

Alphonse Green

Mr. Dowhaniuk

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Growth of a Boy

How significant is one's upbringing in shaping who they become? Can a person overcome a poor childhood, or taint a good one? In the case of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, Duddy's young adulthood and surroundings shapes his transition to a man negatively. For example, when Duddy is growing up on St. Urbain Street everybody undermines him and consequently he feels a need to prove them wrong. In addition, the reader must look at the intricate relationship Duddy has with his Uncle Benjy. In the end this loose bond leads to a divide and lack of respect on the side of Duddy. In contrast, a further significant component of the novel is his relationship with Grandpa Simcha, who is the one person that truly believes in Duddy. As a result he gives him the advice, "a man without land is nobody" (Richler 50). Consequently the young impressionable boy that Duddy is takes the advice to heart and later interprets it the wrong way. As these points show, Duddy's transition to a man is shaped negatively by the influences of his young adulthood and surroundings.

An integral aspect of this novel is the affect of St. Urbain Street and its inhabitants on Duddy at a tender age. The area is known as a Jewish ghetto in Montreal, and the inhabitants are generally of little monetary substance. Unfortunately, on top of this

humble upbringing he also faces a lack of support from these same people, not the least of which includes his father. As Duddy's father Max proclaims, "Duddy's a dope like me. Aren't you kid?" (Richler 21). This is an example of the blatant negativity he faces on a daily basis. A further example, this time less obvious, is the story Max often tells of Jerry Dingleman. Max makes Jerry out as a hero of St. Urbain Street; a true rags to riches story. Duddy takes to liking this man they call the Boy Wonder, and begins to idolize him and covet material wealth. Unfortunately, Duddy fails to realize that most of the people that listen to the story have contempt for Jerry, who in reality is a crook. From a very young age the reader notices the passion in Duddy to achieve material status and prove everybody on St. Urbain Street wrong, including his father. This is shown in one instance, when he undertakes in the selling of illegitimate pornographic magazines as a young teenager, if for nothing else to appease his ever-growing thirst for money. It is also evident at the end of the novel in a scene at the local bar. Duddy doesn't have the money for a cab and the bartender says, "that's all right sir, we'll mark it" (Richler 366). Upon hearing this Duddy yells to his father, "You see! You see!" (Richler 366). To put the situation in context, the talk around town is of the newly acquired land Duddy has in his name and the bartender shows respect for him as a result of his newfound material wealth. Duddy's ecstatic response to the situation shows that all along he is simply trying to prove the people of St. Urbain wrong and earn their respect. Sadly the reader knows that Duddy alienates all the people he loves in the process as a result of his ruthless decisions. Shown by these points, Duddy has a difficult childhood in St. Urbain and faces constant negativity, which leads him down the wrong path later in life.

Secondly is the tumultuous relationship Duddy has with his Uncle Benjy. Contrasting with Duddy's father Max, Benjy creates vast amounts of wealth for himself, going as far as moving into the rich Montreal suburb of Outremont. From a very young age Duddy and his Uncle clash for a clear reason, Benjy does not trust Duddy and believes he might hurt his grandfather. After a conflict in Benjy's factory he says to Duddy, "If you ever do anything to hurt your grandfather I'll break every bone in your body starting with the little fingers" (Richler 65). As a result of Benjy's distrust of Duddy the two have a strained relationship, effectively eliminating the one tie Duddy has to a successful individual. This divide leaves him with a lack of respect for Benjy, and causes him to ignore important advice from Benjy later in the novel. Here is an excerpt from the post-mortem note Benjy sends to Duddy:

There's more to you than money-lust Duddy, but I'm afraid for you. You're two people, that's why. The scheming little bastard I saw so easily and the fine, intelligent boy underneath that your grandfather, bless him, saw. But you're coming of age soon and you'll have to choose. A boy can be two, three, four potential people but a man is only one. He murders the others. There's a brute inside of you, Duddel – a regular behemoth – and this being such a hard world it would be the easiest thing for you to let it overpower you. Don't Duddel. Be a gentleman. Be a mensh. (Richler 322).

This is possibly the best advice Duddy receives in his life and regrettably he ignores it due to his apathy towards Benjy. Once again the reader sees the negative affect Duddy's relationships and surrounding has on his becoming a man.

Closely related to the previous point but distinctly different is Duddy's relationship with his Grandpa Simcha. In this case, there is deep-rooted love and respect between the two. Simcha sees the positive potential in Duddy, as Benjy mentioned in the above quote. The reader witnesses Simcha confide in Duddy and give him the advice, "a man without land is nobody" (Richler 50). This is incredibly important to the plot because it is one of the main origins of Duddy's ruthless ambitions. The intended message from Simcha was that Duddy should strive to be more than his father; he should actually make something of himself. To the disdain of the reader he takes the advice too far, and develops an unforgivable heartlessness in his quest for material wealth. It is later affirmed that the Simcha did not mean for Duddy to act as he does, when he becomes saddened after learning of the methods Duddy uses to acquire the land. In other words Duddy takes him to view the land he purchases, and the Simcha disapproves after learning of what he did to Virgil in the process. Duddy still has not learned his lesson and hastily approaches Yvette who had told Simcha about Virgil, when he says "Why did you go to my grandfather? Of all the people in the world he's the only one..." (Richler 263). Shown by this quote Duddy still has no remorse and only thinks of himself. With this in mind, the reader can see that his transition to a man has once again been affected negatively by his childhood, albeit unintentionally.

Emphasized strongly by Mordecai Richler is the negative affect Duddy's childhood and surroundings have on his path to manhood. This is shown in Duddy's formative years growing up on St. Urbain Street, where most of its inhabitants undermine Duddy leading him to feel it necessary to prove them wrong. It is further depicted through Duddy's relationship with his Uncle Benjy, and finally through his bond with his Grandpa Simcha. Clearly articulated throughout the novel, it is a message the reader will not soon forget.

Works Cited

Richler, M. *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 1959.