

A Character Sketch of Monica Gall's Evolution from Ignorance to Revelation in Robertson Davies' *A Mixture of Frailties*

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The Great classical Greek Philosopher Socrates in his musings about 'Self' said, "Know Thyself and you will know the world" (Severn 7). This wisdom has been echoed by all the great philosophers down the ages. But what does 'Self' consist of and how can one reach it – this remains a difficult and obscure problem, until modern psychology was born and begun to solve the puzzle. 'Self' is an automatic part of every human being which enables people to relate to others. The self is the subject of one's own experience of phenomena: perceptions, emotions and thoughts. The 'self' has been studied extensively by philosophers and psychologists and is center of all discussions to many world religions. Severn defines it as "the living, governing, principle in man, the soul or mind, which animates and gives meaning to all that he is and does" (ibid). The self is not only the soul, but also the mind, the seat of intelligence and the instrument by which we perceive our own identity and create a relationship with the objective world.

William Robertson Davies has also treated the self with much respect and belief. He has been praised as a gifted storyteller, who complex plots and shifting points of view, a man who was a humanist with a strong moral sense. Davies was among the first Canadian novelists to gain, international reputation. As a writer he developed remarkably in range and depth. Part of his legacy comes from the theatre is a delight in entertaining, the joy of displaying skills and the creation of something out of nothing. Davies as a novelist had succeeded in tapping an imaginative spring in the human psyche or in other words explores the psychological moorings of his characters minds in detail and perception.

Davies was primarily a story teller concerned with moral conflicts. Beneath its imaginative enigmatic themes, his works have been translated into seventeen languages. Davies emphasizes on self-knowledge, creative maturity and wisdom. This research paper traces the process of the psychological growth of Monica Gall, the heroin from *A Mixture of Frailties* (1958) which is the most powerful book of the Salterton Trilogy. She transforms herself into the

spiritual realms of wisdom and awareness of her existence in this world. Monica's development from a rustic small-town girl to a sophisticated woman reflects Davies's belief that education and experience are important elements for a complete life. The special interest of the novel, is the relationship between the artist and her life, how she gradually substitutes the universal values of art for the specific and limited values of her Salterton background. The novel portrays Davies's concern with how the past can influence the future.

The plot structure of *A Mixture of Frailties* is triggered off by the death of Mrs. Bridgetower and her ensuing will, which requires her trustees to select a young woman from Salterton and provide her with the means to pursue a career in arts. The aim is for the young woman to "bring back to Canada some of the intangible treasures of European tradition" (494). In the novel Mrs. Bridgetower's believed that Canada had not given importance towards reliving the cultural treasures and reenacting the artistic tradition during the first half of the twentieth century in other words during her life time .

As story unfolds, the trustee's select Monica Gall, who was an ordinary girl with no special training or education in fine arts. She was to be trained as a singer in England and was to returns to Canada as an educated and full-fledged singer .There are further requirements in the will, for instance that Mrs. Bridgetower's son must acquire a male heir before he can receive his share of his mother's legacy. As the novel unfolds the malicious dead hand of fate descends quickly on Solomon and Veronica Bridgetower in the opening scene of the novel. The death of Solomon's mother might reasonably be expected to signal his release from his dependency but as fate could have it a great practical joke opened its mouth wide on him. Mrs Bridgetower's will continued to bind the young couple to her malicious spirit until they produce a male heir. Forced to remain in his mother's home and inadequately supported by his small income, Solomon is tormented in this situation not knowing how to escape or survive the odds.

Critics have noted that the narrative of the Bridgetower's struggles, feels strained and heavy when compared to the story of Monica's metamorphosis from a simple town girl to a fully-fledged artist. The hardships faced by Solomon and Veronica act as a balance to the apparent freedom of Monica's sojourn in Europe. Solomon complete belief that people should never care about anything in life. Solomon eventually forgives his mother and prays for her soul in the third novel *Leaven of Malice* to leave them in peace after Veronica gives birth to a son. They have won their freedom from Mrs. Bridgetower's clutches, but only on the terms defined by her.

Monica's life initially seems opposing to Solomon's. Fortune smiles on her, she is given the opportunity and the appropriate guide lines to remake her identity. Raised in the kind of puritan, fundamentalist, working-class community that Davies likes to satirize, Monica is

capable of abandoning her past life and re-fashioning herself into a goddess. After her arrival in England, Monica first goes to Sir Benedict Domdaniel for advice, with whom she holds two brief consultations. Sir Benedict then writes to her sponsors, the Bridgetower trustees, giving his first impression of Monica as a nice, ordinary girl who has no hint of what fine arts is. He doesn't blame Monica for her lack of cultivation. The implication is that the fault lies in Monica's unsophisticated background. Sir Benedict does not use the word provincial, but what he identifies in Monica as underdeveloped artistic potential, starved of cultural nourishment, is a classic symptom of provincialism familiar to readers of Davies's first two novels of the Salterton Trilogy *Tempest Tost* and *Leaven of Malice*.

Monica's artistic potential lacks nourishment because of repressive, narrow-minded, petty and puritanical influences such those of a church known as the Thirteenth Apostle Tabernacle in her home town. At any rate, now that she is away from Salterton, and exposed presumably to more liberating influences of an atmosphere in which thoughts and emotions can be freely expressed, it should only be a matter of time before her potential is fulfilled and she is able to satisfy her sponsors by taking intangible European treasures back to Canada. That, at any rate, is the predicted shape of events that will form the plot of *A Mixture of Frailties*.

Following his initial consultations, Sir Benedict sends Monica to the young composer Giles Revelstoke for formal instruction, Monica is shocked when she first visits Giles and encounters him stark naked in his flat. Not only that, she notices another young female visitor Persis Kinwellmarshe whose clothes are all in a bundle behind Giles' piano. Such shameless, flagrantly immoral behavior has a shattering effect on the fragile sensibilities of a respectable, young lady freshly arrived from Salterton. Monica's sense of outrage is at its limits. She thinks so, until her first music lesson with Giles, when she realizes that the song she must practice contains the word 'impotence' which is completely out of bounds to someone like her from Salterton – she simply cannot cope with it. She tries her best to manage with the new and different experiences she encounters in England. To Giles exasperation, Monica's shriveled, puritan, provincial instincts blind her to “the crushing sense of spiritual inadequacy” (618), which she must recognize if she is to express it in her singing.

In any case, Monica gets to work on the less deadly provincial malaise of what her mother called “the morality of sexual prohibition” (723). Taking advantage of some manipulation from Sir Benedict, Monica makes rapid progress by sleeping with Giles and not feeling any of the guilt and trauma that might be expected from a Salterton virgin. Though she feels denied, she has an inner feeling of triumph. Far from feeling ruined she felt never happier or looked better. This sea of change gave her energy to surge forward on the wave of good fortune. As Davies puts it, Monica is caught in a new situation of concern that proves she has overcome the narrow minded prudery of her home town.

In other respects as well, Monica appears to make substantial progress in shedding her restrictive, Saltertonian inheritance and adopting a more adventurous and open approach in pursuit of her career and intangible European treasures to which she will be introduced. She seems more confident, purposeful and willing to take risks. For example her practical Saltertonian skills are put to more imaginative use when she is enlisted to manage the finances to the Lantern, the music magazine run by Giles and his cronies. All this is very encouraging and Monica harbours more ambitious thoughts of giving Giles further help and exercising a constructive influence on his creative abilities, rather like Persis, who seems to give herself completely to Giles without being bothered by the morality of her relationship to him. Under the influence of such worldly wise models, Monica's self-confidence blooms and she soon acquires the courage to lash out at Sir Benedict himself for treating her like an exotic robot. In total frustration she loudly expresses herself by saying:

Murtagh Molloy (another music teacher) tells me I have no emotion; Giles Revelstoke treats me like the village idiot because I haven't read everything that's ever been written, and you tell me to fall in love because it would extend my range of feeling! To hell with you all! If I haven't got your easy, splattering feelings I'm proud of it. I'll throw this all up and go home. I won't stay here and be treated like a parrot and learn to say "Polly wants a cracker" in just the right accent and with the right shade of feeling! (694)

Her resentment is spontaneous, if rash, for by this time, although she rightly resents the patronizing attitudes of her English mentors, she has acquired a sneaking admiration for what she has acquired and developed as a person. She learns to live life and practiced worldliness, enjoying each enriching second. This is why she can sleep with Giles a second time and feels confident that he will grow to love her, although he doesn't yet do so.

At this stage of her career, Monica appears well on her way to achieving the broader, more cultivated, sophisticated outlook and emotional maturity that was denied to her in Salterton. For example, when she receives unwanted advances from Murtagh Molloy, she takes them calmly in her stride and quickly sends him packing. Meanwhile, she becomes emotionally tangled with Giles and is shocked when it causes him to become overwrought and turn against her, charging that it was only her Bridgetower money, not her talent that got her a role in his Opera *The Golden Asse*. Shocked, hurt and somewhat dazed, Monica does her best to swallow her pride and regard Giles's attack a stroke of anger. Upon reflection, however, she realizes that her pride is too deeply wounded and changes her mind, writing to Giles and tells him that she can't stay with him and be a doormat, but rather leave and learn to live on her own.

Later, she changes her mind once more, when she is in Venice, where the Opera runs successfully there. She realizes that she and Giles may be engaged in no more than a routine lovers' quarrel. She now becomes more conciliatory and forgiving and suspects that her letter rejecting Giles may have been the result of ingrained Saltertonian feelings of guilt that are driving her to act out of simple revenge.

Longing to be reconciled with Giles, she resolves to visit him immediately upon her return to London. This visit provokes the climactic scene of the novel and one of the most revealing scenes in Canadian Literature. Monica arrives at Giles's flat at about 11.30 am at night and finds his door locked; she has a key and goes inside. She gets choked by the smell of gas, but controls herself and re-enters the room. Monica sees Giles lying on the floor, with the gas turned on, the windows of the room were closed. She quickly acts on her natural instinct and opens the windows and turns off the gas. She was afraid to touch him thinking that he was dead. Then she notices that he was holding her letter tightly in his hand. In a sense of fear she realizes that if her letter was found, she could be blamed for driving Giles to suicide. So, she retrieves the letter, closes the windows, turns the gas back on, and leaves the flat, locking the door just as she had found it. Monica was totally confused.

Monica's natural instinct which, at first, made her show concern for Giles's safety, is suppressed in saving her own skin. Not only does self-preservation take precedence over her feelings of care and compassion for Giles, what is worse is his predicament. Later on when she hears the coroner's ruling that Giles died by choking on his own vomit, rather than from inhaling the gas which had run out shortly after she left the flat and he estimates the time of his death as around two a.m. that is, about two or three hours after she left, it is clear that Giles was alive when Monica visited his flat and that she could have saved his life. Monica is overcome by guilt once she realizes her mistake in falling back on her inherited Saltertonian values of inhibition, fear, pettiness, puritanical respectability and blind self-preservation.

If this scene has not attracted the attention it deserves from critics, it may be because Davies's ironic and unfailingly serious narrative is seen to be equally aimed at Monica's English hosts as well as at herself. Her natural instinct encourages her to save Giles, whereas more persuasive Saltertonian values thought her to save her skin. Technically, Monica's role in Giles's death is somewhat confusing. Confusion is later increased by several of Giles's friends, including Sir Benedict, who claim that their neglect or ill-treatment of the young composer pushed him to take his life. However, none of this relieves Monica's guilt or her sense of "slow, torturing diminution" (785) once she realizes the full horror of her actions in Giles's flat on the night of his death.

No doubt, 'selfishness and littleness of spirit' exists in all societies everywhere. Yet the main point is to link Monica's fear which does not save Giles's life. This fear and selfishness thrives more in the fluid social and cultural conditions of provincial societies than in older societies with long established cultures and traditions. It is to drive home this point that Monica is made to suffer such pangs of guilt for breaking Giles's heart and deserting him when he was dying.

Finally, seeking consolation, Monica confesses everything to Sir Benedict, who counsels her, that she did do something wrong by turning the gas on but to make her understand that she was not a partner in the crime scene, he burns the letter she wrote to Giles to ease her guilt. He then makes a proposal of marriage which she is likely to accept. This brings the plot to a neat conclusion. The new heroine is still not capable of self-actualization in its true sense. Her character embodies the basic prerequisites for growth but not the ability to liberate and utilize the dormant forces without constant external guidance. Its main characters are all mentors of varying degrees who guide Monica through the tribulations of experience, provide her with wisdom and means of fulfillment and are responsible for all her major progressions. Monica's self-realization necessarily remains at an intellectual and emotional level without reaching the spiritual stages characteristic of total self-actualization.

Sir Benedict Domdaniel is the chief guide who takes Monica through the labyrinth of experience, source of self-knowledge, shaper of an artistic career, liberator and future husband. By managing the interactions between his pupil and his assistants with diligence and purposeful determination, he is indirectly responsible for her physical liberation through Murtagh Molloy, her initiation into the mysteries of passion and joy through Giles Revelstoke, the refinement of her interpersonal relationships through Amy Neilson, and her intellectual enlightenment through John Scott Ripon and Bun Eccles. Monica's story ends with the integration of the levels of experience into a balanced whole.

Definitely Monica journeyed towards understanding herself and self-realization of her past actions in becoming a better human being. The moral aspect of Monica's failure on that fateful night is what distinguishes the novel *A Mixture of Frailties* from many other Canadian works of fiction which consider the social and cultural aspects of provincialism like snobbery, bigotry, self-importance and ignorance. The special achievement of Davies in this novel is that he offers similar insights into the darker, moral aspects of the self, because Monica finally decides to deal with her own moral obligation of understanding herself worth and character to polishing herself in the fine arts. So her experiences in life strengths the self-inside her as one finds in the character of Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Santiago in *The Old Man and The Sea* by Ernest Hemmingway.

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