

DON QUIXOTE AND THE PUPPETS

*Theme and Structure in
Robertson Davies' Drama*

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THE STRUCTURE of a play must be determined by the dramatist's effort to achieve maximum clarity and impact. Every character, situation and episode must contribute to the tone of the play, the revelation of character, the development of plot, or the unfolding of theme. To the extent that these elements are irrelevant or tangential to the playwright's intention, structure is weakened, and as a consequence the theme gets out of focus and dramatic force diminishes. This criterion of unity is perhaps the best measure of the achievement of Robertson Davies, who may well be considered Canada's leading playwright.

In *Fortune, My Foe* (1949), Davies' first full-length play, the action centres on the dilemma confronting the intellectual or the artist in Canada, who feels that he must either emigrate to the United States or remain in Canada defeated in his work by the naïve or hypocritical attitude of his countrymen. On this problem, perhaps the most persistent to engage him, recurring as it does in his novels as well as in his plays, Robertson Davies has many sharp and sad comments to make.

Nicholas, a young university instructor contemplating departure for the United States, denies the charge that he is a traitor to his country selling out his ideals and responsibilities for the fleshpots of the south. He sees behind the stereotype of America that Canadians, perhaps defensively, have established. Behind all the commercialism and vulgarity, he argues, "there is a promise, and there is no promise here, as yet, for men like me." He rejects the attempts of Rowlands, an older professor, to dissuade him from leaving Canada. Rowlands, though himself embittered long before by a similar frustration to the one that was presumably

impelling Nicholas to emigrate, queries his colleague's motives, sneering at the incentive of money and shrewdly, almost cynically, suggesting that the real reason was pressure from Vanessa, the self-willed young lady whom Nicholas wishes to marry. In part Rowlands' action may be prompted at this time by a residual affection for Canada, soured but yet abiding; but for the most part one is inclined to agree with Nicholas, who senses in the tone of Rowlands' comments a jealousy stemming from personal frustrations.

Nevertheless, as we can judge from the unwarranted fury of his reply to Rowlands' taunts about his subservience to Vanessa, Nicholas has an underlying sense of guilt about this aspect of his motivation, reluctant as he is to admit it to himself. The dramatist further weakens his hero's position, reducing to absurdity Nicholas' rather pompous claim that he seeks admission to American university life primarily in the service of culture, by showing him engaged in the scholarly task of editing a joke-book, an undertaking applauded by the American professor from whom he was expecting an offer, but labelled by Rowlands as "nonsense and shoddy, catch-penny scholarship," a species of research suggesting his insincerity.

Into this fairly straightforward situation in which the characters and their relation to each other and to the central problem are clearly delineated, Robertson Davies introduces a new element, Franz Szabo, a refugee puppet-master, a mature artist, whose puppet-show, we are told, creates an effect of "intensified reality, rather than of make-believe" and enables us to see people and situations "clear and fresh and marvellously detailed." With almost fairy-tale effect a transformation begins to take place in the chief characters.

The most significant change of all takes place in Nicholas. He had no difficulty earlier in rejecting Rowlands' argument for his remaining in Canada partly because he recognized the basis of the argument, and he could counter with personal reasons of his own, and partly because Rowlands' approach was negative, belittling the importance of money and love as motives. But Szabo presents a positive attitude towards staying in Canada, based on love of country and one's duty to it, an ideal resting on courage and hope. "This is my country now and I am not afraid of it. There may be some bad times; there may be some misunderstandings The educated like my work, and the uneducated like it. As for the half-educated—well, we can only pray for them in Canada, as elsewhere . . . we artists learn very young not to mind too much. We must be tough, and hopeful, too." And Nicholas, at the play's conclusion, influenced by the example of Szabo, decides to stay in Canada, saying, "if we all run away it will never be any

better. So let the geniuses of easy virtue go southward; I know what they feel too well to blame them. But for some of us there is no choice; let Canada do what she will with us, we must stay."

The ending is somewhat pat and sentimental. The romanticism that Hugo MacPherson rightly finds underlying the satire in Davies' novels (*Canadian Literature* 4) is evident here too. But the criticism levelled at Davies by a reviewer of *Fortune, My Foe* in *Canadian Forum* that he offers no constructive suggestions concerning the loss of talented young Canadians to the United States is, of course, invalid. Though we may agree that Nicholas' decision is not based on a premise widely acceptable, the only question we are justified in asking is whether such a person as Nicholas is represented as being would arrive at such a decision. The dramatist is not obliged to offer solutions to social problems. And Nicholas' decision, we find, is in character. Davies prepares us for it by indicating Nicholas' sense of guilt in the conversation with Rowlands, and his sense of duty, of obligation to Canada, in the conversation with Vanessa. It becomes quite clear in the play that a major reason for wanting to go to the U.S. was his desire to earn enough money to marry Vanessa, but as she had already broken up their engagement, this motive is gone. But perhaps most important, Nicholas, like Szabo, is a romantic idealist at heart, and Davies makes this fact clear when he has both men choose enthusiastically the Don Quixote story for the puppet play.

The events centering around Szabo and his puppet show, though amusing and meaningful in themselves, serve the primary dramatic purpose of developing the main action and bringing about the conversion of Nicholas and changes in Rowlands and Vanessa. In these terms the play has thematic and structural unity. There is a second theme that arises out of the Szabo episode: the question as to the function and purpose of art, a question to which several answers are offered by the characters. For Ursula Simonds, a left-wing do-gooder, art or culture is but an instrument of politics, a form of propaganda. For Mr. Tapscott and Mrs. Philpott, art is an instrument of the social worker and "the handmaid of education" to be used on tot-lots or in creative character-building-courses sponsored by libraries, or YMCA's or Extension Departments of universities. These short-changers are driven out of the temple of art, i.e. Chilly's ambiguous establishment, by the enraged and cursing Professor Rowlands shouting "Anathema". Chilly, whose speakeasy is the setting of the drama, expresses a more acceptable view when he remarks that the marionette show gave him "a religious feeling", a view with which Nicholas concurs, saying "It fills a need in the heart. Why not call the feeling it arouses religious?" This theme is related to the first, for we

see that the artist Szabo and his work of art make Nicholas see into himself and effect a change of heart that results in his abandoning his false aims and accepting his responsibility.

IN HIS NEXT PLAY *At My Heart's Core* (1950) Davies is still concerned with Canada as a land of frustration in which there is almost no genteel, sophisticated society, and in which there is little interest in the arts or sciences. As a result the inhabitants who are gifted or cultured reveal a deep, though often unspoken, longing to escape. But in this play the theme does not imply criticism of Canadian society; by setting the events in the early 1800's in a sparsely settled country where pioneering conditions make inevitable hardship and deprivation, Davies shifts the emphasis from social criticism to a consideration of a human problem—the ways in which people react to their uncongenial environment. The dramatist is concerned with the unrealized dream at the heart's core and how it can be manipulated to create discontent.

Cantwell, the omniscient villain, subtly plays on the vanity of three ladies in successive interviews, giving expression and support to their hidden doubts and wishes, releasing an unhappiness which each heretofore was heroically managing to control. The women are clearly depicted, each with her own temperament and special capacity, though they are, on the whole, sketchily outlined. Cantwell, on the other hand, is presented in more ambiguous terms. He is a glib, sophisticated fellow whose realism, untouched by virtues or ideals, becomes cynicism. The ladies' somewhat self-righteous statement that they are beyond temptation suggests a way for him to rob them of their peace of mind, an action which, as the dramatist explains somewhat belatedly near the end, is prompted by a slight which Cantwell and his wife suffered at their hands. The malignancy is entirely disproportionate to the occasion and is not fully credible. One feels that Cantwell, clever and insincere, merely rationalizes the reason for his conduct, which actually is an expression of unmotivated evil. Indeed, Davies goes out of his way to present Cantwell as a satanic figure, the great tempter and destroyer of peace of mind. Though the frequent assertion by Phelim, a superstitious Irish bard-settler, that Cantwell is the Devil may not be convincing, and Cantwell's own jesting references to himself as the Devil may by themselves be ignored, the fact that Cantwell knows not only the weaknesses of each of the ladies and how to play on them, but also the circumstances of their earlier lives and associations makes him inhumanly omniscient. This ambiguity in the characterization is main-

tained to the end of the play. When Mr. Stewart impatiently tells Phelim to stop shouting that Cantwell is the Devil, "We don't have the Devil in the nineteenth century, and we certainly don't have him in this country," Cantwell ironically remarks, "What a happy state of affairs. These ladies have nothing to worry about then." And when Mrs. Moodie a few moments later asks "Who are you, to cast our sins of omission in our teeth, and to stand in judgment upon us?" Cantwell replies "That, Mrs. Moodie, is a matter which I prefer to leave in doubt." Phelim has the last word on Cantwell and his comment applies to the ladies, who, Cantwell believes, will always have doubt gnawing at their hearts, "Ah, wasn't it the big fool I was to take his coin! And sure I'll be in the Devil's own hand from this day!"

In a review of *At My Heart's Core* (*University of Toronto Quarterly*, April 1951), Vincent Tovell criticizes the plot as being contrived and the characterization of Cantwell as unsatisfactory because his behaviour is not dramatically credible. This judgment is valid if we regard the play simply as a realistic historical play. It is that, of course, and indeed is a very fine historical drama with the setting and dialogue re-creating the period honestly without the kind of quaintness that is often associated with historical dramas. The criticism is not applicable if we emphasize the symbolic nature of Cantwell and perhaps of Mr. Stewart in order to develop the underlying pattern of ideas.

Whether Cantwell is an inadequately motivated "real" character or a diabolic force, he is used as an agent by the dramatist to develop what there is of a plot and to establish his theme. The view of Cantwell as Devil relates closely the theme and structure, for the simple structure of the play with its three temptations echoes in its outline the story of Satan's triple temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Furthermore, each temptation in *At My Heart's Core* is followed or accompanied by a blast of a horn in the distance, "clear and mysterious." This horn, as we learn later, announces the approach of Mr. Stewart, returning from a successful expedition against the rebels in Upper Canada under the discontented William Lyon MacKenzie. He comes in the aspect of a redeemer more than a match for the insidious Cantwell; his good humour and good sense clear the atmosphere which has been poisoned by Cantwell's flattery and deceitful sentimentalism, qualities which the tempter shares with Shaw's Devil in *Man and Superman*, but which in *At My Heart's Core* thinly disguise malice. Stewart also is the supreme authority in the district, but though he puts the adversary in his power he cannot wholly undo his work. Where he does succeed is where love exists. His love for his wife, full and unqualified, evokes in her a similar response

and enables her to redeem herself and thus defeat Cantwell's effort. Earlier she did not hear the horn announcing her husband's coming, though she usually did, because she was at the time heeding Cantwell's words, but now she realizes that what Cantwell roused in her "was not regret, but discontentment, disguised as regret."

Like *Fortune, My Foe, At My Heart's Core* has basically a very simple structure. Into the initial situation an outsider is introduced, in the former a Czech refugee artist, and in the latter a mysterious stranger, whose view of life makes the other characters examine theirs. In *Fortune, My Foe* the resolution is simple: the young hero romantically accepts the new vision, that of the mature artist and decides to remain in Canada, foregoing a supposed benefit out of a sense of duty. The resolution in *At My Heart's Core* is somewhat more complex. The three women are affected by Cantwell's view of life, a bad one in this case. What would have happened to Mrs. Traill and Mrs. Moodie as a consequence we do not know, for they are fortunately rescued from the situation which was presumably the basis of their discontent when their husbands, unfit as pioneers, are given government posts in York, where their talents as officers can be put to better use. Perhaps one might say that out of the somewhat remote "evil" of MacKenzie's rebellion came this "good" to these noble ladies, an extension of grace to those on the verge of "falling". Mrs. Stewart's fate is more positive and rewarding. She definitely rejects the tempter when she gains new insight, helped perhaps by the power of love.

Despite the more involved resolution of the issue in *At My Heart's Core*, there is greater structural complexity and unity in *Fortune, My Foe*. The sub-plot in the earlier play, or to be more exact, the second strand of action, involving the new though closely related theme—that of the function of art—which centers on Franz Szabo and his puppets, bears closely on the first theme which involves the unsatisfactory consideration accorded art and culture in Canada, and the intellectual's responsibility to the country which slights him. In fact, as we have seen, the Szabo episode produces significant changes in the major characters and leads to the resolution of Nicholas' problem. It is otherwise in *At My Heart's Core*, however, where the delightfully original sub-plot involving Phelim, the besotted Irish ex-bard and his foster-child "wife", is not clearly or significantly related to the main plot. The dramatist uses Phelim as a device for getting Cantwell to stay at the Stewarts, but this end could have been achieved in a less elaborate way. Insofar as the Phelim subplot provides some commentary on the main action and much comic relief, it does contribute to the total effect of the play, but it is not

closely integrated with the main plot, neither strand of action depending seriously on the other.

ROBERTSON DAVIES in *Fortune, My Foe* is chiefly concerned with the ideas he treats rather than with the characters through whom he presents the ideas in action. Even though, as we have seen, there is development in the character of Nicholas and his conversion is made credible, the treatment of character is superficial. In general, this judgement applies also to *At My Heart's Core*, although here the dramatist, dealing with a problem more deeply rooted in human feelings and one that has universal aspects, creates characters who are more clearly realized, and indeed genuine pathos emerges. His primary interest, however, is still in the idea that runs through the play—the heartbreak and loneliness in the wilderness and the effect of temptation in these circumstances. He examines the effect on three ladies, proving their vulnerability, but in so doing he fails to explore in depth the complex of motives and feelings involved in each case: he presents one and moves on, paying almost equal attention to each. He comes closest to realizing idea through character in the rather moving scene between Mrs. Stewart and her husband at the very end of the play.

In *A Jig for the Gypsy* (1954) Davies is still absorbed more by the ideas he is considering than by his characters, though the character of Benoni is probably more many-sided than any other he has attempted. The structural pattern of *A Jig for the Gypsy* in a sense reverses that of *At My Heart's Core*. Instead of having one person come into the established setting and in the course of events interview separately the three central figures there, we get one key figure established in the one place, and the other characters all come to visit her. As the play develops we get again three major separate interviews. This use of parallel situations within a play gives a certain structural unity to the material, which is reinforced by the fact that Benoni's personality and values figure largely in each episode, as Cantwell's did in the earlier play. But the discussions and the interviews in *At My Heart's Core* have a closer thematic relationship than those in *A Jig for the Gypsy*.

A Jig for the Gypsy lacks the clear focus the other plays possess. Davies cleverly satirizes politicians, their motives and behaviour, through a diversity of characters, bumptious and scheming, in whom strong feelings are aroused over petty issues. At the same time he shows the emptiness of the politician's dream, the disillusionment that accompanies even political success. Even more mockingly he satirizes

the so-called idealist through the "romantic" Edward Vaughan, who worships abstract principles and exalts the working class and who, like his disciple, the starry-eyed Bronwen, is ready to spout Ruskin at the ennobling sight of a labourer dully performing his chores.

The most important theme in the play, however, is that of love and marriage. Benoni, a free-souled realist who cannot abide the rigid restrictive code by which the "moral" middle class lives, urges Bronwen to love many young men before she marries. She does so not because, as the conventional people like to believe, the gypsy is lustful and overvalues physical love and undervalues marriage. Quite the contrary. It is the so-called modest people, like Bronwen, who by idealizing sex place too much emphasis on it. Benoni advocates experience in love not as an end in itself but as a preparation for marriage. Nor, furthermore, is physical love to be considered as the purpose of this important union. "There's more to marriage than four bare legs in a blanket," she tells a shocked Bronwen. Later Conjuror Jones makes precisely the same remark to Benoni when she hesitates to marry him because of his age, and he adds that the firmest foundation for a marriage is a joint interest.

Robertson Davies seems to take here, as in the other themes, an anti-romantic position. To be truly joyful one must learn to live with reality, and one must avoid creating abstractions, ideals, supported by a host of taboos, which obscure or reject reality. The trouble with the world, says Conjuror Jones, is that it keeps nagging itself; it takes a perverted pleasure in its denials. Actually Davies is not so much anti-romantic as opposed to conventionalized romanticism, or sentimentalism, which is in fact the arch-enemy of true romanticism. This in part is the gist of Benoni's advice to Bronwen. And though Benoni accepts Conjuror Jones because it is the sensible thing to do, she does not idealise this union as she did an earlier one with Rhodri Lloyd which was based on love. "What I felt with Rhodri Lloyd was true love. It was as sweet and fair as the daffodils in the spring."

Davies' earlier plays also have much satire, often directed at the same targets as those in *A Jig for the Gypsy*, but it is largely incidental, growing out of the dialogue, and it does not hinder the development of the central theme. In *A Jig for the Gypsy* almost equal attention is given to various episodes and the effect is that strength is lost. Benoni, who is perhaps the only unifying element, acts more as the agent affecting others, like Szabo and Cantwell, than the chief figure in a plot. And perhaps equally serious, what would seem to be the most important theme ends rather lamely with the marriage of Benoni and Conjuror

Jones. While this marriage may be so apt as to have been made in heaven and while we may agree with Davies that "it is a union of two people of extraordinary character and outlook, as a defense against a world which is becoming more and more unfriendly toward their kind," dramatically it is inappropriate because Conjuror Jones seemingly is introduced at the end only to help Davies dispose happily of Benoni.

All in all, the plays of Robertson Davies are a substantial contribution to drama in Canada. The comic spirit which pervades them, expressing itself through language, situation and character, in a variety of modes, is unexcelled in Canadian writing. Davies has also given evidence of considerable originality and skill in creating and projecting character. Such characters as Phelim, Mrs. Stewart and Benoni not only substantiate this claim but indicate something of the breadth of his range. It is unfortunate that in no case in his plays does he explore characters in depth—for the most part they are used as a means to present or develop ideas. It is, of course, not unusual in comedies to find the dramatist subordinating character to situation or to his interest in themes dealing with social conventions or institutions. Many of Davies' themes involve satiric thrusts at the rigid and doctrinaire forces in society, the pompous, and the unrealistically sentimental, whether in personal relations or in social values. But, underlying his satire, Davies offers directly or by implication, through such characters as Pop, Szabo, the Stewarts and Benoni, a positive vision of life. In addition, he has given evidence of superb craftsmanship; his plays move quickly, the scenes following one another quite naturally. At his best his plays achieve a considerable degree of unity of structure and theme. When he falls short, in this respect, as he does at times, it is because he is undone by the delight in ideas and zest for fun that constitute his most attractive qualities. Because his fancy is alert and comprehensive he attempts to crowd too much into his plays, without due regard for the discipline of his form. As a result, while the constant play of wit on a wide variety of themes may amuse and impress, this breadth diminishes the dramatic force that comes from concentration on a given theme. Another weakness, one to which writers of comedy, particularly of satire, are prone, lies in the dialogue. While for the most part the language is adequate—trite when triteness is called for, vulgar or genteel as these qualities are expected—the dialogue at times reveals startling incongruities and often fails to distinguish adequately the characters. These flaws, however, in the context of the entire work, are minor. The plays are eminently stageworthy and are a valuable contribution to a genre that Canadian talent has unfortunately neglected.