in Mrs. Dempster, and while he is too young to understand exactly what is going on, her encounter with the vagrant and the opprobrium she faces as a result, seems to initiate Ramsay into a world of adult complexities. He learns a smart woman can be scandalous, and the proper people can be a bit obtuse. He will have to see for himself, and choose for himself.

Vocabulary

Occasion, quarreled, humiliating, plentiful, apparatus, vindictive, Samaritan, conductor, innumerable, meagre, naïveté, supremacy, sanitary, edifices, redemption, ingenuity, diluted, mountainous, adolescence, mistrustful, delicacy, overtake, knickerbockers, verandah, prolonged.



Part 1, Chapters 7-14

Summary

When Dunston Ramsay shows no aptitude for his father's business of printing, he works at the library as an under-librarian. There, he is able to read to his heart's content, and he begins to study magic and conjuring, with the intention of becoming a professional magician. Dunston meets Paul Dempster there, and teaches him to work with coins and cards. Reverend Amasa Dempster finds out about this, and exiles Ramsay from the house. Not only has Ramsay taught Paul gambling and thieving ways, but he has been telling him stories out of a Catholic book of saints, and Reverend Amasa Dempster accuses him of indoctrinating Paul in Popish ways. Reverend Amasa Dempster threatens to give Dunston Ramsay a beating, or to tell Ramsay's parents, but Ramsay calls his bluff, and does not take a beating. Neither does Reverend Amasa Dempster call his parents. He remains exiled, though, and when Mrs. Dempster next sees Ramsay, she asks him to come by to see Paul, but of course he could not.

Dunston Ramsay does not see Mrs. Dempster again until after she creates a scandal. When Reverend Amasa Dempster reports her missing, a search party is organized, and Ramsay joins his father and the others and searches the pit, which is a gravel pit neglected by the railroad company. The pit is also frequented by vagrants, and Ramsay is the one who finds Mrs. Dempster in the act of making love with a vagrant man. Before she can be taken away from the others, her husband asks her why she would do something so outlandish as sleep with a vagrant, she answers she did it because he 'wanted it so badly' (p. 48).

This statement is taken as a declaration of war against civilized society, as the women of Deptford understand if people are to copulate simply because they want to, there will be no sacred structure left in society. As a result of this scandal, Reverend Amasa Dempster moves his family to a small house on the road to Ramsay's school, although Ramsay still stops in to see Mrs. Dempster. He reads the newspaper to her, and she became his only friend. Ramsay describes Mrs. Dempster sympathetically as someone with no fear, who follows the light within herself

Ramsay is already aloof because he is big and does not fit in with the others, and now he exiles himself further by becoming more educated. He reads the encyclopedia, and gains enough knowledge to become a nuisance to everyone around him.

Ramsay's brother William falls ill, a consequence of an injury at the printing plant, and one evening Ramsay is left in charge of him. William has a convulsion that makes him appear dead, and in his panic, Ramsay runs to Mrs. Dempster. She comes and prays over William, who seems to come back to life. When the town finds out that Ramsay has brought the scandal-plagued woman into his home—and that he has befriended her—he is practically cast down to the lowest social position. His mother in particular takes



his relationship with Mrs. Dempster as an affront, and tries to force him to choose between her and Mrs. Dempster.

He avoids choosing by deciding to enlist, even though he is two years under age. This means Leola Cruikshank starts to see him as a desirable partner, and by the time he ships out by train, she tells him she loves him and will wait for him to return from World War I.

Analysis

Already strange because of his friendship with Mrs. Dempster, Ramsay takes a position that will only ensure he will be an outsider. He acquires learning from the encyclopedia at the library, and becomes a nuisance because his learning does not have experience to back it up. In conversation with his father's friend Sam West, Ramsay exemplifies a model of someone who looks at every faith, but neither refutes nor subscribes to any one. His religiousness is more general than that.

When Ramsay is exiled for teaching Paul card and coin tricks, he stands up for himself to Reverend Amasa Dempster, but he starts to hate the Reverend's kind of pious blindness.

Mrs. Dempster's encounter with the vagrant, and her apparent openness to such encounters, is a crisis for Ramsay, for it forces him to take sides in a moral landscape he is not entirely sure of, so he refuses to choose. He obeys his mother for a time, but when his brother appears to die, Ramsay exercises a surprising impulse in running to Mrs. Dempster. She brings him back to life—which seems to be a miracle to Ramsay—but this brings down a lot of harsh judgment on him and Mrs. Dempster alike. Ramsay still sticks to his guns, though, and when his mother tries to force him to declare his loyalty, he finds a 'third solution' to the either or situation of loyalty to his mother or to Mrs. Dempster. He enlists in the army, and if he is afraid, he is also recognized as being brave enough to follow his own way.

Vocabulary

Dewlap, reglet, acquisitions, equator, auctioneer, sophisticated, elegant, sinister, mortar, insuperable, prestidigitation, impudence, officious, clemency, linotype, precocious, coax, incriminated, evangelistic, gaunt, proferrings, implied, indignation, gaped, dilapidation.



Part 2

Summary

When Dunston Ramsay goes to Europe to fight in the war, he does not know where he is going, and he is afraid of the older men in the army, who seems to want to turn him into someone like themselves. He does not particularly enjoy army life, but he excels at it. It cost him something to do this, though, as he is bored stiff by a lifestyle bent on conformity and does not give him anything to think about.

Life in the trenches is filthy and terrifying, and Ramsay says he is more or less afraid for three years. In 1917, at the Battle of Ypres, Ramsay is selected with five others to try to dislodge a German machine gun nest. Flares are sent up over the six men as they crawl through the filthy mud toward the machine gun, and when Ramsay is disoriented, he begins to run. He ends up running toward German lines, and when he bursts into the machine gun nest, he shoots the three German gunners dead. He retreats hastily, in fear of an Allied bombardment killing him in the German emplacement. In his retreat, he is wounded in the leg and crawls toward some masonry that turns out to be part of a school. There, he stares up at a statue of the Madonna and recognizes Mrs. Dempster's face on the statue.

Ramsay is in a coma for months. When he awakens, he finds he has lost a leg and his left side has been badly burned when a flare came down on top of him. But he is alive, and his nurse, Diana Marfleet, tells him he has been awarded the Victoria's Cross for gallantry. As Ramsay continues to recover, he learns he has to play the role of hero much the same way the King of England has to play the role of king when he pins the V.C. on his uniform.

Ramsay has lost some memory and is not sure whether he has been engaged to Leola Cruikshank before he left Canada, but he cannot tell from her letters and suffers from the uncertainty. Nevertheless, Ramsay and Diana became intimate. He meets her family, but as lovely as they are, he is still only twenty and feels like he needs to start growing up. He fights with Diana to preserve his freedom, and eventually parts from her on fairly good terms. Her parents, he figures, must have been happy when their daughter does NOT end up married to a cripple.

Ramsay returns to Deptford, where he is given a hero's welcome, a parade and a banquet. Everyone is happy to celebrate him, and he lets them, although his description of the proceedings is very humorous as he describes how everyone drones on and on in their praises. At the end of the ceremony, he sees Percy Boyd Staunton and Leola Cruikshank, who are now engaged. Ramsay plays a dirty trick on Staunton by saying, loudly, the best man has won—which lets everyone know he was a contender for Leola's affections as well. Nevertheless, the three of them together, Ramsay, Staunton and Cruikshank, made a kind of tableau, and stick together throughout the rest of the evening.



At the barbershop, Ramsay catches up on all the local gossip, and hears Paul Dempster ran away with the circus shortly after his father has died. Mrs. Dempster

was whisked away by an aunt who lives near Toronto, and has not been seen or heard from again.

Analysis

Even when he goes to war, Ramsay has a hard time believing the rhetoric about the enemy, for he can see the Allied soldiers are a foul-mouthed, thieving lot. Ramsay is terrified by the war, the men, and the inanity of his labors. Even though he learns to perform them well, he still hates to see his soul killed by the boring routines. His experience in battle is a real descent into hell, with the bloody mud filled with corpses and body parts. Even his heroism is not so shiny, to him. In his mind, he merely murders three men, and then is injured as he returns.

The experience that stuck with Ramsay, in addition to the fear and horror, is the miracle of seeing Mrs. Dempster's face on the Madonna in the courtyard. This seems to prove a religious impulse in him and affirms the presence of a higher power, with Mrs. Dempster as its face and emblem. His description of his relationship with Diana Marfleet preserves his image as a man who will seek experience on his own terms and stay true to himself, where another man might have caved in to her expectation of marriage. Instead, he wrestles a difficult and meaningful friendship out of a casual sexual relationship. He is also renamed, as Diana prefers Dunstan (after St. Dunstan) to Dunstable, which sounds affected to her ear.

Ramsay was similarly even-tempered when his parents died, as he saw them for what they were: a domineering woman, and a man who could not stand up to her. Likewise when Ramsay was awarded the V.C. by the king himself, he realizes the public persona of hero or king is separate and almost unrelated to the private experience of the king's own temperament, which has to be suppressed in public occasions.

A certain question does get raised by Ramsay's reaction to Leola Cruikshank's engagement to Percy Boyd Staunton, and readers have to wonder what motivates Ramsay if not the desire for love and the kind of possession associated with marriage. But with his burns and his prosthetic leg, the reader can be reassured there is nothing wrong with his desires: perhaps it is just his recognition he is no longer suited for a normal life.

Vocabulary

Boundless, menaced, defy, campaigns, accomplish, desperate, panoply, degradation, listlessness, chaplain, polymath, likelihood, dwindling, pretence, objective, rhythm, exceptional, disheartened, tetanus, masonry, sceptre, unconscious, tremendous, peaky, privileges.



Part 3

Summary

Still writing to the headmaster, Ramsay describes having sold his parents' house (they had died in the influenza epidemic in 1918) and moves to Toronto to start earning a college degree in History. He sees Staunton there frequently—he is there to read for the bar—and describes Staunton's carousing and affairs. Ramsay describes Paul as “the quintessence of the Jazz Age, a Scott Fitzgerald character.” (p. 114). He begins to excel in business, and even to recommend investments to Ramsay, who has a pension and some money from the sale of his parents' house.

Eventually, Ramsay finishes his degree and became a schoolmaster, well regarded by the boys. He says, though, he only treated the boys as green apples who would not ripen until they were men, so it is the discipline of history that interests him more than the students themselves. He does not marry, but does take lovers, generally steering clear of long-term commitments. In the summers, he returns to Europe to visit Paschendale and to look for the Madonna that looked over him when he was wounded.

As a result of his interest in the Madonna, Ramsay begins to become an expert in saints and their stories, as well as knowledgeable of the art that went into their sculptures.

At around the same time that Paul and Leola leave the Presbyterian church and become Anglicans—a move that asserts their good breeding and good taste, at the time—Ramsay encounters Joel Surgeoner, who had been the vagrant whom Ramsay had seen, as a boy, with Mrs. Dempster. The encounter with Mrs. Dempster had saved Surgeoner, and he is now running a mission for vagrants. When Ramsay goes to talk with him, Surgeoner describes the conversion experience, for Mrs. Dempster had been so kind to him his humanity was rekindled.

Returning to Deptford, Ramsay is warned away from thinking of Mrs. Dempster as a saint. The Catholic priest describes her rather as a fool-saint, a foolish person whose saintliness always makes things go awry. Ramsay goes to see her nonetheless, but she has become simple-minded, and does not recall the past very clearly.

Because of his interest in saints, Ramsay travels to Europe to research the patron saint of women who want to get rid of difficult suitors. When he goes to the circus to see the bearded lady (Saint Wilgefortis had grown a heavy beard to turn her suitors away) he meets Paul Dempster, who is doing card and coin tricks. They talk, but Paul does not look back on his family with pride, and feels no desire to be reconnected with them. When the chapter closes, Ramsay suspects Paul stole his wallet.



Analysis

When Dunston Ramsay leaves Deptford, he seems to the reader to be somewhat hard-hearted, turning his back on his past, but he returns to it soon enough.

Percy Boyd Staunton is been reborn as well, changing his name to Boy Staunton, and the tradition of rebirth through renaming seems to be widespread. Staunton idealizes the aristocracy, and affects a friendly relation with the Prince of Wales, which contrasts with Ramsay's serious and productive self-involvement.

Ramsay remarks upon his own intellectualism, but from his vantage point in the present, he says he had not known, while he was in college, how misleading the intellect could be. His jealousy over Staunton's possession of Leola Cruikshank is nonetheless an unpleasant surprise to him, and it raises a set of feelings he reflects on with shame. Ramsay is content to get along with Staunton, in spite of their rivalry, and it seems both men benefit from the friendship, although the outward advantage still always lies with Staunton. The best Ramsay can offer is his sense of playing fair with the women he takes as lovers, but readers still have to wonder what Ramsay's true feelings are and where his passion is.

Readers see this some in Ramsay's research into saints, which really seems to be concerned with the nature of human experience. Ramsay wants to know whether the Bible is closer to literature like the Arabian Nights than to an exclusive spiritual authority, and he seems to locate real authority in living sources.

Nevertheless, Ramsay is appointed at a boy's school where his artificial leg and his seriousness made him likeable. His disdain for Joel Surgeoner turns to affection when he hears Surgeoner's story, and realizes that Surgeoner was once the vagrant whom he had seen with Mrs. Dempster. He recognizes the living spiritual devotion in Surgeoner's mission and in the generosity that greets it. This turns him further away from Truth toward an incarnated religion of people performing spiritual acts for each other, each according to his own constitution and set of beliefs.

When Surgeoner describes Mrs. Dempster's act of generosity in giving herself to him as a lover, Ramsay sees a miracle: she turns him away from tramping toward a religious life.

Following this discussion, Ramsay's meeting with Father Regan warns him against the fool-saint, who seems saintly, but whose foolishness turns religious behavior to no good ends, and readers wonder what role Mrs. Dempster will ultimately play in Ramsay's life.

When Ramsay finds Paul Dempster—now going by the name of Faustus Legrand—the three main characters have all been renamed. Paul Dempster's indifference to his mother shows the reader one possible reaction to the past, and the reader has to wonder what stance Ramsay will take himself.



Vocabulary

Perfectionist, displeased, aristocracy, countenance, cadaverous, pension, wallowing, consummated, compelling, pious, zealous, agnostic, principal, denouement, chastity, blasphemer, quenched, counseled, reparations, crucified, hilarious, cruelty, necessary, madder silk, afforded.



Part 4

Summary

Still relating his past, Ramsay says Boy Staunton becomes very rich during the Depression, as he sold people the things that console them, such as bread, doughnuts, or water sweetened with beet sugar. He becomes an object of envy to the people Ramsay works with at the school, but Ramsay retains a friendship with him and Leola. Leola, however, is 'lagging in the upward climb' into affluence and culture (p. 151). While Boy acquires skills and culture easily, Leola comes along slowly, and this begins to take a toll on their marriage.

Ramsay describes two times when he intervenes. In the first case, Boy has taken some nude photos of Leola, and he asks Ramsay to develop the photos—and then to comment on them in Leola's presence. In the second case, he tells Boy and Leola the story of Gyges and King Candaules, in which the king is so proud of his wife that he invites his friend Gyges to see her nude. In the two variations of the story, Gyges either runs off with the wife, or else kills the king. This story seems to foreshadow trouble for Ramsay, his friend and his wife.

When Miss Bertha Shanklin, Mrs. Dempster's aunt, dies suddenly, her will appoints Ramsay Mrs. Dempster's guardian, and Ramsay expects to inherit some substantial money from Miss Shanklin's estate, but it turns out the lawyer has embezzled the money to pay other investments, and there is nothing with which to provide for Mrs. Dempster. Ramsay has her installed at a public hospital for the insane, which depresses him, but he doesn't feel like he can do anything else.

He does allow himself the luxury of traveling abroad to research the saints. After submitting his research on Wilgefortis to the *Analecta*, the journal of the Bollandists, his article is accepted and he is invited to come to their library for research and a visit. This he does, and befriends a number of the priests there. But he is most influenced by his friendship with Padre Blazon, a Spanish priest who travels with him by train to Vienna.

On the trip to Vienna, Blazon, who is seventy-six and decidedly odd, regales Ramsay with his thoughts about the possible saintliness of Mrs. Dempster. He concludes saintliness resides in the beholder, so to speak, and he says even though Ramsay is Protestant, and the Protestants have not named anyone a saint, Mrs. Dempster may very well be the instrument through which Ramsay's fate is being revealed. Blazon even proposes the possibility his fate might have to be accomplished through the sacrifice of Mrs. Dempster.

Ramsay returns to Canada and describes his visits to the public hospital as grueling and depressing. He makes them nonetheless, even though it is always clear Mrs. Dempster wants desperately to leave the place.



Ramsay remains close to Boy Staunton and Leola, and he is a witness when Leola finds evidence of Boy's infidelities. Boy is already depressed because his hero, the Prince of Wales, abdicates the Throne of English shortly after assuming it. When Leola asks Ramsay to comfort her with kisses, Ramsay refuses. He has come to pity Leola, not to love her. He leaves her, and then she tries to commit suicide, leaving a note saying she has always loved Ramsay.

Leola recovers, but Christmas is ever afterward a bleak memory in the Staunton household. Leola acquires a pudgy and empty face after that point. Ramsay describes her as one of the walking wounded who never recover from their wounds.

Analysis

Ramsay's morality and selflessness continue to be a counterweight to Boy Staunton's capitalistic excess. Staunton's mistreatment of his wife, when she fails to keep up with the demands of his lifestyle, makes the reader feel safe in Ramsay's monk-like remove from marriage and capitalism. The story of Candaules and Gyges foreshadows a rough period for the trio.

The case of Bertha Shanklin's attorney embezzling her money puts Ramsay in a bind. He cannot afford to support Mrs. Dempster himself, and is loath to put her in a hospital. When he does, the reader can see this costs him something morally. This decision complicates the plot of Ramsay's moral development, for it is a financial decision, which sacrifices Mrs. Dempster to Ramsay's research and travels. The saintliness he takes from her seems to have less to do with her and more to do with his own soul. Padre Blazon predicts his own salvation might have to come at the expense of Mrs. Dempster.

Ramsay's meeting with Padre Blazon is a watershed event, for we are introduced to an older man who can serve as a model for Ramsay's own development. Blazon is certainly good humored and very wise, and it seems like he might not be a bad end-result for Ramsay's development. The reader gets the feeling from Blazon that Ramsay's visits to Mrs. Dempster in the public hospital might be self-lacerating rather than self-serving.

With Boy Staunton's affairs and Leola's suicide attempt, the reader is put back in a position of feeling relief for Ramsay's aloofness from the world. Leola has been a character for long enough now that her decline into 'walking wounded' status is a sad event.

Vocabulary

Extensively, adventurous, annoyance, lambasted, pronunciation, absurdity, substantially, lagging, hobnobbed, impertinencies, inadequacy, roguish, zephyr, secularized, appetite, discomfiture, disorder, spinster, vermin, guardian, miraculous, ambiguous, festal, coherent.

Part 5

Summary

Ramsay is still relating his history to the Headmaster in Part 5, which begins with World War II. Ramsay describes World War II primarily in terms of its effect on Boy Staunton, who becomes extremely rich as an industrialist and Minister of Food. Leola drops out of the story during this time: she dies of pneumonia. David, Staunton's son, is at Ramsay's school, and Ramsay himself has to tell him his mother has died.

After the war, Boy Staunton considers Ramsay for full-time headmaster of the school. He is currently headmaster pro-tem, but Boy Staunton says he is 'queer'—not that he is homosexual, but his interest in saints makes him unsuitable for the position of headmaster to a school to which parents will send their children. The two friends agree Ramsay will be Assistant Head, and will take six months off before returning to teaching.

For his six months' leave, Ramsay travels to Mexico, where he sees Paul Dempster performing highly polished magic, sleight-of-hand, hypnotism and escape tricks under the name Magnus Eisengrim. He meets him after the show, and also meets Liesl Vitzlipützli, the manager and backer of the show. Eisengrim and Liesl tell Ramsay about their high-class plans for the show, and they invite him to ghost write (invent) the autobiography of Eisengrim. Ramsay spends time with Eisengrim and Liesl, retooling their show in order to get the maximum mystery out of the tricks, and to do away with mechanical or sentimental tricks.

In Eisengrim and Liesl's company, Ramsay describes having lost his reserve. He talks openly and at length to Liesl, and tells her about his past in detail. He also finds himself slapping the bottoms of the showgirls, but more importantly, he falls in love with one of the characters in the show: Faustina is a beautiful young woman whom Ramsay sees practically naked. He watches her during the shows, and is consumed by the possibility of having her in his life.

When Ramsay sees Faustina and Liesl locked in a kiss and a sexual embrace, Liesl comes to his room and talks to him about his life, and his foolish desire to love Faustina. She tells him he is wasting his life taking care of Mrs. Dempster and others, when he should be getting to know the devil inside himself, and that devil's father, the Old Devil.

Liesl invites Ramsay to sleep with her, but he refuses on account of her ugliness. She pulls him down and they wrestle. She hits him with his prosthetic leg, and he punches her in the face, and eventually she escapes. She came back later, for more talk, and they end up making love nonetheless.



Analysis

After Leola's funeral, Milo Papple, an old childhood friend of Dunston Ramsay's, told him everyone who knew him, Boy and Leola knew why he never married. So this must be one of the theories about Ramsay's queer nature, but it strikes the reader as a bit beside the mark. The reader, after all, knows Ramsay only pities Leola. After the war ends, Ramsay and Staunton talk about Ramsay becoming headmaster, but Boy Staunton says Ramsay could never be Headmaster because of his queer nature. Staunton derides his interest in saints, but Ramsay can see it is unique, and he does not argue the point. He only asks Boy Staunton to take care of him in appointing another, and asks for six months off.

Ramsay's break leads him toward writing a book on the nature of faith, to ponder the question of whether the miraculous is simply part of everyday experience, or whether the desire for miraculous experiences comes from the most religious facet of human experience. It is of course an unanswerable question, but Ramsay does not get to answer it, exactly, because he meets Paul Dempster again, and is drawn into a personal drama that is not academic.

Ramsay's love for Faustina is not important in itself—they do not pursue any connection—but because it is a personal obsession. He has not allowed himself such a strong feeling, and this makes him ripe to know Liesl Vitzlipützi, who is really the most important person Ramsay could have met. She spurs him to confront his innermost self, and to know his innermost desires. When she comes to his bedroom and tries to seduce him, and he fights her, he is a person he has not been in any other circumstance. This personal confrontation—not a war, or enemy soldiers—brings out a fighter in him, and then a lover. Having acted on his disgust for Liesl's appearance, he can now allow himself to get close to her because of her obvious intelligence, which he esteems.

Vocabulary

Lunacy, disciplined, astonished, competence, desolated, convalescence, wretched, capable, scarce, administrative, indebted, uncanny, eccentrics, cretinous, testimonial, basilica, preconception, reputedly, inestimable, assurance, flayed, eloquence, unimpaired, prolonged, renunciation.



Part 6

Summary

Ramsay begins the final part of his memoir to the Headmaster by describing the pleasure he takes in writing the autobiography of Magnus Eisengrim. It allows him to be fanciful and a little sadistic, and it sells like hot-cakes. After some months in the Adirondacks writing it, Ramsay parts from Eisengrim and Liesl and Faustina. He gives Faustina an expensive necklace, for which she gives him a kiss in return. To Eisengrim he gives studs and links, an expensive gift which Ramsay compensates him for by asking Eisengrim to contribute to the support of Mrs. Dempster, his mother. To Liesl he gives nothing, as they are already good friends, and need no gifts to confirm this.

Ramsay says he has moved Mrs. Dempster to a better facility, and she has shown some improvement, but when he tells her he has found her son, she turns against him, and treats him as a conspirator who had deprived her of her child. He is not permitted to see her, and she dies not too long afterward.

It is a blessing and a curse for Ramsay that Boy Staunton marries a second wife who does not like spiritual things, or Ramsay personally. This gives Ramsay some distance from which to regard Boy Staunton's personality, and to see the vain and power-hungry person he has been since childhood. Denyse Hornick, Boy Staunton's second wife, is an ambitious woman who is determined to see Staunton appointed Lieutenant Governor of Ontario. Denyse originally works with Staunton in a political capacity, but he falls in love with her, and overcomes her objections about marrying him.

It is shortly after Boy Staunton's marriage to Denyse Hornick that Mrs. Dempster dies, and after her death, Ramsay travels to Europe to see the Bollandists, and Padre Blazon. Blazon asks about his fool-saint, and Ramsay tells him about Mrs. Dempster. Blazon concludes that Ramsay has allowed Mrs. Dempster's presence to 'color his life with beauty and goodness' (p. 249). When Blazon asks Ramsay whether he has met the Devil, Ramsay tells Blazon about meeting Liesl, and claims the Devil knows corners of us all of which Christ Himself is ignorant' (p. 249). Ramsay completes his satisfying trip to Europe by finding the Madonna he has seen in the war. He spends time with her and then goes home with her image inside him forever.

Boy Staunton dies mysteriously a few days before he is to have been named Lieutenant-Governor of Ottawa. It is one of the few places where Ramsay breaks with linear narrative, for he describes the death, and then goes back in the story to the events that lead up to it, which are these:

Magnus Eisengrim's magic show comes to Canada, and one afternoon, Eisengrim comes to Ramsay's school to talk to the children about magic and hypnotism. Boy Staunton sees Eisengrim talking with Ramsay, and the three men retire to Ramsay's apartment, filled with books and papers. Boy Staunton is feeling competitive with



Eisengrim, and the three men begin to tell stories with a bit of personal animosity in them.

When Boy Staunton comments it is every boy's dream to run away with the circus, Eisengrim describes his mentor's taste for morphia and young boys. He tells Ramsay and Staunton what a hell it was, being enslaved by the old man. He says he stayed with him, though, even when his morphia addiction was killing him, out of a kind of loyalty.

Eisengrim compares his loyalty to his mentor to Ramsay's loyalty to Mrs. Dempster, but Staunton says he does not remember Mrs. Dempster. This causes Ramsay to tell the story of how Paul Dempster was born as a result of the snowball Percy Boyd Staunton hit her with. Staunton still does not remember, and Ramsay hands him a small stone that has served as a paperweight on his desk all these years. It is the stone Staunton had put in the snowball that hit Mrs. Dempster, which caused Paul Dempster to be born prematurely, and Mrs. Dempster to lose her sanity. Ramsay says he only realizes the stone is missing from his desk after he hears that Boy Staunton is dead. Because Ramsay skipped ahead and described the circumstances of Staunton's death, we know the stone was in his mouth when he drove his car into Toronto bay.

The final note of the book is provided by the Eisengrim's final show in Canada. Audience members ask a levitating prophetic head who killed Boy Staunton, and the voice (Liesl's voice) answers in enigmatic terms, describing the 'inevitable fifth, who is keeper of his conscience and keeper of the stone' (p. 266). This causes an uproar, and it also causes Ramsay to have a seizure. He is rushed to the hospital, and after some recuperation receives an invitation from Liesl to come to Switzerland for some 'high times' (p. 266).

Analysis

When Ramsay tells Mrs. Dempster he has found her son, we see Mrs. Dempster in her true delusional state, and we lose pity for her. She is obviously simply crazy, not a saint. When she dies, it is practically a blessing and a relief for Ramsay, who has already outgrown his guardianship and the lessons she taught him. He has already learned more by searching his own religiousness than he learned from her herself.

In relating the details of Boy Staunton's marriage to Denyse Hornick, Ramsay continues to be the fifth business, aloof from everyone, but necessary to the action. He gains more independence, though, in Denyse's disregard for him. He is not allowed to be as close to Boy as he had been, and as Ramsay describes Boy's behavior, this seems to be a good thing.

In a final interview with Blazon, Ramsay is warned again that Mrs. Dempster might have been a fool-saint, although he concedes her presence seems to be beneficial for Ramsay. Ramsay's discovery of the same Madonna he had seen in battle is a bit of an anticlimax, as he now has religiousness inside of himself. The business of his guilt, however, still needs to be resolved.



This part is the only place in the book where Ramsay jumps ahead, and uses flashbacks, which the reader experiences as a turn away from memoir toward the novel, and the suspense readers expect from novels. There is a certain irony and paradox here, because following Boy Staunton's death, Denyse Hornick asks Ramsay to write Boy Staunton's biography, but he declines. The memoir the reader is reading, however, is itself a 'life' of Staunton, albeit fictional.

The conclusion of Fifth Business resolves the guilt earned in the first church. Boy Staunton is killed by the man who suffered most for his wrong actions. There is a certain rough justice in this, but Ramsay is not too concerned with the roughness of it. He has been trying to lead Staunton to view his actions morally, and Eisengrim's murder-by-hypnosis seems like a fitting end for him. Ramsay's return to Liesl Vitzlipützli, a similarly deformed, similarly spiritual, similarly brilliant companion, is a fitting end as well.

Vocabulary

sensational, immolate, nourishment, annual, miser, vanity, avarice, asylum, perceptive, compulsion, sprang, irrational, elaborately, nominated, ignominious, delusion, acclamation, authoritarian, feminine, contingencies, rationale, masculinity, imperil, disposition, jollity.



Characters

Dunston Ramsay

Dunston Ramsay starts the book as Dunstable Ramsay, but changes his name at the request of a nurse in English. He is narrating the book as a memoir to the headmaster of the school he just retired from, ostensibly to prove the point that he is more than just a doddering figurehead for the school.

Ramsay is a religious and moral figure, very deliberate in his decisions. He is interested in the lives of saints, and becomes a prominent hagiographer. Eventually he is warned that his admiration for Mrs. Dempster might be dangerous to his soul. He is confronted also with the possibility that his life work might require that Mrs. Dempster is sacrificed. In the end, Ramsay relinquishes his secret guilt about his role in Mrs. Dempster's life, and is somewhat cleansed of his guilt when Eisengrim hypnotizes Staunton so that Staunton kills himself.

Percy Boyd Staunton

Percy Boyd Staunton is Dunston Ramsay's childhood friend, although even as children, Staunton is superior and overbearing to Ramsay. Staunton comes from a wealthy family, and picks things up easily. His career progress outpaces Ramsay's, as he becomes fantastically wealthy first in the Depression and then in World War II, leading up to his almost-appointment as Lieutenant Governor of Ottawa. But his moral development remains slow compared to Ramsay's, as he has affairs, and is mocking and cruel to his wife. He represses any memory of having thrown the snowball that brought about Mrs. Dempster's troubles, and this repression revisits him in the end, when Eisengrim comes to Canada, hears the tale, and hypnotizes him. He speeds off a dock with a stone in his mouth from that snowball.

Paul Dempster

Paul Dempster is the baby Mrs. Dempster bore prematurely when she is hit by the snowball Percy Boyd Staunton threw at Dunston Ramsay. He learns magic from Ramsay as a child, and runs away with the circus when his mother's reputation makes life in Deptford impossible for him. He is effectively enslaved by his mentor in the circus, but he learned the craft, and Ramsay encounters him once in Europe as Faustus Legrand and then in Mexico as Magnus Eisengrim. He visits Canada and gets retribution for his mother's life when he hypnotizes Boy Staunton causing him to kill himself.



Mrs. Dempster

Mrs. Dempster seems like an angelic creature to Dunston Ramsay, although she looks like a simpleton to many others in Deptford. She is Reverend Amasa Dempster's wife, and after she gives birth to Paul Dempster prematurely, she seems to have lost her reason. She is no good at housework, which is a serious failing in the strictly religious town of Deptford. When she gives herself to the vagrant who is about to rape her, she sets up a scandal that causes her son to leave town, and also causes Dunston Ramsay to flee Deptford and enlist. She performed two more miracles in Ramsay's eyes: she appeared to save his brother William when he died, and her face appeared on the statue of the Madonna he saw when he is injured in Paschendale. She seems to fade out of the novel after her miracles, but she does become dependent on Ramsay, who supports her and visits her even though he hates the public hospital where she is staying.

Leola Cruikshank

Leola Cruikshank is the town beauty in Deptford, and both Percy Boyd Staunton and Dunston Ramsay date her. She marries Percy Boyd Staunton, but has a difficult time keeping up with his meteoric rise through society. She does not learn languages and facts easily, with the result that eventually Staunton is completely exasperated with her. When she finds out about her husband's affairs, he stalks out, and when she makes an appeal for affection from Ramsay, he turns her down as well. She makes an unsuccessful suicide attempt, but she becomes one of what Dunston Ramsay calls the walking wounded, who are not really alive any longer.

Joel Surgeoner

Joel Surgeoner is the vagrant whom Ramsay saw making love with Mrs. Dempster in the pit, but Ramsay does not recognize this until he is in school, and Surgeoner shows up to talk about the mission he is running.

Liesl Vitzlipützli

Liesl Vitzlipützli is the Swiss 'gargoyle' who manages Magnus Eisengrim's magic show, and commissions Dunston Ramsay to write Eisengrim's autobiography. She is an extremely intelligent woman in a malformed body, and this makes her an ideal partner for Dunston Ramsay.

Padre Blazon

Padre Blazon is an old man who gives Dunston Ramsay advice about searching for saints. He warns Ramsay that Mrs. Dempster might be a fool-saint, and he shares a



warm friendship with Ramsay, sharing his search for a god who can instruct him in growing old.

Diana Marfleet

This is the nurse who claims Ramsay in his hospital in English, and as he recovers, she begins an affair with him. Ramsay sees that she wants to control his soul, though, and he resists becoming her own dear laddie to be bossed about.



Objects/Places

Deptford

This is the town in Canada where Dunston Ramsay, Paul Dempster and Percy Boyd Staunton grew up. They are all twice-born, so they are reborn as men after leaving Deptford, but the place and its society figure strongly in their histories and their characters.

The Pit

This is where Ramsay and others, including his father and Reverend Amasa Dempster, find Mrs. Dempster copulating with the vagrant who turns out later to be Surgeoner.

Paschendale

This is the place in France where Ramsay is injured during the Great War. There is a school here where Ramsay sees the Madonna looking down on him with Mrs. Dempster's face.

The Madonna

This is the image Ramsay sees looking down on him when he is injured and about to be scorched by the flare after killing the three German soldiers in Paschendale in France.

The Public Hospital

This is where Mrs. Dempster is taken care of after Bertha Shanklin dies, and her inheritance has been squandered. Ramsay sends Mrs. Dempster here and even though he hates it, he comes to visit regularly.

Analecta

This is the journal of the Bollandists, and when Ramsay submits a piece to it, he is surprised to have it accepted. He befriends the Bollandists and publishes pieces in Analecta regularly.



Themes

Capitalism

Boy Staunton is a highly successful capitalist. People—particularly on Ramsay's faculty—attack him, but Ramsay is a friend of his, and he sees the value in Staunton's work. Chiefly, he benefits from Staunton's recommendations for investments, which help him take care of Mrs. Dempster. They also subsidize his travels in search of saints to write about. Capitalism is not really described as an economic system, but as a way of life, and Ramsay describes it as corrupting to Boy Staunton's soul. The power he gets from his wealth makes him careless about other people's feelings, and he does not feel the guilt Ramsay carries with him, over the snowball incident.

Guilt

This is the thing that distinguished Boy Staunton from Ramsay: Ramsay empathizes with Mrs. Dempster's sufferings, and takes his role in the snowball fight that injured her very seriously. His guilt makes him highly moral, almost insufferably so, for he wants to deal squarely with everyone he encounters. He is careful not to hurt the women he takes as lovers, although he does suffer some pangs of conscience over his treatment of Diana Marfleet, and his recollection of Leola Cruikshank.

Some of Ramsay's guilt might be survivor's guilt, some might be the guilt of self-sufficiency, for not needing people more than he does. When his parents die, he hardly feels anything but relief. Ramsay finally unburdens his guilt by sharing the secret of the snowball, and this act leads to Boy Staunton's death. He could be said to die for his inability to feel guilt.

Saints and Miracles

After Mrs. Dempster brings William back to life, Ramsay begins to believe she has more than just an ordinary preacher's wife in her. She then appears on the statue of the Madonna, and later Ramsay finds out that Surgeoner attributes his salvation from vagrancy to her gift of herself in the pit.

These spiritual events are not explained scientifically, and the reader gets the feeling that Ramsay savors the mystery of the apparition of a miracle. They seem to be a confirmation that even if there is not a well-defined divinity overseeing things, there is at least a human function creating the spiritual experience of saints bestowing favors on the living.



Magic

Ramsay is careful to say that he does not believe in magic. Paul Dempster/ Faustus Legrand/Magnus Eisengrim is not conjuring, but performing highly-polished, artful sleights of hand, and Ramsay is not careful to say he has seen all of these tricks before. In Eisengrim's hands, magic is a high art, and it enhances human dignity, as opposed to many magicians, who make their subjects do foolish things under hypnotism.

Being 'Queer'

One of the questions permeating *Fifth Business* is the question of Ramsay's orientation. Not necessarily his sexual orientation—but the orientation of his passion. The reader does not know what makes Ramsay human, and not just a scholar of saints. This quality of being queer keeps Ramsay from being appointed head of the school, but it also puts him in a position to meet Eisengrim and Liesl Vitzlipützli. This queerness results in his match with Liesl, which is the most spiritually and intellectually satisfying union in the book.



Style

Point of View

Fifth Business is told from the point of view of Dunston Ramsay. It is supposedly written in a period after his retirement, and it narrates the period from his tenth year until after his retirement. The book uses foul language freely when necessary, and describes some very unsavory human behavior, perhaps in order to show the narrator is not disturbed by the full range of human experience, from perverse to violent to self-destructive to merely silly, to spiritual or wise.

Ramsay is characterized by a stubbornness typical of Scotsmen, and an even-headedness typical of Canadians. He feels a deep sense of guilt over his role in Mrs. Dempster's premature birthing and subsequent insanity, and he feels a deep sense of responsibility toward Paul Dempster.

This sense of responsibility itself begins to weigh on Ramsay, and the book describes his development toward a clean conscience. The book is ostensibly written at the end of this process, so there is a good deal of introspection and commentary in which Ramsay distances himself from his earlier self. He seems to be at peace, though, so the reader is rewarded by the spectacle of a wise man looking back at unwise behavior and accepting his early self.

Setting

Fifth Business takes place largely in Deptford, which is a small town in Canada. Ramsay describes the town primarily through the people in it, and the large-scale history they participated in. The scene shifts to France when Ramsay enlists, and he spends some time in England in the hospital, but he returns to Deptford and even though he tries to leave, he still feels formed and connected by his time there.

The novel returns to the Bollandist monastery, and a long conversation between Ramsay and Padre Blazon takes place on a train to Vienna. Ramsay also travels to Mexico to research saints there, and that is where he meets Paul Dempster (Eisengrim, now) and Liesl Vitzlipützli.

The final meeting of Fifth Business takes place at the school where Ramsay taught: this is where Ramsay finally unburdens himself of the story of the snowball, and how Paul Dempster came to be born early.

Language and Meaning

Davies' language is literary and highly literate. He does not make many allusions, and his language is not particularly metaphorical or symbolic, but he relates Dunston



Ramsay's search for meaningful understanding of life's spiritual mysteries in poignant prose. Often Davies writes dialogue, and when he does so, particularly with Padre Blazon and Liesl Vitzlipützli, Ramsay is not included as an interlocutor. He is merely assumed, and the novel proceeds from the mouth of the character. But the characters do not use too many euphemisms or idioms, and their language is as literary as Ramsay's.

Structure

Fifth Business is a straight, linear narrative, except for one leap ahead, where Ramsay mentions Boy Staunton's death and then uses flashbacks chronologically to tell the circumstances leading to his death.

The story is framed as a letter to the Headmaster of Ramsay's college, but this frame is a weak device, which does not serve the meaning of the text very well. It is merely an excuse to get Ramsay writing his story. The ostensible reason for the memoir is Ramsay feels slighted by an article in the College Chronicle, and he wants to correct the record.

Ramsay does address the Headmaster from time to time, so the reader is never comfortable with the voyeuristic delight most novels give. There is always at least the audience of one, the Headmaster, and there is always Ramsay's reason for writing to him. This bounds the story to a particular purpose, although many details described in the novel itself are quite beside the point of the purpose of setting the initial article straight.



Quotes

One of the cruelties of the theatre of life is that we all think of ourselves as stars and rarely recognize it when we are indeed mere supporting characters or even supernumeraries

How could I reconcile this motherliness with the screeching fury who had pursued me around the kitchen with a whip, flogging me until she was gorged with—what? Vengeance?...What I knew then was that nobody—not even my mother—was to be trusted in a strange world that showed very little of itself on the surface.

I saw no reason why hell should not have, so to speak, visible branch establishments throughout the earth, and I have visited quite a few of them since.

I knew [my mother] had eaten my father, and I was glad I did not have to fight any longer to keep her from eating me”.

We have obligations above what is merely personal, and to let personal feelings obscure the obligations would be failing in one’s duty.

I have tried to think charitably of people in prominent positions of one kind or another; we cast them in roles, and it is only right to consider them as players, without trying to discredit them with knowledge of their off-stage life—unless they drag it into the middle of the stage themselves.

I liked going to bed with her and as she liked it too I thought this a fair exchange.

We were a splendidly sentimental story made flesh...that was why we went to the bonfire as a threesome.

To me a boy is a green apple who I expect to expose to the sun of history until he becomes a red apple, a man.

Get on with your own life and accept the possibility that it may be purchased at the price of hers and that this may be God’s plan for you and her.

My motives, like those of most people, were mingled.

You must get to know your personal devil. You must even get to know his father, the Old Devil.



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Dunston Ramsay is twice warned about the fool-saint. Is Mrs. Dempster a fool-saint for Ramsay, or is she a saint? How does Ramsay tell the difference? How can we tell?

Topic 2

Dunston Ramsay's development as a person within the novel tends toward the role of the fifth business, but how specifically does his character arrive at this role? What are the key events that lead Ramsay to play this part among the people in his life? What acts, words or gestures embody his role as the fifth business?

Topic 3

At the end of the novel, Percy Boyd Staunton's errant snowball shot has been avenged, but how does his death avenge the childhood error? Is this a justifiable death? Does the novel propose that it is? Did Boy Staunton have a latent wish to die, which his death fulfilled? Was Eisengrim justified in killing him?

Topic 4

Compare and contrast Ramsay's lovers. What made each of them the right person for the time? What makes Liesl Vitzlipützli the most satisfying of the women he has known? Why does he have to resist her ugliness before he can give in to her?

Topic 5

What is the difference between public and private selves, and how does Ramsay learn to distinguish between the expectations for a hero or king or headmaster and the internal expectations associated with the inner self? How are the two selves complementary? How do they work in opposition?