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A SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN MORDECAI RICHLER'S
"THE APPRENTICESHIP OF DUDDY KRAVITZ"

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ABSTRACT

The Jewish Montreal world is of course an integral part of Richler's best novel, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959), which is the story of a Jewish boy's making it. It centers around the title character, a third generation Jewish-Canadian boy living with his family in working-class Montreal. He's far from the cliché "nice Jewish boy," tending to be combative, scheming, dishonest, and endlessly sarcastic. The book follows him from his years harassing teachers at his local Jewish school to his adult life as he hustles in an attempt to make a name for himself—and in the process, learns a little about life. Exploring themes of anti-Semitism, morality, ambition, alienation, and the Jewish community in Canada, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* is considered a classic coming-of-age story and is one of Richler's most popular and acclaimed books.

Keywords: Alienation, Anti-Semitism

Introduction

The novel focuses on the young life of Duddy Kravitz, a poor Jewish boy raised in Montreal, Quebec. The young boy of Quebec, who is growing up in St.Urbaine's Street is a poor Jew. He is given nothing as a child and must work if he wants anything. His family, friends, lovers, and teachers all contribute to Duddy's burgeoning obsession with power and money- desires embodies in the possession of land. Duddy soon believes land ownership to be life's ultimate goal and the means by which a man is made. Duddy is told by his grandfather that a man without land is nobody; this motivates him to do whatever he has to in order to own land as soon as possible. He begins by taking a summer job at a hotel in St.Agathe, where he soon stumbles upon the land he wants to own. He finds this land while on a date with Yvette, a chambermaid from the hotel. Upon finding the property, he heads back to Montreal to start a film company. The film company becomes a huge success and he is soon able to begin to purchase a portion of the land. Duddy then makes a profit on ten pinball machines from Virgil, an epileptic, who is then offered a job on the distribution side of the movie business, and all has to do was showing the movies. A couple of months later, Virgil experiences a seizure while driving and is paralyzed from the waist down. Yvette leaves Duddy to take care of Virgil full time. This accident leaves Duddy to show the movies seven days a week and try to produce movies at the same time. When Duddy's uncle Benjy dies, this acts as a trigger for Duddy who then experiences a nervous breakdown and doesn't leave his room for a week. Since there is no communication with the outside world for Duddy this week has made him lose all his clients, thus forcing him to declare bankruptcy and to give all his possessions over to the state (except for the land, which is not in his name). After Duddy recovers from his nervous

breakdown, he invites Yvette and Virgil to move into his uncle's mansion with him. Duddy, finally owns all the land, but embarrasses his grandfather who is unhappy with the way he obtained the land, (Duddy had obtained the final portion of the land after stealing from Virgil). This robbery prompts Yvette and Virgil to move out of the mansion and to ban Duddy from ever seeing them again. Finally, when all is said and done, Duddy is happy that he accomplished his goal of owning land and being somebody.

Duddy begins to behave the way he constantly tries to avoid. As a child, Duddy was notorious for being a bully, a prankster and taking advantage of people's weaknesses. Duddy is seen acting childlike when he takes advantage of people in business, for example, Virgil, Duddy's epileptic employee. Not finding employment very easily, Virgil is thankful to get any work he can get. Duddy recognizes this, and offers the epileptic a dangerous job of driving a truck. In turn, he pays him a very meagre salary. Worst of all, to acquire the last portion of land on Lac St.Pierre Duddy must steal it from Virgil. Duddy shows he is still too immature to work in the adult world, which consequently plays an effect on adults' acceptance of Duddy.

The accusations concerning Duddy's insensitivity towards Virgil do not begin with his forging the cheque at the end of the novel. Duddy offers Virgil a job; the catch is that rather than paying Virgil the \$1000, he owes him, Duddy is going to supply him with a truck, and pay him \$60 a week. Yvette grows angry at Duddy: "I've seen you do lots of dishonest things, Duddy, but never in my life did I expect you to cheat a boy like Virgil" (DUD 216). There is a tendency, in this situation, to side with Yvette because Duddy has craftily avoided having to make good on an empty promise that he had made, back in New York. It is apparent that Duddy never expected to see Virgil again; he is referred to in their first encounter just as "a young man who had been in the pinball machine business" (DUD 143), and he is obviously confused when Virgil arrives at his door. "How did you ever find me?" he asked" (DUD 205). Suddenly, he is saddled with a responsibility that he did not expect and, rather than telling Virgil that he is no longer interested in the deal, he decides to set him up with a job. This is beneficial to Duddy, but it is beneficial to Virgil in a bigger way, Virgil is thrilled at the offer of a job: "Virgil's eyes are filled with excitement, 'When could you know definitely?' he asked, his fists clenched" (DUD 215).

Earlier on, he had explained to Duddy that, as an epileptic, he had been unable to find a job: "Who would take a chance on me as a waiter?" (DUD 208) he asks, and later says:

That's why I started out in the pinball machine business in the
Bronx, you know, Nobody would hire me so I had to go into business
For myself. (DUD 209)

Duddy has taken a chance that no one else has been willing to take, and is treating Virgil like a regular human being. This, to Virgil, means the world, and for this reason, his loyalty to Duddy remains solid throughout the rest of the novel. He has given Virgil friendship, respect, and a way to earn his own living.

Virgil would have loaned Duddy the money he needed to buy the final piece of land at the end of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, but Yvette does not let him. Virgil's loyalty to Duddy is unwavering, even when Yvette is growing tired of his strange, selfish ways. Virgil cries when Duddy is asking him for the money and Yvette tells him not to give it to him, because his loyalties are torn between Yvette and Duddy. Yvette loves Duddy, but they fight with each other quite often. Still, Yvette knows that Virgil's ability to help Duddy now exceeds hers. She is jealous, and she would prefer for Duddy to fall short of his goal than to have achieved it in the end with the help of someone else:

'Does Duddy need more money?' Virgil asked.

'Don't you say a word,' Yvette said.

'But'-

' You heard me, Virgil.' (DUD 301)

Duddy wouldn't have stolen the money if he hadn't been so close to his goal, and so utterly desperate to achieve it. Virgil, certainly, is willing to help him achieve it in every possible way. As Duddy tries to find out

whether Virgil can help him, Virgil screams, "I can't," and "I promised Yvette. I can't" (DUD 306). Yvette knows how important it is to Duddy to get this last piece of land, how close he is to losing it and his dream completely. Noe even the Boy Wonder finds Duddy's project worthy of note. Everything Duddy has worked for is teetering on a knife's edge. The Boy Wonder will shatter in a second, if Duddy doesn't come up with the money by the very first deadline. When Yvette prevents Virgil from lending Duddy the money, she helps drive him to an extreme of dishonesty to which he would not normally stoop. He feels guilty for what he is doing, but now feels that he has no other choice:

But the signed cheque frightened him. He concealed it in his back pocket.

I'll wait an hour, he thought, well, three quarters anyway, and if they show

Up before then I'll tear up the cheque. If not-Well, they shouldn't leave me

Alone for that long. Not in my desperate condition.

Duddy waited an hour and a half...(DUD 308).

These paragraphs make it apparent that Duddy desperately wanted Virgil and Yvette to return. It is not the characteristic of Duddy to wait: when he wants something, he must have it right away. He is still hoping for a better way to reach his goal, a way that does not involve the betrayal of his dearest friends. When Virgil has his terrible fit, the guilt is too much for Duddy. He is faced with the consequences of having done something that he did not want to do and he does not have the emotional capacity to handle it: "Duddy ran, he ran, he ran" (DUD 309).

Duddy reverts to childlike patterns in order to succeed in his adult business ventures. He is frustrated and upset at the outcome of his escapades. He realizes that all his beliefs and goals have failed him. In the end in the midst of his anger and disappointment, he has his respective epiphanies.

The key element in the rich irony of Duddy's ultimate "Victory" is that he has won it, not only by preying on others, particularly Virgil, but also by taking advantage of the victimization of his own people, since anti-Semitism prompts the St.Agathe farmers to sell to Duddy, who uses Yvette as his front, rather than to Jerry Dingleman, the Jewish wheeler dealer. But if Duddy uses his group's victimization for his own ends, he too is nevertheless a victim. Despite his justified revulsion toward Duddy's methods of acquiring the land, and toward Duddy's materialistic plans for exploiting it. Duddy's Zeyda (grandfather), with his constant peasant's refrain that "a man without land is nobody" and his immigrant's desire for his progeny to do well, bears some responsibility for Duddy's misguided obsession.

CONCLUSION

Richler has clearly highlighted the plight of Jewish Canadian immigrant society in the novel "*The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*". He has picturized the life of a young Jewish man who has created life on his own. He tries to break the Jewish ghetto by establishing his identity. There is an obsession with achieving success which makes the protagonist go to any extent to achieve success as it is obvious that Duddy lives for his goal of obtaining land. He knows that he can achieve his goal only by breaking the Jewish ghetto and finally ends up accomplishing it by sacrificing his friendship with Virgil and Yvette. Richler has developed a plot which encircles around the character and his wish to achieve his goal.

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