



ENGL 290 Seminar Presentation: The Ties That Bind

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Seminar Timeline

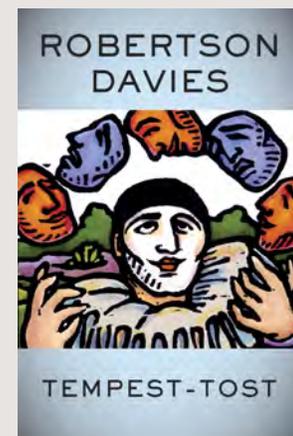
- I. Introduction & Topic
- II. Family in *Tempest-Tost*
- III. Family in *Leaven of Malice*
- IV. Family in General
- V. Other Interpretations
- VI. Wrap-Up & Conclusion
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Introduction & Topic

- In his 1950s novels *Tempest-Tost* and *Leaven of Malice*, Robertson Davies writes tales with family dynamics in major roles. The city of Salterton is a place where most people live in restricting family dynamics. Davies thus uses diction to imply and advance a pessimistic vision of family in his works.
- The representation of families within both of Davies works are crucial to the progression of the novels and help the reader to fully understand the setting, while also playing a major part within the theme.

Family in *Tempest-Tost*

- Hector and Solly are two of the novel's main characters and help hint at the cynical nature of families in the novel.
- Hector Mackilwraith comes from a religious background and was expected to follow this path after his father's death but declined. When it came to Hector's life choices, his mother remarked it was "a mercy your father didn't live to see this day," she quavered. 'It was his dearest wish that you should follow him in The Work'" (Davies, 88). Hector's family do not support his aspirations and are cruel to him, setting up a toxic relationship between them.
- This fallout with his family provides Hector with the psychological issues that drive him to make the questionable decisions that drive his character arc in the novel. Thus, familial conflicts have a large influence in the story.
- Also dealing with a mother's negative influence is Solly Bridgetower, whose mother is so overbearing that "daily and hourly he was required not to die but to live for her" (Davies, 130). His entire life is dictated by the whims of his mother, who prevents him any sort of personal life. Just like Hector, his parents have unhealthy controlling tendencies that cast a negative influence on his life.
- Both Solly and Hector are deprived of agency. This toxic dynamic shows family members as controlling and limiting a person's potential with their expectations, which can be quite true in real life.
- In comparison to their parents' overbearing presence, these characters cannot help but feel like overly-obedient children at times. They are unable to stand up for themselves and often act out in immature ways like the children they, on some level, are; such as when Hector and Solly fight over Griselda. Their development has been hampered, their full potential blocked.
- This experience is one two major characters in the novel share, allowing such [] to have a strong influence in the novel's tone and the character's development. Thus, the novel is imbued with a cynical sense of family instead of a more hopeful one that people should be exposed to.





Family in *Leaven of Malice*

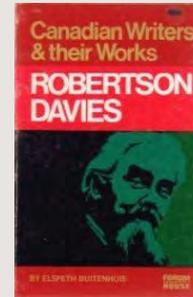
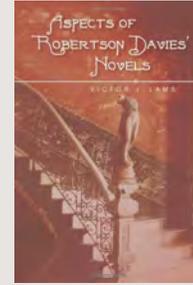
- Two prominent families primarily focused on throughout this novel are the Vambraces and Bridgetowers, the families belonging to the falsely engaged couple on which the novel is centered.
- Professor Vambrace's negative influence on the characters in the novel plays a significant role in the novel's plot, allowing its hostile attitude to permeate the text and have a lasting impression on the reader.
- Both parties involved in the wrongful engagement, Solly and Pearl, belong to families where their parents display significant control of their children's lives. In the home of Pearl, her father, Professor Vambrace, displays authority over his daughter's life, seen in his total disregard for her wishes not to follow legal action against the "Evening Bellman," which published the incorrect engagement. She pleads with her father not to proceed with any legal steps in response to the article as she believes such actions would harm her character overall, commenting that she would not appear in court or agree to him suing whether he decided to or not (Davies loc 1735).
- Within the household of the Bridgetowers, Solly experiences a lack of control on his life, due to his mother's overbearing nature, she displays a very authoritative nature and pressures Solly to devote his life to her. Solly's mother holds a great deal of guilt over his head and manipulates him to get him to remain unmarried and living with her, shown in her statement after Solly returns after a party "I'm worried that I'm going to lose my little boy" (Davies loc 3517). His resentment for her actions are also represented on page loc 3505, where he describes his displeasure for her words stating, "there ought to be rules for these encounters --an intergeneration agreement about hitting below the belt" (Davies). Solly is showing his recognition for her trying to be a victim and aiming to gain pity out of him.
- Moreover, both families within *Leaven of Malice*, display inappropriate interactions with their children, which show to have a negative effect on both Pearl and Solly.

Family in General

- What do the recurring nature of these interactions have in common? What larger purpose do they serve to the story?
- These discordant family dynamics drive conflicts, and push characters towards their motivations. The characters want to break free from them and pursue their own desires. Consequently, this type of plot can get the reader invested in the characters' struggles and developments. Conflict drives stories; without it, there is no story.
- Having conflict come from the family side of things can make it more personal and relatable, thus getting the reader more enthralled with the narrative as the characters become easier to identify with. However, for such things to occur, there must be action via conflict, and that is where the pessimistic vision of family comes into play.

Other Interpretations

- Victor J. Lams, in his 1935 analytical book *Aspects of Robertson Davies' Novels*, notes for Hector in *Tempest-Tost* "[t]he interior disabilities generated by his parents' woeful performance ... form the basis of his permanent psychic state" (Lams, 22-3). For *Leaven of Malice*, he remarks that Pearl and Solly "share a common lack of vision, because neither can see a way to escape the fate that their elders will have imposed upon them" (Lams, 56).
 - We do agree with this view since we had the same interpretations about these characters. Lams also sees that negative family dynamics have a large influence in the novels and acknowledges them as important aspects of the text.
- Elspeth Buitenhuis wrote in her 1972 analysis *Canadian Writers and Their Works: Robertson Davies* that "[o]ne of Davies' favorite themes, here and elsewhere, is the obsessive hold parents exercise on their children" (Buitenhuis, 43).
 - We do agree with this view since we had the same interpretations about how Davies writes families. Buitenhuis chooses to emphasize this repeating motif, showing she feels this cynical view is an important facet of Davies' writing. Buitenhuis seems to have the same view as Lams, thus showing this recurring theme as prevalent and enforcing the view that the novels highlight a pessimistic view on families.
- Thus, we side with both critics, and even ended up having some of the same views.



Wrap-Up & Conclusion

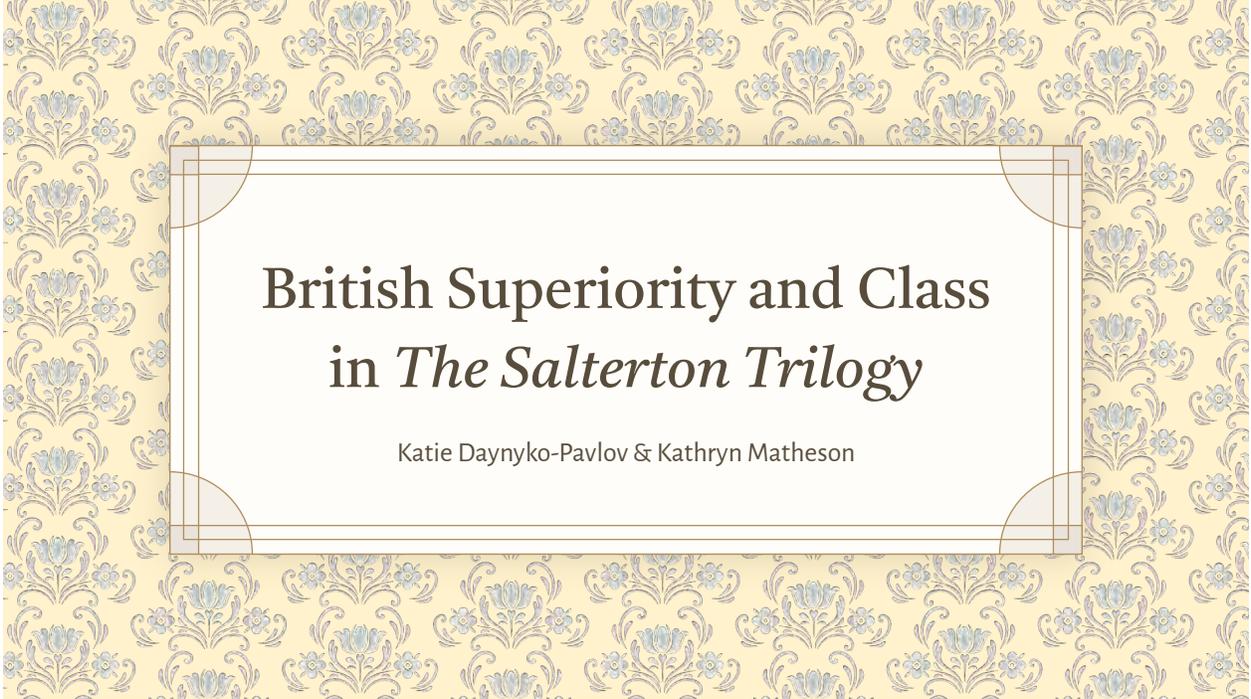
- In conclusion, with his 1950s novels *Tempest-Tost* and *Leaven of Malice*, Davies' usage of diction suggest a cynical view on family dynamics. The families of the characters keep them from achieving their full potentials. Thus, Davies invites his readers to a fictional world heavily influenced by the families inhabiting it.

Discussion Questions

- Why else would Davies depict family dynamics in such a harsh light, when the man seemed to be close to his own parents and followed in their footsteps instead of resisting them?
- Would a more optimistic and healthy family dynamic make for a better story? Why or why not?
- If you were to tell your life as a novel like those in the Salterton Trilogy, what role would your family play?
- If these novels were set within the 21st-century, how do you believe the outcome of both stories would have been different? Or why not?

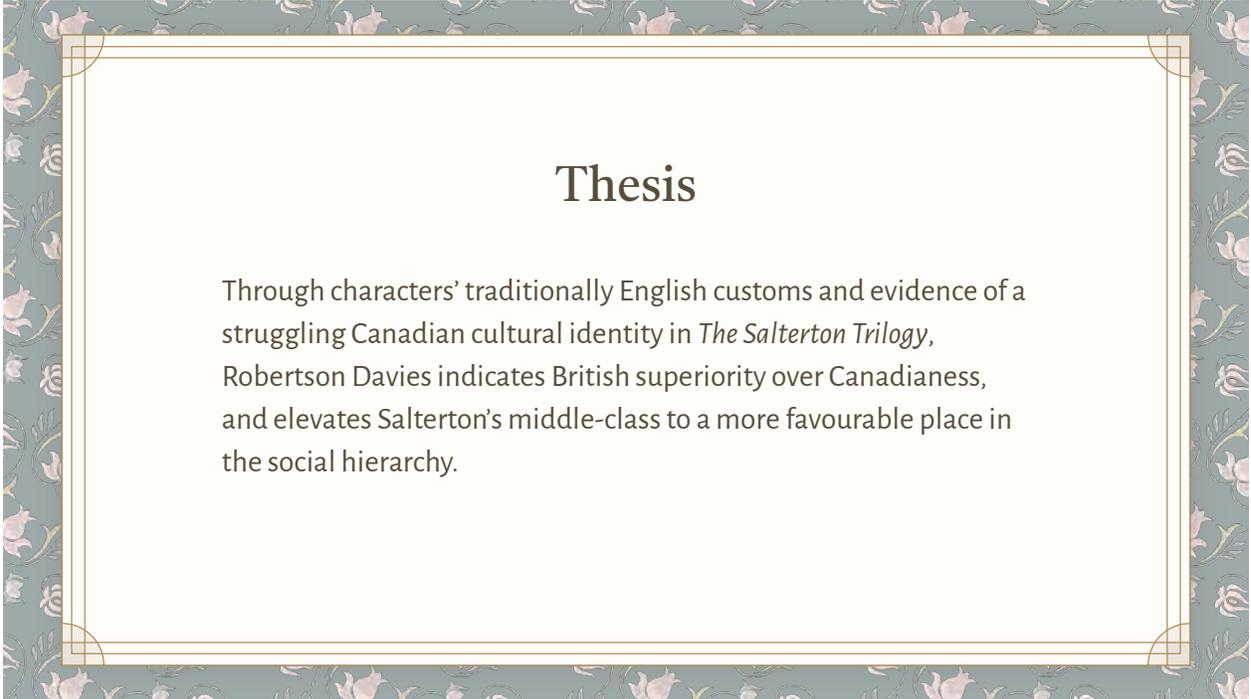
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British Superiority and Class in *The Salterton Trilogy*

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Thesis

Through characters' traditionally English customs and evidence of a struggling Canadian cultural identity in *The Salterton Trilogy*, Robertson Davies indicates British superiority over Canadianess, and elevates Salterton's middle-class to a more favourable place in the social hierarchy.

01

Solly & Canadian Academic Culture

Solly's struggle for autonomy parallels Canada's struggle to find its own cultural footing.

Solly's Search for Identity & Canada's Search for its Cultural Footing

- "In his work, Davies linked the **individual's search for identity** to the **national identity crisis**." (Jackson 2)
- Both Solly and Canada struggle to find **autonomous identities** and move away from an oppressive parent (Mrs. Bridgetower and England)
- "He needed **freedom** ... a profession at which he could support himself ... [and] someone to whom he could talk ... about the humiliating thralldom which she had imposed upon him **since his thirteenth year**." (*Tempest-Tost* 117)
- "**Escape to Cambridge** had been a glorious break for freedom," but his mother's illness "had brought him, literally, flying home" (116)
- Dr. Sengreen: "**there isn't much to be done [in Amcan]**... I'm going to give you Heavysege" (*Leaven of Malice* 152)
- Solly is bitter that Canada is trying to create its own culture and "rapidly acquire the trappings of older countries" (153)
- "Solly pondered bitterly ... how firmly he was caught in the **strong, close mesh** of his country's cultural ambitions" (153)

Solly's Search for Identity & Canada's Search for its Cultural Footing

- "There's no money in novels" (*Leaven of Malice* 169)
- "All the originality has been educated out of you" (Humphrey Cobbler, 169)
- "You'll find a way out" (Molly) "I know I will" (Solly, 171)
- "I've given Heavysage the heave-ho ... I [have] something original, that I want to write ... [I want] to be a creator of Amcan, not one of its embalmers." (239)
- Solly is simultaneously pushing his life and Canadian culture forward
- England and Mrs. Bridgetower are elevated to a higher level of power, yet Canada's cultural and Solly's personal development cannot occur until they are free from these powers

02 Nature & Nurture

The limited discussion of the Canadian outdoors shows the prevalence of British culture through Britain's association with urban spaces.

Limited Presence of Canada's Outdoors and the Infancy of Canadian Identity

- “Canadian identity is a **topographical matter** [...] Canadians identify their country more easily **with its landscape** than with anything man-made” (MacKay 114)
- Canadianness is associated with nature above all else, and it is fitting that Canadian theatre is performed outdoors
- “Nature has to be kept firmly in check. Nature is very **difficult to rehearse** and Nature has a bad trick of **missing it's cues**” (Tempest 48)
- “We'll have a lot of resistance to break down, doing a pastoral.” (Tempest 49)
- The audience of Shakespeare is familiar with the British version, where it would be staged on a formal stage
- Canadian flare to Shakespeare involves performing outside, where less things can be controlled

Limited Presence of Canada's Outdoors and the Infancy of Canadian Identity

- “You have been away from your native land for too long. You have forgotten our folkways [...] they are scanning the heavens and hoping aloud that it won't rain tomorrow. That is to **placate the Old Man in the Sky** and persuade him to be kind to us” (Tempest 233)
- Canadians and their old wives' tales connect them to the land and give the characters the impression that they can sway nature instead of fretting
- “National spirit [...] as a **ravishment** of the land” (MacKay 11)
- Canadian identity is tied to the land around it, and both respecting and manipulating nature to human wills
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03 At Home Days & at the Morphews'

British elitism in *The Salterton Trilogy* is shown by comparing the strict social decorum at Mrs. Bridgetower's At Home days and the freedom from social expectations at the Morphews' home.

Home Life and Class in Salterton

At Home Days

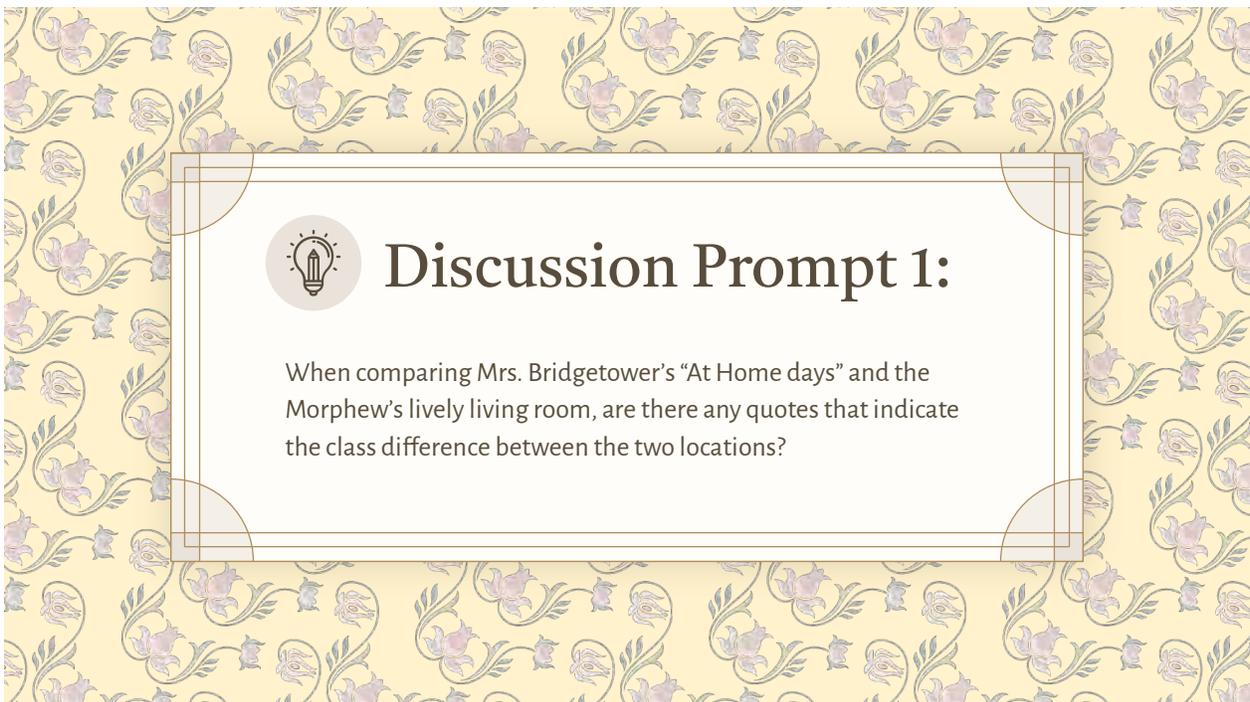
- “there are not many people now who keep up the custom of **At Home days**, but Mrs. Solomon Bridgetower had retained [this tradition from] just before the First World War” (*Leaven of Malice* 132)
- “she had a **solid fortune**, and it had protected her against changing customs; this made her captain among those forces in Salterton which sought to **resist social change**” (132)
- “It was Mrs. Bridgetower’s notion that everyone lived as she did” (*Tempest-Tost* 42)
- “Mrs. Knapp... had known these ladies a mere ten years or so, and was thus a virtual **newcomer** to Salterton society” (*Leaven of Malice* 133)
- “she subsided with an exhalation which was meant to be a **social laugh**, and sounded like **fright**” (134)
- “Salterton’s upper class is a very tightly knit community, a garrison, which **does not welcome outsiders.**” (Jackson 7)
- “Davies’s picture of Canadian society is that of **white upper-middle class society**, whose outdated ideals are relics of **British colonialism**” (Jackson 8)

Home Life and Class in Salterton

At the Morphews'

- "Painting her **toenails** coral pink [after having] spend an agreeable hour **rubbing the hair from her legs**" (*Leaven of Malice* 207)
- "A great deal of bare leg and **frilly panties**" (207)
- "You've become George's **Thing**" (209)
- "It hasn't brought you any children" (208)
- "**Nipping** her playfully on the **big toe** with his front teeth" (209)
- "Working class people only being used as a form of **comic relief**" (Woodcock 37)
- "The survival of strict **class divisions** in Salterton [... portraying] Canada [as] a very **class-conscious country**." (Jackson 7)







Discussion Prompt 2:

What examples from pop culture today exemplify the social decorum of the upper class? Are celebrities able to “resist social change” like Mrs. Bridgetower?

Thank you for listening!

Any questions for us?

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