

**ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY**

**FACULTY OF ARTS, LAW AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**

**GENDER, CULTURE AND SOCIAL CHANGE  
IN THE FICTION OF MARGARET DRABBLE**

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**ABSTRACT**

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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This thesis, which is feminist and historicist in its methodological approaches, explores the social, cultural and political circumstances in which Margaret Drabble's nineteen novels were produced by using close textual reading to position her novels in their historical context.

The core objective of this thesis is to establish the relationship between Drabble's fiction and the changing face of English society since 1960s. This is in addition to her literary exploration of some global issues that were of concern to Drabble, being an opponent of many aspects of British and American foreign policy including the Iraq War and a supporter of the rights to self-determination of the Kurdish people; the context in which I first came across both her discursive writing and her fiction in Kurdish northern Iraq.

This thesis is divided into five chapters which deal with the fiction broadly chronologically with the exception of chapter four. Chapter one deals with the first five novels of Drabble by putting them in historical context of the 1960s, which are *A Summer Bird-cage* (1963), *The Garrick Year* (1964), *The Millstone* (1965), *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967), and *The Waterfall* (1969). Chapter two presents Drabble as a 'condition of England' novelist analysing the representation of modern Britain in *The Needle's Eye* (1972), *The Realms of Gold* (1975), *The Ice Age* (1977), *The Middle Ground* (1980) and *The Radiant Way* (1987). Chapter three deals with the influence of Arnold Bennett on Drabble's writing and his attitudes to provincial life. Additionally, it demonstrates how Drabble moves from local issues to global crises in *A Natural Curiosity* (1989) and *The Gates of Ivory* (1991). Chapter four is concerned with literary influences that have been important to Drabble and considers the critic F. R. Leavis, the poet William Wordsworth, and the novelists Jane Austen, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing. Chapter five deals with *The Witch of Exmoor* (1996), *The Peppered Moth* (2000), *The Seven Sisters* (2002), *The Red Queen* (2004), *The Sea Lady* (2006), *The Pure Gold Baby* (2013) and *The Dark Flood Rises* (2016) and brings together different themes and concerns which have already dealt with in Drabble's earlier novels.

This thesis takes issue with some common misperceptions of Drabble as being a 'Hampstead novelist,' an old-fashioned realist, and a 'women's writer'. My thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge by providing an up-to-date overview and critical account of all Drabble's novels beginning with the 1960s and taking the reader up to the present.

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DRABBLE**

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## INTRODUCTION

Margaret Drabble (b.1939) is a writer of longevity whose publications span four decades of the twentieth-century and the first two decades of the twenty-first. She is the author of nineteen novels beginning with *A Summer Bird-cage* published in 1963. Her most recent is *The Dark Flood Rises* (2016). Drabble, who was made a Dame of the British Empire in 1988, is also the editor of the fifth and sixth editions of the reference work *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, published in 1985 and 2000. She has also published numerous articles, short stories, and works of criticism and has written for the screen and the stage: *Isadora* (1968), *A Touch of Love* (1969) and *It's a Woman's World* (1964) as well as literary biographies of Arnold Bennett (*Arnold Bennett: A Biography*) (1974) and Angus Wilson (*Angus Wilson: A Biography*) (1995).

In 1992 Dame Margaret deposited ninety boxes of personal papers containing a life-time of correspondence with many writers including Harold Pinter, Ted Hughes and R. S. Thomas in the Cambridge University Library, as well as original drafts, typescripts and working papers of her memoir, biographies, short fiction, novels and communications with personal friends and cultural and educational institutions around the world. Unfortunately, no financial provision was made for the papers to be catalogued and the part-time cataloguer who was appointed and began work left and was not replaced. The Cambridge University Library has a non-negotiable policy of prohibiting access to uncatalogued materials. Despite several requests to the library, and representations by my supervisor to Dame Margaret through her literary agent, I was not given permission to work in the Drabble archive, although I was allowed one visit in which I was able to see the handwritten manuscript of *A Summer Bird-cage* (1963) and materials which had been catalogued relating to *The Peppered Moth* (2000). I deeply regret that my thesis has had to be written without access to a uniquely important resource for any scholar trying to understand Drabble's writing, the experiences of a generation of women who came of age

in the 1960s, and the literary and intellectual life of the past six decades. In May 2018 I was given permission to work on the Doris Lessing/Margaret Drabble correspondence (1978-2008), available at the University of East Anglia.

Dame Margaret has been generous in providing answers to questions about her life and work in numerous interviews conducted in person over the years. These interviews provide many revealing insights into how her thinking has evolved and I have drawn extensively upon them in my research, quoting liberally, throughout the thesis, placing Drabble's own words in context, and providing an appropriate critical commentary. The most significant interviews which can be found in print or online are those with Nancy Hardin (1973), Peter Firchow (1974), Nancy Poland (1975), Barbara Milton (1978), Diana Cooper-Clark (1980), Parker and Todd (1983), Kevin Courier (1987), John Hannay (1987), David Plante (1988), Olga Kenyon (1989), Eleanor Wachtel (1996), Suzie Mackenzie (2000), *The Oklahoma Review* (2000), Nick Turner (2010), Lisa Allardice (2011), Claudine Peyre (2011), Lydia Perović (2014), and Lynn Barber (2016).

There is at present no monograph or doctoral thesis which provides an up-to-date overview and critical account of Drabble's publications beginning with the 1960s and taking the reader up to the present. My thesis is the first to do so and is an attempt to remedy a gap in existing scholarship. With the exception of Glenda Leeming's short study, *Margaret Drabble* (2005) published in the Northcote House 'Writers and their Work' series which is now thirteen years old, the monographs on Drabble all relate to the early years of her career and to her publications of the 1960s and 1970s up to the mid-1980s. These are Valerie Grosvenor Myer, *Margaret Drabble: Puritanism and Permissiveness* (1974), Ellen Cronan Rose, *The Novels of Margaret Drabble: Equivocal Figures* (1980), Lynn Veatch Sadler, *Margaret Drabble* (1986) and Joanne Creighton, *Margaret Drabble* (1985).

Important critical work on Drabble's writing has appeared in essays in journals, book chapters and as part of longer works. The notion of Drabble as a chronicler of Britain originates with a book review by Phyllis Rose, 'Our Chronicler of Britain' in 1980. Nora



Forster Stovel's classification of Drabble's fiction into two stages; the psychological novels of the sixties reflecting her interest in Wordsworth and the social novels of the seventies influenced by Bennett has underpinned my own thinking. Ruth Wittlinger's *Thatcherism and Literature: Representations of the 'State of the Nation' in Margaret Drabble's Novels* (restricted to five novels) published in 2002 and Gayle Greene's essay, '*Bleak Houses: Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble and the Condition of England*' in 1992 have influenced my own research into the 'condition of England'.

In *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) Elaine Showalter situated Drabble alongside other novelists whose writing was influenced by the women's liberation movement who started using 'vocabularies previously reserved for male writers' and describing 'formerly taboo areas of female experience' (Showalter, 1977, p.35). More recently, Maroula Joannou (2015) has situated Drabble alongside Muriel Spark, Anita Brookner, Margaret Forster, Beryl Bainbridge, Doris Lessing and A. S. Byatt as 'The Grandes Dames' of twentieth-century English letters whose longevity has made possible their engagement with the major cultural, social, literary and political changes of their times.

In this thesis I take issue with a number of common misperceptions of Drabble, including the damaging view that she is an unreconstructed realist, resistant to the postmodernism, innovation and change which I addressed at many points. The (usually pejorative) perception of Drabble as a 'Hampstead novelist' has followed her for much of her career. Writing in *The Guardian* in December 2008, Kate Kellaway describes the 'Hampstead novel', which is usually associated with a number of contemporary writers including Penelope Lively, Margaret Forster and Ian McEwan as 'a middle-class morality novel – probably involving adultery and shallow-masquerading-as-deep' (Kellaway, 2008). Although the origins of the term are obscure, Dame Margaret, who now lives in Notting Hill in west London with her husband, the biographer, Michael Holroyd, suggests that the 'Hampstead novel' was the 'invention of the Thatcherite press (to get at left-wing novelists)' (Kellaway, 2008). Moreover, she tells Kellaway that the Hampstead of her

youth was not rich at all but 'intellectual, progressive, benign' (Kellaway, 2008). Nor was the area uniformly affluent. Drabble remembers her mother who visited her from Yorkshire, 'recoiling from the squalor of Fleet Road, in South End Green: "I thought Hampstead was a nice place," she said' (Kellaway, 2008).

This thesis demonstrates that 'Hampstead novelist' is an inappropriate categorisation of Drabble for a number of reasons. While 'Hampstead novel' suggests a narrowness of scope, I show that the very opposite is true of her writing. In fact, Drabble has been described as a novelist whose 'social and political terms of reference are among the widest of her generation' (Carter & McRae, 2017, p. 467). Moreover, Drabble's heroines, as Lorna Sage points out, are frequently not metropolitan but 'have their roots in the English provinces, like Drabble herself' (Sage, 1992, p. 90). Drabble's childhood home of Sheffield has been consistently represented throughout her fiction as the town of Northam. For instance, Northam is Clara's hometown in *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967) and the childhood home of Liz Headleand in *The Radiant Way* (1987). Indeed, Drabble returns to Northam in *A Natural Curiosity* (1989), *The Gates of Ivory* (1991), *The Ice Age* (1977), *The Witch of Exmoor* (1996), *The Peppered Moth* (2000) and the short story 'Stepping Westward: a Topographical Tale' (2011). In chapter three of my thesis I look closely at Drabble's relationship to the novelist Arnold Bennett (1867-1931) whose novels are based in the pottery towns of Staffordshire to show how Bennett's representations of provincial life, exerted a profound influence upon Drabble's ideas about the English literary tradition, and to analyse the representations of provincial life, attitudes and characters in her own work.

My thesis is feminist and historicist in its methodological approaches. I use close textual readings to position Drabble's novels in their historical context, and to explore the different social, literary, cultural and political circumstances in which they were produced. It cannot, of course, be argued that literature can reveal history in any straightforward way. Although fiction cannot prove historical facts, it can and does support what is already

known about the prevailing ideas, events and circumstance of the time in which it was produced. To take one example, *The Ice Age* (1977), as Steve Connor points out, uses the metaphor of the ice age which was commonly in use at the time and 'resurfaces in the idea of the "winter of discontent" of industrial conflict in 1978-9' (Connor, 1995, p.64). Connor notes that there was 'an enormous amount of economic analysis, but nothing on the subject of declining Britain in fiction at all' (Connor, 1995, p.64). My reading of *The Ice Age* shows it to be a response to the author's immersion in the economic and political debates on the left. Much the same is true in her meticulously researched novel, *The Gates of Ivory* (1991) which is concerned with the killing fields of Kampuchea and draws heavily on the writings of the expert William Shawcross and the preoccupation with the excesses of the Pol Pot regime described in both Shawcross's writings and the national media at the time.

Because Drabble's work, her more recent work in particular, is eclectic and wide-ranging in its scope; reliant on history, literature, sociology, economics, anthropology, philosophy and other disciplines, it is receptive to New Historicist approaches which refuse the distinctions between literature and history, and text and context, giving researchers new opportunities to cross the boundaries separating history, politics, literature and economics (Veesser, 1989, p.ix). The intellectual historian, Dominick LaCapra has identified six 'overlapping areas of investigation' to be born in mind when analysing the relationship between a literary text and its historical context and I have taken account of his ideas in my approaches to this thesis. LaCapra suggests that the critic needs to address the relationship between the text and the author's intentions, the relationship between the text and the author's life, the relationship between the text and society, the relationship between the text and culture, the relationship between the text and the corpus of work of a writer, and the discourses that are available to the author at the time of writing (LaCapra, 1983, pp.35-59). Drabble herself has emphasised the dangers of considering the literary text in isolation from its social context, for example in an interview conducted by Gillian Parker and Janet Todd: 'I see it a lot in terms of a writer's personal biography....

It's so obvious that writers are influenced by the way their parents behaved. It seems to me ridiculous to isolate a text, in fact almost meaningless' (Parker and Todd, 1983, p. 171).

A central objective of the research project is to establish the relationship between Drabble's fiction and the changing face of English society, beginning with the liberalisation of attitudes to sex in the 1960s, and then the ideas of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s, the changes brought about by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, the consequences of the Gulf War and the Iraq war, and most recently, globalisation, and the mass migration, often prompted by wars or famine, from the poorer parts of the world into Europe. Drabble has spoken out against the 'nostalgia/heritage/fancy dress/costume drama industry' approaches to the nation's past and insisted that 'it is the novelist's duty to write about the present, to confront an age which is "ugly, incomprehensible, and subject to rapid mutations"' (Byatt, 2001, p. 9).

As Valerie Purton has pointed out in a written note on the first draft of this thesis, Drabble's 'engagement with her social, political and historical context is often anguished and there is always a tension in her work (usually, but not always, a fruitful one) between the rival impulses to *confirm* what she believes in and to *subvert* it'. There is no agenda for social reform in Drabble's fiction and, as Purton observes, a tension between the political Drabble and the Quaker Drabble driven by the values of plain living and high thinking which is clear in *The Needle's Eye* (1972) where the emphasis is in 'redemption' than in political reform.

Drabble has been an outspoken opponent of many aspects of British and American foreign policy over the last six decades including the Gulf War, the Iraq War, and interventions in Ireland and the Lebanon. She is a strong supporter of the rights of Palestinians and of the movement for Peace in Kurdistan (the context in which I first came across her writing at my university in Kurdish northern Iraq). In an interview with Lisa Allardice, Dame Margaret describes her politics as 'left-of-centre egalitarian'. Allardice notes that 'she has stayed faithful too – "they [the politicians] shift but I don't!" – and a

vein of social responsibility (strongest in her middle novels) runs throughout her work' (Allardice, 2011). Drabble told Nick Turner: 'I write about the obsessions I have: some are political, such as egalitarianism; some are to do with the old Labour party and the new Left, and they're not very gendered issues' (Turner, 2010, p.7).

Drabble published her first novel, *A Summer Bird-cage* in 1963 at the age of twenty-three. The Canadian critic, Lydia Perović, refers to the young Margaret Drabble as the 'embodiment of cool' with her 'young Glenda Jackson style, the mini-skirt, the knee-high boots, the effortless, understated 1960s glamour' (Perović, 2014). *A Summer Bird-cage*, *The Garrick Year* (1964), *The Millstone* (1965) and *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967) were enthusiastically received and acclaimed for their 'polished' style, subject matter, and woman-centred content. Their concern with maternity, and with women's intimate bodily experiences in menstruation and childbirth, led to the description of these novels as 'gynaecological literature' and Drabble discussed the merits of this description in a short piece written in 1968 (Drabble, 1968, p.87).

The critic Gail Cunningham conveys the sense that Drabble was exploring exciting new ground which mattered to ordinary women, the impact of the fiction on her first readers in the 1960s, and her relationship to her female audience thus:

While deliberately limited in range, the novels are highly polished, meticulously patterned investigations of the possibilities open to the intelligent women of the age. Complex and comprehensible, they provide a focus for the emerging feminist readership which saw for the first time its immediate concerns voiced with satisfying seriousness and with perceptible depth beneath the surface clarity. (Cunningham, 1991, p.127)

Critical interest in Drabble reached its height with the publication of two very powerful early works, *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967) which received the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and *The Millstone* (1965) which she adapted into a successful film *A Touch of Love* (1969) and has subsequently declined. Much of the published criticism on Drabble although useful in its time, is now dated and in need of revision, in particular

the early criticism which is often reliant on 'first-wave' ideas of feminism which have subsequently given way to the very different feminism of today. The latter has broadened in its concerns to become 'intersectional', i.e. to include types of discrimination that are not based on gender, and to reflect upon the ways that these interact; a process of enlargement which has been reflected in the broadening of Drabble's own concerns in her fiction. Glenda Leeming has usefully pointed out the impact of that 'expansion of subject matter' that 'alienated some of her critics, who stubbornly continued to search her work for female role models and patriarchal oppression' (Leeming,2006,p.1).

This thesis uses close reading to discuss how Drabble has focused on women protagonists throughout her sixty-year writing career despite the expansion of her canvas and subject-matter. While she does represent male characters and male voices in her fiction, this is up to a point. *The Needle's Eye* (1972) is the first third-person novel in which the point-of-view is distributed between different characters. The only novel which is written exclusively from a male point of view is *The Ice Age* (1977). In a later novel, *The Radiant Way* (1987) Drabble makes a self-conscious authorial intervention to emphasize her refusal to be side-tracked away from her preferred female perspectives: 'Brian is not a woman and reflections on his prospects...would at this juncture muddy the narrative tendency' (RW,88).

The concerns I discuss in this thesis in relation to Drabble's early novels are closely related to the second wave of feminist struggles from the late 1960s concentrated on 'reproduction, mothering, sexual violence, expressions of sexuality and domestic labour' (Gillis, et al.,2004,p.1). But by the early 1990s, it had become clear that the kind of feminist activity that had blossomed from the late 1960s through to the late 1980s no longer existed and from the middle phase of her writing onwards. Drabble began to look for more inclusive narrative modes to represent women, an effort that Lin

suggests 'parallels her experiment with spatial narrative trope in her post-1972 novels' (Lin,2005,p.16).

Hilary Radner has defined a 'woman writer' as an educated middle-class woman writing for women like herself (Radner,1995). Drabble dislikes being called a feminist writer because 'people tend not to notice anything else in one's work at all. They seize only on the feminist issues' (Alexander,1989,p.25). At the same time, she has also made it clear that she is not 'an anti-feminist'. On the contrary, she is 'a feminist' but does not like 'some of the feminist approaches to my work because they tell me I should have been something else' (Cardwell, et al.,2000,p.3). 'If I end with a marriage, it's going to be seen as a mistake; if I end with a woman alone, it's going to be regarded as a triumph' (Greene,1991,p.2).

Here, as throughout the thesis, her interviews are invaluable in pinpointing what Drabble feels about her writing, her critics, and herself. She explains to Nick Turner that she does not write specifically for women and describes herself as 'a gendered writer' who is 'interested in gender issues' (Turner,2010,p.7). She does, however, remain closely attuned to her female readership and is now very aware of who that readership is. In her interview with Claudine Peyre, Drabble states: 'When I wrote my first novel, when I was in my twenties, I did not know who the reader was and I was very isolated. And now, when I write, I know who the readers are or I know who some of them are' (Peyre,2011,p.120). She also told Turner in 2010 that 'Women read more novels than men— that's a fact. I have had a lot of correspondence, mostly from women, who sometimes see themselves and their "real life" problems in the novels. The letters I have had from men have been from academics and intellectuals, and they have a different agenda. They have been more interested in issues of, say, structure and form' (Turner,2010,p.7).

Drabble's fiction consistently engages with the societal expectations and perceptions of women's roles, with women's domestic responsibilities, and with the ways

in which societal expectations of women are internalised, rejected or accepted in part, by the individual woman who is often depicted in a state of conflict torn between her own desires and what others expect of her. This representation of women's internalised conflict is strongest at the start of Drabble's writing career, and is depicted vividly in the novels of the 1960s, which are set, as well as written, at the time of the women's liberation movement, and which topically dramatize current issues such as the demand for reliable childcare for which second-wave feminists were campaigning at this time. Women characters, torn between motherhood and career, do struggle with the balancing acts of combining paid work and family care and are working hard to manage both. For instance, Rose in *The Needle's Eye* (1972) chooses to do a variety of badly paid jobs, such as serving dinners at the school and supervising the launderette. Frances Wingate in *The Realms of Gold* (1975), an archaeologist and the mother of four children is another example of the hardworking women combining family and a career. Liz in *The Radiant Way* (1987) is able to pursue her career quite competently although she has been distracted by divorce. Her friend Alix, a single mother who is living on her part-time teaching jobs, struggles against poverty, refusing to submit. However, the issues of love, marriage, divorce, child-rearing and the problems experienced by women attempting to pursue a career as well as to bring up their children are not restricted to the early fiction. On the contrary, Drabble's fiction represents the changing experience of women and this includes those positive changes in women's understanding of themselves and their own horizons brought about, in part, by the success of the women's movement in changing perceptions and possibilities. Such characters as Dr Barbara Halliwell; an English academic in *The Red Queen* (2004), Ailsa; a social historian and second-wave feminist in *The Sea Lady* (2006), Jessica Speight; an anthropologist in *The Pure Gold Baby* (2013) and Francesca Stubbs; an inspector of residential homes for the elderly in *The Dark Flood Rises* (2016) are depicted as confident successful career women although still under pressures to achieve domestically and the focus on tensions and contradictions in women's lives, on constraints as well as opportunities, is



strong. Drabble's earlier fiction demonstrates the restrictive nature of marriage as in *A Summer Bird-cage* (1963), *The Garrick Year* (1964), *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967) and *The Waterfall* (1969) where the women characters often got married at this time so as to escape from the parental home. However, *The Millstone* (1965) offers a modern alternative to marriage: single parenthood and a professional career that makes it possible to bring up a child on one's own. Drabble uses the notion of marriage as imprisonment very similarly to George Eliot; both use the metaphor of marriage as a bird-cage.

Drabble's women are never far from awareness of their bodies and their bodily functions. Women characters' concern with maternity, and with women's intimate bodily experiences in menstruation and childbirth in Drabble's earlier novels; such as *A Summer Bird-cage*, *The Garrick Year* (1964), *The Millstone* (1965) and *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967), led to the description of these novels as 'gynaecological literature'. This is true of her later works as well as her earlier ones, and of those novels which are internationally focused and reflected her growing interest in global conflicts. As one example, the problems of menstruation and feminine hygiene occur in *The Gates of Ivory* (1991) which is set in war torn Cambodia. In situations where their lives are at risk, her protagonists must still worry about how to protect themselves during their next menstrual cycle. The thesis highlights how Drabble's interest in older women develops as Drabble ages herself and the older, post menopausal protagonists of her most recent works, for example, Francesca in *The Dark Flood Rises* (2016) are recognisably older versions of the intelligent, questioning, fiercely independent, heroines of the 1960s.

This thesis is divided into five chapters which deal with the fiction broadly chronologically with the exception of chapter four which is concerned with literary realism and romanticism, literary tradition, literary influence and Drabble's 'ability to think in quotations' (SB,44). Chapter one is concerned with *A Summer Bird-cage* (1963), *The Garrick Year* (1964), *The Millstone* (1965), *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967), and *The*

*Waterfall* (1969). The novels are situated in the historical context of the 1960s in which English society had become more accepting, open and liberal in many respects including attitudes to divorce, abortion, homosexuality and censorship. In her sociological study, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) the American feminist, Betty Friedan identified what she termed as the 'problem without a name': the discontent of intelligent, educated home-bound women who were unable to articulate their feelings of resentment and isolation. Drabble's female characters, the ambitious 'clever girls' whom Mary Eagleton discusses in her recent monograph *Clever Girls and the Literature of Women's Upward Mobility* (2018), are invariably bored with domestic responsibilities, find it impossible to combine marriage with motherhood, to make use of their education, or to establish satisfying careers.

Emma Evans in *The Garrick Year*, Jane Gray in *The Waterfall*, Beatrice in *The Millstone*, and Louise in *A Summer Bird-cage* all find themselves yearning for more from life than they have found in their unequal and unfulfilling marriages. As Wendy Webster explains, 'by the early 1960s a generation of educated women, born during or immediately after the war, began to define home as an oppressive, over-private and stultifying place for women' (Webster, 2003, p. 149). 'Isolated within their increasingly privatized families, and knowing they were doing what "real" women were supposed to do, housewives could only conclude that if they felt unhappy with their lot, then they had only themselves to blame' (Coote & Campbell, 1987, p. 4).

In chapter two I make the case for Drabble as a 'condition-of-England' novelist and analyse the representation of the social, economic and political realities of modern Britain in *The Needle's Eye* (1972), *The Realms of Gold* (1975), *The Ice Age* (1977), *The Middle Ground* (1980) and *The Radiant Way* (1987). I compare Drabble's preoccupation with economic stagnation, industrial disputes and political unrest in her modern 'condition of England' novels with the depiction of social ills such as (industrialisation and 'de-skilling' at home, revolution on the continent, and the plight of

the urban poor) depicted in mid-Victorian novels which emerged at a time of crisis and unrest in society such as Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845), Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* (1854) and *Little Dorrit* (1857), Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854) and *Mary Barton* (1848) which are all in their different ways concerned with the state of English society.

Chapter three deals with the influence of Arnold Bennett on Drabble's writing and his attitudes to provincial life before consideration of the final two novels in *The Radiant Way* trilogy; *A Natural Curiosity* (1989) and *The Gates of Ivory* (1991). By this stage the 'condition of England' has become inseparable in Drabble's mind from the history of Britain's involvement overseas and from the effects of the latter on English society. The characters in these novels inhabit a world of terrorism, warfare, and gross economic disparities. Drabble moves from local issues to global crises and beyond the 'condition of England' to the condition of other parts of the world and back again. *The Gates of Ivory* reflects the rise of a global consciousness which is linked to the other changes of consciousness that took place at the time. Drabble uses classical and pagan myths to address the human capacity for evil which manifests itself in the behaviour of the serial murder who is obsessed with the pagan cult of the severed head in *A Natural Curiosity* and in the atrocities committed by the Pol Pot regime and the Khmer Rouge and Cambodia.

Chapter four brings together writers who had a strong influence on the development of Drabble's writing, style and representations; the critic F. R. Leavis, the poet William Wordsworth, and the novelists Jane Austen, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing. In her first novel, *A Summer Bird-cage*, a young graduate Sarah Bennett decries her Oxbridge education for having left her with few achievements other than 'the ability to think in quotations' (SB,44). Chapter four is largely concerned with Drabble's capacity to 'think in quotations', i.e. with the use of allusion and the intertextual relationships that can be found in much her fiction.

My thesis is entitled 'Gender, Culture and Social Change in the Fiction of Margaret Drabble' and chapter four is concerned with literary culture and with F. R. Leavis, in particular. I show how freeing herself from Leavis's destructive and patriarchal assumptions was important to Drabble's development as a literary critic and creative writer. She is aware of the potential pitfalls of her immersion in the literary tradition and that it is essential to free herself from its influence if she is to think and write in interesting new ways and to find her own creative voice. Drabble's early championing of Arnold Bennett, and later of Virginia Woolf, whom Leavis disparaged, are both significant. The central tension in Drabble's fiction, as Elizabeth Eastman Somerton puts it in an unpublished Ph.D. thesis, is the tension between 'her awareness of and respect for the Leavisite "Great Tradition,"' on the one hand and 'her revisionary impulse', on the other (Somerton, 1998, p.7).

Chapter five deals with *The Witch of Exmoor* (1996), *The Peppered Moth* (2000), *The Seven Sisters* (2002), *The Red Queen* (2004), *The Sea Lady* (2006), *The Pure Gold Baby* (2013) and *The Dark Flood Rises* (2016). This chapter revisits and consolidates themes and concerns which have already become familiar to her reader. She returns to Greek mythology, and to Virgil's *The Aeneid* in *The Seven Sisters*, and explores the mother-daughter relationship in *The Peppered Moth* with insight having already examined antagonistic mother-daughter relationship in Jerusalem the Golden and her other novels in the 1960s. However, Drabble's most recent novels have taken her in a new direction in addressing the questions of women's ageing and intimations of death. She dramatises the life journey of women characters Frieda in *The Witch of Exmoor*, Anna in *The Pure Gold Baby*, Candida in *The Seven Sisters*, Ailsa in *The Sea Lady*.

Following J. Brooks Bouson in *Shame and the Aging Woman: Confronting and Resisting Ageism in Contemporary Women's Writing* (2016), I show how Drabble's representations of these ageing women work against the dominant images of older women in literature which shame them for their loss of their former beauty and child-

bearing capacities and strip them of their dignity. *The Dark Flood Rises* (2016) combines its study of its ageing heroine, Francesca Stubbs with a prophetic introduction of the crisis of mass migration that western Europe must confront in the twenty-first century.

## CHAPTER 1

### Gender and Social Change in Margaret Drabble's Novels of the 1960s

This thesis begins with analysis of the novels of Margaret Drabble which were published in the 1960s; *A Summer Bird-cage* (1963), *The Garrick Year* (1964), *The Millstone* (1965), *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967), and *The Waterfall* (1969). A core objective of the chapter, as indeed of the thesis as a whole, is to show how closely Drabble's literary works engage with the changing political, social and historical context in which they were written. In these novels Drabble is concerned with representing and, at a key historical moment, bringing up-to-date the subjects of marriage, illegitimacy, motherhood, abortion, and women's aspirations to achieve economic independence which she dramatizes within the framework of the family.

As Joanne Creighton puts it, Drabble's fiction is 'protean and reflective of its time' (Creighton, 1985, p.8). The first five novels are all, in their different ways, concerned with a woman's quest for personal autonomy and were written at a historical moment before the advent of second-wave feminism with its emphasis on consciousness-raising. Drabble noted that 'the feminist movement didn't really get going until the late 1960s and I began writing in the early 1960s. It's as though it was gathering strength at exactly the time I began writing' (Cardwell, et al., 2000, p.3). Her fictional works focus heavily on the problems of young, educated middle-class British women and 'expose the emptiness, the waste, the aimlessness of middle-class lives' (Creighton, 1985, p.18). They map the changing roles within the family and the challenges that women experience in coping with divorce, single motherhood, childcare and housework; in dealing with psychological maturation and the complications of sexual and domestic relationships. Her novels mirror women's struggle to establish a sense of identity and to find their own voice. In *The Waterfall*, Jane Gray longs to build a new morality because

she cannot fit in with the old: 'If I need morality, I will create one: a new ladder, a new virtue.... I will invent a morality that condones me' (W,53).

Much of Drabble's early fiction centres on a young woman struggling to free herself from patriarchal attitudes to love and sexuality. Her protagonists are typically young, stylish and discriminating, and they often define their personal liberation in terms of their own loss of inhibition and the difference between their attitudes to life, sex and love, and their mothers. In *Jerusalem the Golden*, thoughts of Clara Maugham's mother would fill Clara's mind 'when drunk or naked' (JG,123). The sophistication to which Drabble's protagonists aspire is reflected in their choice of food, music, and décor. In *A Summer Bird-cage*, Sarah Bennett's desire for freedom is reflected in her style of dress: It was a 'wonderful exhilarating dress to wear because it left me complete freedom of movement: it had no belt to sever my legs from the movement of my shoulder... It was a perfect garment to feel happy in' (SB,81).

Drabble revisits and modernises women's traditional rites of passage. *The Waterfall* begins with a detailed account of a home birth as this is being experienced by Jane, abandoned by her husband, and giving birth to her second baby, and who is attended not in the conventional way by a midwife or by her mother, but by her cousin Lucy and by Lucy's husband, James. Drabble's early novels are concerned with the lives of intellectual women; typically the graduate wife and the working mother who experience crises unfamiliar to previous generations. Her characters develop in a 'world where old values are no longer tacitly accepted and new views are unclear' (Creighton,1985,p.18). The central protagonist 'is always a woman and the society in which she lives is always depicted, accurately, as deeply patriarchal and class-bound' (Rose, E. 1985,p.2). As one of her earliest admirers, Valerie Grosvenor Myer puts it, a 'whole generation of women readers identifies with her characters, who they feel represent their own problems' (Myer,1974,p.13). However, their attitudes to their situations are by no means uniform or straightforward. As Mary Hurley Moran observes; 'While her novels delineate the bitterness and sense of injustice felt by many women

living in a patriarchal society, they at the same time dwell on the joys of motherhood, family life, and romantic love' (Moran,1983,p.7).

The historical moment at which *A Summer Bird-cage* was first published (1963) was marked by the opening up of more university opportunities for women and their wider participation in the paid labour force. Interviewed about the significance of her first novel by Barbara Milton, Drabble replied: 'Perhaps it was about the purpose of education for women and the choices it offers' (Milton,1978). Drabble's formative years were those in which, as Mary Eagleton has pointed out, female university graduates had faced limited job opportunities, which was compounded by 'the lack of career advice, the expectation that women's careers would defer to those of their husbands, the difficulty of combining employment and maternity, and sexual discrimination both in recruitment and in the work place' (Eagleton,2018,p.64). This provides the context for the fictional representations of the ambitious 'clever girls' who go to university in postwar Britain in the novels of women writers who including A. S. Byatt's *The Shadow of the Sun* (1964) and *The Game* (1967) which Eagleton has discussed in her recent monograph *Clever Girls and the Literature of Women's Upward Mobility* (2018).

Drabble recalls the pressures on her generation of university graduates to marry immediately on graduation and to abandon any aspirations of a career or personal fulfilment outside the family and home. She recollects:

There was ... a feeling that women were fighting one another in the marketplace, a marketplace which then, of course, was not concerned with writing but with getting married, and I remember quite clearly that the triumphant way to leave university was to leave with a ring on your finger. It is pitiable, tragic even, that this should have been the case, but that was the atmosphere, although we were not conscious of it at the time. It took until the early sixties for women to become conscious of the pressures to which they had surrendered. They had surrendered their honesty and their feeling of independence. (Drabble,1998,pp.163-164)

Drabble related her first writing to her feelings at finding herself at twenty-one, 'free, unemployed, wondering where to go, watching [her] friends and contemporaries to see where they would go' (Milton, 1978). She had initially wanted an acting career



when she graduated from Cambridge University with a double-first in English Literature in 1960. Soon after her graduation, she married the actor, Clive Swift, and her pregnancy put an end to her acting ambitions. Drabble's mother had had a similar experience after she was forced to abandon a promising teaching career in order to care for her family and as a result, her 'anger at being a housewife cast a terrible pall over [Margaret Drabble and her siblings]' (Stout, 1991).

With three very young children to take care of, Drabble found writing more compatible with motherhood than acting and decided to stay at home and to start writing novels instead. She wrote *A Summer Bird-cage* (1963) while she was expecting her first baby and the subject of modern marriage and its dilemmas for young ambitious women was much in her mind. The success of her debut novel encouraged her to continue on this new path. The restrictive nature of marriage in the 1960s and the consequent likelihood of lack of fulfilment for women is a repeated concern in *A Summer Bird-cage* (1963), *The Garrick Year* (1964), *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967) and *The Waterfall* (1969). None of these novels has a central protagonist in a happy marriage. Drabble recalls that women often got married at this time in order to escape from the parental home; 'a career was not considered a good enough reason for leaving home. Careers were not taken seriously, whereas marriage, however implausible, had to be respected' (Drabble, 2001b). *The Millstone* (1965) does, however, offer a modern alternative to marriage: single parenthood and a professional career that makes it possible to bring up a child on one's own, and this is sympathetically explored in the novel.

An appreciation of the revolution in British social and sexual attitudes in the 1960s is essential for an informed understanding of how radically the lives of men or women altered between 1960 when Margaret Drabble left university, and 1970, by which time she had married, had all three of her children, and published *The Waterfall*, the last of the five novels which had appeared at intervals of one or two years. Before I turn to these books in greater depth I wish to establish the historical framework in which they were written and to trace the movement in Britain towards a more open and liberal

society within which the early fiction is situated, and in which the question that Drabble consistently poses is 'what is an intelligent young woman to do with her life?'

In *Sixties Britain: Culture, Society and Politics* (2005) and *Doing History* (2011) (co-authored with Claire Norton) the historian Mark Donnelly describes the 1960s as a time of 'social and economic progress and cultural reinvigoration' when a 'cultural revolution' fused together naïve idealism, post-war materialism, youthful rebellion, sexual freedom, social mobility, limitless possibilities and artistic innovation (Donnelly, 2005, p.9). There was no single event that inaugurated the momentous changes in a decade that is remembered for 'mod fashions', short skirts, long hair, and the excitement of British popular music (The Beatles and the Rolling Stones) sweeping across the world. This was a decade marked by the Profumo scandal, the 'discovery' of sex and drugs by the 'baby boomer' generation, the summer of 1967 (the so-called Summer of Love); the contraceptive pill, the Robbins Report on the expansion of student numbers, the 'new' universities, student unrest and protests about the Vietnam war.

Two landmarks that helped to establish Britain as a more permissive society were the ending of censorship in the theatre and the liberalization of the law relating to the publication of explicit sexual content in art and literature, the latter was the Obscene Publications Act of 1959. As a consequence, Penguin had published D. H. Lawrence's controversial novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in full in 1960 to test the Act's application (May, 1995, p.445). The book, which contained four letter words which had not hitherto appeared in print, as well as sexually explicit depictions of Lady Chatterley's extra-marital affair with her gamekeeper, Mellors, a man from a much lower social class, had come out in Italy in 1928 and in France the following year, but had been considered too shocking for publication in the United Kingdom. The acquittal of Lawrence's publishers opened the floodgates for the publication of more sexually explicit books. After a protracted campaign the role of the Lord Chancellor as official theatre censor was abolished by the Theatres Act in 1968. As a result of this, and other important legislative

changes, men and women were gradually freed 'from the oppression of laws that stood between individuals and their self-determination and fulfilment' (Best,2009,p.40).

During the Second World War (1939-45) women had played active roles on the home front, frequently replacing the men who were away from home in the armed forces by undertaking manual labour and work in the factories. In 1943, Winston Churchill had stated that for Britain 'to maintain its leadership of the world and survive as a great power that can hold its own against external pressure, our people must be encouraged by every means to have larger families' (Webster,2003,pp.27-28). Earlier, William Beveridge (1879-1963), responsible for the 'Beveridge Report of 1942' which was key to the Welfare State and has since formed the basis for much social legislation, was fearful of falling birth rate and explained in his report: 'In the next thirty years housewives as mothers have vital work to do in ensuring the adequate continuance of the British race and of British ideals in the world' (Land,2010,p.23). In the 1950s, 'the emphasis was very firmly on the joys of marriage and motherhood. Although some women continued to work, the image of the stay-at-home wife and mother as the lynchpin of a stable household was encouraged as the ideal' (Osborne,2001,p.25).

The fear of population decline continued during the 1940s and 1950s. However, by the late 1960s this had turned into concern about over-population with growing discussion about finite resources and the effect of human activity on the environment. Thus, the earlier arguments were reversed. As Suzanne Mackenzie puts it, 'those who gave birth, as opposed to those who did not, were castigated as selfish, short-sighted, and in need of control. Fear of the consequences of the "[population] bomb" gave rise to a proliferation of groups advocating a "balance" of population and resources. It also gave rise to a new wave of birth controllers' (Mackenzie,1989,p.65).

For much of the twentieth-century respectable middle-class women had been required to conform to the societal norms which restricted their sexual activity. Marital rape was not recognised by the law and sex outside marriage, divorce and illegitimacy were all stigmatised. The changes in social attitudes to sex and marriage in the 1960s

had a profound impact on the expectations of women of all social classes. As Jane Lewis notes, 'The whole of the post-war social settlement was built on the twin assumptions of full male employment and stable families' (Lewis, J. 2003, p.260). Neither was destined to survive in the long-term. Women's participation in the paid labour force grew and so did the divorce rate and illegitimacy rates (Lewis, J. 2003, p.260). Contraception led to the increase of sexual activity outside marriage and to a generation for whom sex and marriage were no longer inseparable: 'Between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s large sample surveys showed a marked increase in unmarried teenagers with sexual experience, especially at younger ages' (Lewis, J. 2003, p.268). There was a sharp rise in the extramarital birth rate during the 1960s (Lewis, J. 2003, p.268) and this eventually established a new type of single parent family.

There was less pressure for married women to remain in abusive marriages and the Divorce Reform Act of 1969 made divorce permissible after a two-year separation only if both parties agreed. Otherwise, it was five years. While generally welcoming these measures, Drabble was acutely aware of the contradictions of what came to be known as the 'permissive society' and, in 1967 commented upon the strain that married couples were experiencing.

whereas young unmarried people do love now with a relaxed, permissive attitude towards sex, marriage itself has become increasingly difficult, tense, strained, and neurotic. The standards are high: we have freedom of choice, control over the size of our families, a high idea of husband-wife equality, a contempt for Victorian hypocrisy. Consequently the failure rate and the degree of suffering in this transitional period is high. (Drabble, 1967)

Other significant shifts in social attitudes and behaviour were, in part, related to the new legislation brought about by Harold Wilson's Labour governments of 1964 and 1966. The Family Law Reform Act of 1969 reduced the age of majority from 21 to 18. Amendments to existing statutes legalized activities such as abortion and (male) homosexuality which had been imprisonable offences: female homosexuality had never been recognised in law. Trevor May argues that there was 'no concerted programme of

legislation, and that each reform had to be argued on its merits by pressure groups which had to secure a parliamentary majority for reform without alienating their moderate supporters' (May,1995,p.446). The Sexual Offences Act of 1967 introduced by the Labour MP, Leo Abse implemented the recommendations in the Wolfenden Report a decade earlier and made homosexual acts between two consenting adults in private no longer a criminal offence (Marwick,1991,p.71). It is worth mentioning that the 1967 Sexual Offences Act was limited and acts in public were still criminalised.

The legalisation of abortion was among the most controversial of all the reforms. Supporters of abortion law reform advocated a 'woman's right to choose' whether or not to have a baby and opponents of abortion defended the right-to-life of the foetus. Indeed, Gillon Raanan has argued that 'the central issue in the abortion debate [the moral status of the human foetus] has not changed<sup>1</sup> since 1967 when the English parliament enacted the Abortion Act' (Gillon,2001,p.ii5). David Steele's Abortion Act while stopping short of abortion on demand did make abortion legal in some circumstances, up to the twenty-eighth week of pregnancy.

In 1967 Drabble wrote that 'we face the certainty of a sexual revolution,' which was 'caused largely by the development of contraceptive techniques' (Drabble,1967). For Drabble and other feminists, reproductive rights were inextricably linked to equality between the sexes. 'This freedom is evidently connected to that other major revolution of our society, the emancipation for women... Emancipation is now a reality, and we ought to be entering on the golden age of free adult sexual equality and companionship' (Drabble, 1967).

The oral contraceptive pill, a very effective and reliable method of birth control, was introduced in Britain in 1961. However, restrictions were placed on its distribution and initially it was made available only to married women. The contraceptive pill was

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<sup>1</sup> However, what has changed is 'the debate about abortion on grounds of fetal abnormality... These days an increasingly forceful disability rights movement is arguing that abortion on the grounds of fetal abnormality is morally and legally objectionable in discriminating against disabled people and in manifesting and encouraging disrespect, hostility and contempt for disabled people' (Gillon,2001,p.ii8).

available to unmarried women from Brook Advisory Centres from 1964. Access to the contraceptive pill and to a network of family planning clinics made it easier for women to pursue their careers without having to take leave due to unexpected pregnancy, as did the legalization of abortion. Eventually, the availability of birth control and legal abortion made it possible for women to enjoy their sexuality without fear of the consequences and widened their horizons beyond marriage and childbirth by reducing the risk of unwanted pregnancy (Perrons,2009,p.20). As Drabble, put it, 'Education, freedom to work, equal pay and social equality did not mean much when they could be negated by the arrival of one small unintended baby' (Drabble,1967).

These changes relating to reproductive rights were, however, controversial. While some feminists welcomed them, others did not. Susan Kingsley Kent wrote of the 'generational revolt against postwar society, producing anxiety and unease among significant segments of the population' (Kent,1999,p.336). Although the contraceptive pill gave women control over unwanted pregnancy it also subjected them to demands to be sexually available to men (Cook,2004,p.1) which many women resented. The sexual revolution was rejected at the beginning of the 1970s by some feminists who believed that 'it was primarily men who had benefited from the greater permissiveness and that female sexual autonomy was still denied' (Cook,2005,p.109). In 1970 the Equal Pay Act made it illegal to pay women lower rates than men for the same work although this was 'not intended to become fully effective for another five years' (Marwick,1991,p.71).

The legislative changes, and the changes in public attitudes to sexuality and marriage, which I have outlined above, have a direct influence upon Drabble's fiction. In *The Needle's Eye* (1972), for example, the main events take place in 1969, eleven years after Rose, the central protagonist, has separated from her husband. He leaves her in 1967 and she decides to divorce him at the end of the following year, 1968, and is granted a decree nisi (NE,66-67). We learn that Rose was born in 1937 and married at the age of twenty-one, i.e. in 1958. We are taken back to the historical moment when

Rose was longing for her crucial twenty-first birthday to arrive so that she would be in a position to marry without parental consent. The age of majority which was then twenty-one was lowered to eighteen when the Family Law Reform Act (1969) came into force in January 1970.

Unwanted babies and abortion occur with some insistence in the early novels of the 1960s. In *A Summer Bird-cage*, Gill becomes desperate as she realizes she is pregnant and Tony lends her money for an abortion. Hesther, an actress, tried to gas herself during her pregnancy because she 'was afraid that the baby would ruin her career' on stage (SB,179). In *The Waterfall*, Jane chooses to have an abortion after her first pregnancy because having another baby would deprive her of the enjoyment, of having a job, or freedom (W,109). In *The Millstone*, Rosamund has a half-hearted and unsuccessful attempt at abortion by means of gin and a warm bath.

Somewhat surprisingly, given the topical nature of the subject, Drabble does not deal with homosexuality in any depth in her fiction, although there is occasionally some suggestion of same-sex attraction between men. In *A Summer Bird-cage*, Louise accuses her husband, Stephen, of being in love with her lover, John (SB,200). In *Jerusalem the Golden*, homosexuality is openly discussed at a family gathering. Clelia says that 'Gabriel's boss is passionately in love with him... he thinks he's the most beautiful thing he's ever seen' (JG,120). In *The Millstone*, it is inferred that George, the father of Rosamond's child is homosexual (M,25).

Although Drabble is ambivalent about marriage as an institution, her first novel is typical of its time in that it sees marriage as 'almost inevitable for a woman' (Leeming,2006,p.16). The thematic importance of marriage is reflected in its title *A Summer Bird-cage*. The title is taken from a simile in John Webster's (1580-1634) play, *The White Devil* (1612): "Tis just like a summer bird-cage in a garden: the birds that are without, despair to get in, and the birds within despair and are in a consumption for fear they shall never get out' (Drabble,2001b). On the one hand, the cage symbolises

confinement, deprivation of liberty, and stasis, and on the other, a safe, secure and sheltered place where material needs are met. The night before her wedding, Louise Bennett, feeling restless, embodies the image of marriage as imprisonment by walking 'backwards and forwards, like an animal in a small cage trying to take exercise' (SB,22).

The narration of *A Summer Bird-cage* is conducted in the first-person. Sarah Bennett, a young university graduate, describes her uneasiness about having to choose between a career or a marriage: 'it was the one thing that kept me strung together in occasionally ecstatic, occasionally panic-stricken effort, day and night, year in, year out' (SB,37). As Mary Hurley Moran puts it, Sarah 'longs to have her cake and eat it too— to have both a career and marriage, both intellectual and emotional fulfillment— but she knows that for women of her generation such a future is not possible' (Moran,1983,p.12).

Sarah plans to marry Francis whom she met at Oxford University. However, her viewpoint on marriage is inconsistent. At one point, she thinks about 'those stupid home truths about a woman being nothing without a man' (SB,187). At another, she assures herself that 'the days are over, thank God, when a woman justifies her existence by marrying' (SB,74). Sarah expresses her sense of vulnerability as a woman and the inevitability of defeat in anything that she attempts to do on account of her sex: 'I looked at myself in fascination, thinking how unfair it was, to be born with so little defence, like a soft snail without a shell. Men are all right, they are defined and enclosed, but we in order to live must be open and raw to all comers... I felt doomed to defeat. I felt all women were doomed' (SB,28-29).

Sarah has had a difficult relationship with her sister, Louise, dating back to their childhood. Louise marries Stephen, a rich novelist, for his money, and tries to satisfy her emotional needs by an extra marital affair. The failure of Louise's mercenary marriage serves to bind the two sisters together in a bond of understanding and forgiveness when Louise is forced to ask for Sarah's help after being summarily thrown out of the house in her dressing gown when her husband discovers her in the bath with her lover. Sarah



believes in love, but she has lost all faith in the institution of marriage. She appreciates what her calculating married sister has achieved in turning tradition upside down and making marriage work in her favour. Louise may indeed have 'succumbed to social pressures.... But on her own terms.... she's getting her pound of flesh from society for not letting her live as what she is' as an 'intelligent,' 'beautiful and sexy woman' (SB,149). As Joanne Creighton puts it, Sarah feels admiration for her sister's flouting of convention in 'marrying money and choosing adultery, thereby reversing a previously male "tradition" of such extramarital arrangements' (Creighton,1985,p.42).

Louise's behaviour is represented as daring and pathbreaking in that a woman takes the sexual initiative and contests the 'double-standard': discreet affairs by men were often tolerated at this time but not marital indiscretions on the part of women. 'No fault' divorce on the grounds of the irretrievable breakdown of marriage was only made possible in 1969. Furthermore, financial settlements took no account of the spouse's contribution as a home-maker and the divorce laws in general remained heavily weighted in favour of men. Sarah reflects on the significance of what Louise was doing; 'a reversal of roles' as 'she was taking the man's part, calling at the theatre instead of being called for. She was in the tradition, but she had reversed it, instead of opting out completely, as most girls are now obliged to do. I felt a glow of admiration ... it was braver than to abandon the game completely. To force marriage into a mould of one's own, while still preserving the name of marriage— it seemed an enterprise worth consideration' (SB,180). She does, however, surprise herself by her own reaction: 'Who would have thought that an emancipated girl like me should actually feel concerned about a trivial thing like this?' (SB,129).

In a state of anxiety and equivocation about her own impending marriage, Sarah examines the marital experiences of the couples around her. None of them encourages her to take the decisive step. Her own parents' relationship was strained. Her family is 'characteristically patriarchal': her father 'determined all the fundamental conditions and made the key decisions,' while her mother is dissatisfied with her lot submitting

obediently to male authority and sacrificing her own aspirations for her husband and her children (Rai,2013,p.149). Her father is 'brutal' and 'reactionary towards women' (SB,26,30). She calls him 'a bit of a brute' a phrase that really fits him at times when he 'rudely and abruptly dissociates himself from everything Mama says' (SB,21). The happy marriage of a woman friend, who is pregnant, and enjoying a life of order and harmony (SB,84) is exceptional and Sarah feels both jealousy and contempt.

In *A Summer Bird-cage* the decision to marry is not depicted simply as a matter of informed choice. On the contrary, Sarah understands this to be determined by the pressures exerted on the individual by society. Sarah is 'vaguely aware of a hinterland of non-personal action, where the pulls of sex and blood and society seem to drag me into unwilling motion' (SB,71). She would so like people to be free, and bound together not by need but by love.

In *The Millstone*, Rosamund's sister, Beatrice gets married shortly after graduation. She has three children in quick succession and stays at home to bring them up. She suffers emotionally in not being able to work and to make use of her Oxford degree (M,204). Rosamund scornfully talks about her classmate in Cambridge who is now 'to her great annoyance, nothing but a wife and a mother' (M,144). Sarah looks pityingly at her 'poor brave twittering Mama, pretending everything had always been so lovely, ignoring the facts' and covering up her 'courage and desperation' with 'nonsense and fuss and chirruping' (SB,21). The ostensibly happy married life of their friend, Gill ends abruptly after she refuses to 'put the kettle on' (SB,41). Louise describes the marriage of Stella, a university graduate, and Bill, a physicist, whom she married in the year they came down from university, as 'the worst catastrophe [she has] ever seen' (SB,204). Stella is surrounded by 'wet nappies' and a 'screaming' baby and is full of abuse for her husband who in contrast to herself had interests and contacts outside the home (SB,205). No wonder Sarah sometimes thinks, 'Oh, I didn't want it, any of it. I felt frightened and ill' (SB,188). In *The Waterfall* James, a possessive and demanding

husband, expects Lucy to have babies that she does not want: She started to cry when she recounts; 'he kept going on about babies, until I began to hate him for it— I hated having children, they drive me to despair, how could one have more than three kids? It wouldn't be possible' (W,226-227).

As Carol Seiler-Franklin puts it, Drabble's early fiction 'reflects the attitude of a society which only accepts women's working for money as a temporary occupation before marrying, for a woman's main duty is to look after her husband and produce his children' (Seiler-Franklin,1979,p.84). Although her women are assertive, well-educated and have high expectations of life, they are still expected to put their husband's career first.

The novels depict women who are adept at compromise. Despite being a 'confirmed pacifist,' Beatrice marries Hallam, a scientist engaged in atomic research, and has to move to an atomic research station; 'a deserted spot in the Midlands populated only by other atomic scientists, their wives, tradesmen and engineers' (M,72). It is extremely difficult for Beatrice to endure living there at first, and she finds her husband's job as a nuclear scientist difficult to reconcile with her principles. However, she begins 'to take the line of realistic compromise' (M,72).

In *The Waterfall* Jane looks back on her temporary job after graduation with nostalgia. She 'had lived in a flat full of girls, whose chat about sex and food and clothes and books had given [her] an illusion of life and company' (W,105). Jane laments the decision to marry that has trapped her in a web of isolation; 'these things were lost to me, taken from me by my own choice, and nothing presented itself to replace them' (W,105). 'Somehow the fact of being married took all life from me, it reduced me from the beginning to inactivity' (W,105).

Jane has grown up with middle-class parents who believed, or so they said, 'in the God of the Church of England,...in monogamy, in marrying for love, in free will, in the possibility of moderation of the passions, in the virtues of reason and civilization'

(W,53). She 'feels capable of true passion and love, but must start to consider her emotions to be unsuitable in an environment where reason and self-restraint are regarded as the true goals of human existence' (Schier,1993,p.45). She is therefore driven to deception. She 'practised concealment...knowing that if they could see me as I truly was they might never recover from the shock (W,53).

Jane withdraws in order not to shatter the system: she puts her emotions and physical desires into a private self that she never exposes to the public. On the surface she adapts: she resigns herself to a marriage with Malcolm for whom she feels neither loves nor attraction. As Schier puts it, 'From then on she feels an unbridgeable gap between mind and body, reason and emotion' (Schier,1993,p.45).

I now want to contextualise the position of the working mother who is a recurrent figure in Drabble's early fiction. After the war politicians had stressed the importance of motherhood and rebuilding the family; a position echoed in the circulars of the Ministries of Health and Education, which ruled that the children of working mothers were not to be given priority for day care or nursery education. Indeed, 50 per cent of wartime nurseries had been closed by 1955 (Lewis, J. 2003,p.266).

Women had been encouraged to play the role of the home-based mother because 'sociologists and psychologists warned of the dangers of maternal deprivation caused by the working mother's absence' (Garrett,1997,pp.139-140). Works such as Dr Benjamin Spock's book on *Baby and Child Care* (1947) and Dr John Bowlby's report, *Maternal Care and Mental Health* (1951) were 'used to make women feel guilty of neglecting their children if they took paid employment as this was believed to lead to psychological problems, juvenile delinquency, and crime' (Pugh,1996,p.266). Women's participation in work outside the home 'became equated with "maternal deprivation" and regarded as profoundly damaging to the child. Thus, to be a "good" mother was to be a stay-at-home mother: one whose sole focus is on the needs of the child' (Lafranc,2009,p.30). The shortages of labour and the guilt about absentee mothers

made married women of the late 40s and 50s face contradictions which encouraged them to go back to work, this time in a part-time capacity.

The number of female participants in the paid workforce increased dramatically in the late 1950s and this continued in the period about which Drabble writes when 'rather more than half (55%) of women under 60 years old were earning (either as an employee or self-employed)' (Davies & Joshi,1998,p.35). In her survey in 1965 of married women and work conducted on behalf of the Ministry of Labour, Audrey Hunt concluded that there were three motives behind women's going out to work: 'firstly, the financial advantages, secondly, among younger women, boredom, and thirdly, among educated women, to make use of the qualifications obtained' (Anderton,1994,pp.40-41)

There was no significant shift in domestic responsibilities at this time and the uneven division of domestic labour in the household, even where the mother was in full-time work, continued largely because the assumption that caring for others was women's primary responsibility remained largely unchallenged: 'Working women continue to do the lion's share of housework, child-rearing, and caring for elderly relatives. Surprisingly, this [rule] applied even in situations where women were primary earners' (Garrett,1997,p.142). In the mid-1960s, 'neither the government nor the husbands who were apparently willing to share the burden' (Anderton,1994,p.42).

Martin Pugh explains that women who sought freedom and equality by going out to work struggled with the double burden of work and family care as both 'working-class and middle-class women increasingly undertook jobs, often part-time, in order to enable their families to enjoy the higher standard of living' (Pugh,1996,p.266). Though women were working in a comparable range of jobs alongside men during the 1960s, they were not awarded equal pay for work of equal value and in 1962 'there were separate pay scales for some professions including teaching' (Perrons,2009,p.20). The demands for equal pay was one of the big gender issues of the 1960s and was only resolved after

the success of the strike of the Dagenham sewing machinists in 1987 and the Equal Pay Act of 1970 introduced by Barbara Castle.

Emma, a young wife and mother of two in *The Garrick Year* is a prime example of frustrated career ambitions and marital regrets. She is forced to turn down an offer of a job as a TV newsreader in London, although this is an 'exceptionally lucky opportunity' for her 'at a time when the television channels and the public were still unwilling to accept that women could be taken seriously in such a role' (Leeming,2006,p.21). She loses this 'rare' job (GY,14) because she is obliged to leave London for Hereford, a small provincial town where her husband takes part in a theatre festival. Emma has to abandon her desire for 'a good, steady, lucrative job' (GY,10) in order to accompany him. Emma deeply resents her marriage which prevents her reaching her goal of economic independence. Thinking about her unfulfilled career expectation, she grimly reflects;

I could hardly believe that marriage was going to deprive me of this too. It had already deprived me of so many things which I had childishly overvalued: my independence, my income, my twenty-two inch waist, my sleep, most of my friends who had deserted on account of David's insults, a whole string of finite things, and many more indefinite attributes like hope and expectation. (GY,10)

Valeria Grosvenor Myer notes that as a young married woman, Drabble followed her husband to the Royal Shakespeare Theatre at Stratford-on-Avon where he acted and that comparisons can be made between Emma's situation and the author's. However, she points out the difference between Drabble and Emma: the latter is neither 'serious' nor 'intellectual'. Myer described the novel as 'a satirical portrait of a silly woman,' to which Drabble retorted, 'She's not silly!' Myer suggests that this intimates Drabble's 'respect for her character and sympathy with Emma's plight (which was in many respects her own)' (Myer,1974,p.31).

In *A Summer Bird-cage* Sarah Bennett's options are restricted: she understands that society expects her to choose between marriage and an academic career. However, in Drabble's middle and late novels, women characters do struggle with the balancing acts of combining paid work and family care; torn between motherhood and career, but

working hard in order to manage both. Against her solicitor's advice, Rose in *The Needle's Eye* refuses to apply for maintenance after her separation from Christopher. Instead, she chooses to do a variety of badly paid jobs, such as serving dinners at the school and supervising the launderette (NE,44). Liz in *The Radiant Way* is able to pursue her career quite competently although she has been distracted twice; first by her first divorce and secondly by Charles's denial of her importance in their affair. She knows that she has 'plenty to get on with' and after all, she has 'a brilliant career... [and] a dozen children' (RW,62,121) still loving her. Her friend Alix, a single mother who is living on her part-time teaching jobs, struggles against poverty, refusing to submit; she 'renounced the role of tragic widow with an austerity that irritated her would-be saviours' (RW,96). Frances Wingate in *The Realms of Gold*, an archaeologist and the mother of four children is another example of the hardworking women combining family and a career.

Drabble's married women have extra marital affairs as a means of escape from unequal marriages with husbands who take them for granted. In *A Summer Bird-cage*, Gill and Tony separate when Tony fails to see her as an independent woman. He evaluates her only in terms of her use to him: 'Oh it was awful. I wanted to do things too, I didn't like just waiting on him' (SB,35). However, these affairs have consequences when young children are involved. In *The Garrick Year* Emma hardly ever has sex with her husband. Drabble writes that their two children were conceived by 'legalized rape' (GY,63). The choice of vocabulary is revealing here. Marital rape, although an issue of importance to feminists in the 1960s and 1970s, was not recognised in criminal law until 1991. Emma starts an affair with Wyndham Farrer to escape boredom and domesticity but the heavy price that she pays is the loss of her maternal feelings for her children. 'I could hardly believe that I had ever had them. They smiled at me and I smiled at them as I smile at babies in the park, strange babies: and this was real pain' (GY,111). The deeper her involvement in her affair, the more problems her children face. On one occasion, she returns home after an illicit encounter to find that the oven is on, unlit, and

the house full of gas (GY,117). On another, her daughter falls in the water while Emma is busy talking to her lover (GY,151). He too has expectations that she will attend to his every need.

"Tell me, Wyndham, what makes you think that I'm any better at sewing buttons on than you are?"

"Well, you're a woman. More practice" (GY,130).

At the end she thinks of herself as 'a fool' because 'he doesn't know anything about [her] or care anything about [her], he just wanted to get [her] into bed' (GY,16).

Drabble is frank about women's sexual response in *The Waterfall*. Jane does not enjoy sex with her husband, and describes her frigid response to him after her miscarriage at three months (W,106). The novel candidly explores a woman's feelings in a loveless marriage in which sex is physically painful. Jane overcomes her lack of interest in sex in an affair outside her marriage and is surprised to find herself becoming passionate for the first time: 'That a desire so primitive could flow through her, unobstructed, like milk, astonished her' (W,47).

In *The Garrick Year*, it is not only Emma who is unfaithful to her husband; he betrays her by having an affair with an actress, Sophy Brent (GY,143) who is sexually attractive but not Emma's equal in intelligence: 'I have always found it hard to believe that a man can love a woman despite her identity, and solely for eyes and thighs and so forth' (GY,145) is Emma's response. Emma's life consists of childcare, household chores and economic dependency during her seven months of exile in the countryside and she is made to feel inadequate by her husband for spending money that she does not earn.

"You're not in a position to complain," he said. "It's my lovely self that paid for those chops and that television and that dress you're wearing and that roof over your head".

"Ah well," said I, getting to my feet, "perhaps that's why I'm so keen on getting myself an independent income, so I can throw all this rubbish back in your charming face" (GY,17).



Watching her daughter, she wonders 'what I would do if I had to deal with her by myself, on a weekly allowance. This was what I had asked for in marrying David and in saying a qualified Yes to Wyndham: this insecurity. But this time I was its victim, not its agent' (GY,146). What Emma has forfeited through marriage is all sense of excitement and joy. She married because she 'did not want an easy life, I wanted something precipitous' (GY,25). Yet she finds herself overwhelmed with domestic responsibilities, pregnancy, child care, and sleepless nights while conscious that her husband might stay out all night enjoying himself 'until he was driven home by hunger, annoyance or misery' (GY,14).

The need for an expansion of the numbers in higher education in England featured highly on the political agenda in the 1960s. The Robbins Report on higher education (1961-1963) was prepared by a committee appointed by the Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan and the Conservative Party who held the office from 1957 to 1963. This report recommended the increase of the university places. The Wilson government (1964 to 1970) responded by building the new universities of Sussex, Essex, York, East Anglia in the 1960s. Moreover, some Colleges of Advanced Technology became universities. A 1971 report found that 4.6% of women in England entered university compared to 7.6% of men (Philips,2006,p.56). The figures show that the percentage of young people going into higher education during the 1960s was small and the percentage of women even smaller.

The government supported students offered a place at university through a system of grants. State and County grants were given during the 1960s 'based on a means test meant that any boy or girl could now afford to go to university, but there were just not enough places for those who were qualified for higher education' (Philips,2006,p.56). The 'university expansion helped to make education the greatest achievement of the 1964-70 Labour Government. It was an irony that by 1970 that same government had become the object of bitter attacks by many of the students who had benefited from its policies' (Pugh,1996,p.269). In *Jerusalem the Golden*, a state grant

makes it possible for Clara, whose family cannot support her financially, to have access to university; her student grant in the first term is £90, which is equivalent to £1,500 today. In *The Millstone* Rosamund is living rent-free in a flat owned by her parents and has an income of about £500 per year through various research grants and endowments.

The women characters of Drabble's early fiction are caught between conflicting desires and regrets, about losing their jobs after graduation or not having had the chance to go to university at all. Jane in *The Waterfall* is a university graduate and looks back with nostalgia on her temporary job after graduation and before getting married (W,105). The home-bound Emma in *The Garrick Year* meets a friend from school, who got a good degree in history and a career in teaching. It crosses Emma's mind that 'our lives had turned out quite neatly upside down: she was to have had the early marriage and the children, I was to have had the independent and faintly intellectual career' (GY,62). The question that preoccupies Sarah in *A Summer Bird-cage* is 'what a girl can do with herself if overeducated and lacking a sense of vocation?' (SB,8) Her degree is 'shiny' and 'useless' (SB,6). When Sarah leaves home to work in London, her mother wishes she had 'a proper job' (SB,62). In her day women could not seek higher education because 'education was kept for the boys' (SB,63). As Manasa Rai reminds us, Sarah's dilemma was all too common: 'girls considered themselves to be over educated and did not know what job to seek. For those who wanted to work had limited options to choose from. The only vocations open to them were: teaching, secretarial jobs, nursing' (Rai,2013,p.148).

The intellectual women characters in Drabble's novels realise that their way towards career advancement cannot easily be combined with any conventional notions of femininity to which they aspire. As Anita Brookner once put it, 'Girls who are alone too much need not suffer in this day and age. They can do research' (Brookner,1991,p.23). In *A Summer Bird-cage*, Sarah tells her sister: 'I used to fancy myself as [a don]. But I'll tell you what's wrong with it. It's sex. You can't be a sexy don.'

It's all right for men, being learned and attractive, but for a woman it's a mistake. It detracts from the essential seriousness of the business' (SB,183). In this case, femininity, and specifically female sexuality, as Mary Eagleton has noted, is at odds with intellectualism; 'there is the appeal to "seriousness" which the sexual woman, representing the body, feeling, even frivolity, fatally undermines' (Eagleton,2018,p.66).

Another theme which Drabble developed and which was new in the 1960s was women's physical or bodily experience. Like Doris Lessing who, in *The Golden Notebook* (1962), had touched on subjects which were 'taboo' for the novelist, such as menstruation, Drabble struggled to find a 'suitable language to describe experience like pregnancy or breast feeding' and she 'had to find a language that was not part of traditional literature' (Tsushima,1991,p.87). Rosamund in *The Millstone* was a rebel for her time in breaking away from the traditional role designated for women and deciding to bring up a baby on her own. The critic Yoshiko Enomoto sees her as a pathbreaking character participating 'in the formation of a new gender identity' (Enomoto,1998,p.117).

In her introduction to *Between Mothers and Daughters: Stories Across a Generation* (1985) Susan Koppelman argues that there is a close relationship between women's personal experiences as mothers and daughters and the literary narratives that they produce:

Women who write fiction write stories about mothers and daughters. Often, a woman writer's first published story is about the relationship between a mother and a daughter. Nor do women writers abandon this subject as they grow in their craft and their lives. They return to the literary contemplation and portrayal of mothers and daughters again and again throughout their careers. Women of every race, ethnicity, religion, region, and historical period write stories about mothers and daughters, and the similarities among the stories are greater than the differences because what we share as women, at least in terms of this primary relationship, is more than whatever else divides us. (Koppelman,1985,p.xv)

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929) Virginia Woolf suggests it is important to 'think back through our mothers if we are woman' (Woolf,2005a,p.75). Tess Cosslett defines a matrilineal narrative as 'one which either tells the stories of several generations of

women at once, or which shows how the identity of a central character is crucially formed by her female ancestors' (Cosslett,1996,p.7). Tania Modleski refers to matrilineage as 'our cultural heritage as women' (Modleski,2014,p.43). Maternal subjectivity positions 'the mother as a subject in her own right' (Yu,2005,p.7). In *Mother, She Wrote. Matrilineal Narratives in Contemporary Women's Writing*, Yi-Lin Yu suggests that matrilinealism in contemporary women's fiction, 'calls forth not only a reaffirmation of relationality within feminist and women's writing of motherhood and mothering but also its adjustment and transition' (Yu,2005,p.5).

Drabble's most extended and important engagement with the matrilineal is in a much later novel, *The Peppered Moth* (2000). However, her interest in the matrilineal and the mother-daughter relationship is also present in the writing in the 1960s. She has often been described as the 'novelist of maternity', for example by Elaine Showalter as far back as 1977 (Showalter,1977,p.503). Margaret Rowe suggests that the critical recognition that Drabble's early works received from feminist critics was largely a consequence of her 'giving voice to the significance of maternity' (Rowe,2005,p.421). This reputation, which does much to explain her popularity in the 1960s, has stayed with Drabble, somewhat unfairly, throughout a long career in which, as I go on to show in later chapters, her thematic interests have shifted and broadened considerable, and dates back to the preoccupation with motherhood in her first five books.

Drabble's depiction of the mother-daughter relationship was affected by her relationship to her own mother which was at times troubled and ambivalent: 'They could fight and scream, and slam doors at each other and then feel better' (Stout,1991). However, her mother encouraged her daughters to study and to work and for that she felt gratitude. Drabble admits that she has never been good at creating 'good mothers' in her fiction but that her own mother was 'good enough' (Milton,1978).

Jane Gray in *The Waterfall* is a strikingly perceptive representation of maternal ambivalence and how patterns of mothering are reproduced across the generations. She has a difficult relationship with her mother but a good relationship with her children.

Jane is angry about the way that her mother unconsciously rejected her at her birth and her dislike of her ever since (W,121,59). As a reaction to her mother's withdrawal of love, Jane proceeds to make herself emotionally inaccessible. 'Denied love at birth, she now denies her own love to others... when she has her first child she is herself genuinely surprised at her own unreserved and uncomplicated love for her son' (Kluwick,2007,p.136).

*The Waterfall* was at the time of its publication the most stylistically experimental of Drabble's novels. Drabble uses a divided narrative point of view tailored to depict the condition from which Jane suffers and in which she feels that her mind and her body are at odds. As it is explained in the first-person, she 'felt split between the anxious intelligent woman and the healthy and efficient mother– or perhaps less split than divided. I felt that I lived on two levels, simultaneously' (W,110). The first half of *The Waterfall* is concerned with Jane's pleasurable experience of giving birth to her second baby, albeit that she has been deserted by her own husband at a late state of pregnancy, and is experiencing an illicit passionate love affair with her cousin's husband is written in the third-person. However, there is a switch from third to first-person narrative at about the half way point in the novel when Jane in the first-person cries out 'Lies, lies, it's all lies. A pack of lies.... What have I tried to describe? A passion, a love, an unreal life, a life in limbo, without anxiety, guilt, corpses' (W,84). First- and third-person narration then take turns with the third-person narrator recounting the heightened emotions of the love affair. This split narration expresses a division that we see in Drabble's women characters who are torn between a longing for romantic intensity of feeling that exists alongside a pragmatic rational side to their character and a critical intelligence that keeps passion and unruly emotions under close scrutiny and in check: 'It was some foreign country to me, some Brussels of the mind, where I trembled and sighed for my desire, I, a married woman, mother of two children, with as much despair as that lonely virgin in her parsonage' (W,84).

In her interview with Barbara Milton, Drabble stated that the 'worst mother in my novels is the one in *Jerusalem the Golden* who was modelled on my grandmother who made my mother's life a misery' (Milton,1978). The central protagonist Clara is intelligent, but her mother is mean-spirited and unwilling to offer praise or encouragement. Instead, she induces fear and guilt by 'so many fixed and rigid rules' (JG,44). Clara's academic ability singles her out; 'made her an object of ridicule and contempt from the earliest age, and some of her most frightful memories were of her mother, grim-faced, ill concealing her resentment, as she flipped through those predictably shining school reports' (JG,8). When asked 'where her daughter got her brain from,' Mrs Maugham 'would sniff and shrug her shoulders and say, as though disclaiming a vice or a disease; "Well, she certainly didn't get them from me, she must have got them from *him* [her father], I suppose"' (JG,27).

However, Clara eventually understands the truth; that her mother was intelligent herself and 'had done well at school, she had shone and prospered, and the evidence of her distant triumphs still lay around the house in the form of inscribed Sunday school prizes. But whatever talents she had once had, she had now turned ferociously against them' (JG,27-28). As Sue Ann Johnston explains, it is because Mrs Maugham 'herself had been forced to stifle her intelligence, she cannot give the encouragement she had been denied' (Johnston,1981,pp.168-169).

Drabble's utterances on the experience of being a mother from the 1960s to the present have been consistently positive: She considers motherhood to be 'the greatest joy in the world' (Lin,2005,p.16). Maternal love is shown as particularly redemptive in *The Millstone* and has a deeply transformative effect on Rosamund's life. In overcoming the many difficulties of her pregnancy and motherhood, Rosamund achieves fulfilment and independence. Drabble addresses the problems attendant on motherhood at the same time as she shows that with sufficient determination and courage on the part of the mother any 'handicap' that society puts in her way can be overcome. Rosamund writes better after her baby is born and she finishes her thesis on Elizabethan sonnet

sequences in excellent time. Rosamund believes that she must 'have a rock-like confidence in [her] own talent, for [she] simply did not believe that the handicap of one small illegitimate baby would make a scrap of difference to [her] career' (M,107). Much the same is true for Emma in *The Garrick Year* whose children ground her in reality. After a friend's suicide she states that 'I used to be like Julian myself, but now I have two children, and you will not find me at the bottom of any river. I have grown into the earth: I am terrestrial' (GY,170).

The mother figures in Drabble's fiction are often prone to depression. In *Melancholics in Love: Representing Women's Depression and Domestic Abuse*, Frances Restuccia sees maternal depression as part of the cultural transmission of female suffering from mother to daughter arguing that the mother who views herself as a wounded member of a female line retreats inwardly and inflicts her own sense of grievance upon her child (Restuccia,2000,p.55).

The condition affected her own mother badly when she left university and started a family but Drabble writes of depression as a problem of particular significance in the 1960s when it appeared to be dramatically on the rise among women. Drabble writes; 'the 19th-century diagnosis of hysteria (etymologically, a womb-related disorder) more or less disappeared and was overtaken by a blanket diagnosis of depression.... More women take anti-depressants and more women are succumbing to depression year by year, or so recent surveys suggest' (Drabble,2010c).

Clara's mother in *Jerusalem the Golden* is deeply depressed and the novel depicts Mrs Maugham's melancholy state of mind at the time of her daughter's birth when she names her 'Clara' as a penance of her 'existence and sex' (JG,8). Phillipa Denham is overcome by a deep unnamable despair and wanders around the house 'in nervous, silent suffering', always ready to shed tears: 'She wept in the street; she sat on the front steps and wept ... with a baby in a pram ... and the two others running loose down the pavement' (JG,141). A full explanation of her distress is never offered but 'it

was suffering that made her cry' as did the birth of her daughter and 'in the girl... she saw herself and her wounds reborn' (JG,143).

At the end of *Jerusalem the Golden* Clara returns from Paris to find her mother dying of cancer. When she visits Mrs Maugham in hospital it is without flowers because she anticipates their rejection. She is 'afraid of that sour smile with which so many years ago her mother had received her small offerings of needle cases and cross-stitch pin cushions and laboriously gummed and assembled calendars' (JG,198).

While she lies in the hospital, Clara searches her bedroom and finds photographs in which her mother appears to be single and 'smiled bravely, gaily, a smile of radiant with hope and intimacy' (JG,195). Clara discovers that her mother had been very different before her marriage. Unmarried, she 'looked thin and frail and tender, quite lacking the rigid misery that seized her face on the wedding photographs; Clara had never seen such a look upon her face' (JG,28). Reading her mother's diary dating back to 1925, she is aware that the diary was written 'before her mother's marriage, before the end of her hopes' (JG,196) and realises that she had never really known her mother. This incident, in which she recognises her mother in a youthful, hopeful phase of life, brings Clara a moment of shock. She 'was glad to have found her place of birth, she was glad that she had however miserably pre-existed, she felt, for the first time, the satisfaction of her true descent' (JG,196-197).

The episode with the mother's girlhood diaries has been analysed very differently by two of Drabble's earliest critics, Valerie Grosvenor Myer in *Margaret Drabble: Puritanism and Permissiveness* (1974) and Mary Moran in *Margaret Drabble: Existing Within Structure* (1983). For Myer, this is a moment of reconciliation with a mother of whose pain Clara has been hitherto unaware but her familial legacy is largely negative; guilt and puritanical repression. For Moran the family is that which ties individuals to their roots and Clara's moment of recognition is a source of psychological relief and



emotional comfort. As Mary Eagleton puts it, Clara 'begins to understand a maternal genealogy' and can now admit a link to the past she has denied (Eagleton,2018,p.51).

In *Contemporary Women's Writing: From The Golden Notebook to The Color Purple* (2000) Maroula Joannou suggests that the story of the unmarried mother is 'a rebellion against the dominance of romance and marriage plots, which show marriage as the conclusion of the heroine's quest for self-acknowledge ... in formulating how best to live a life outside marriage the contemporary "unmarried mother" narratives question the conventions of the novel as well as the social order' (Joannou,2000,p.57). It should, however, be emphasised that *The Millstone* does not romanticise the sexual liberation of women in the 1960s, rather it produces a nuanced picture of the sexual mores of the times by engaging with the contradictory expectations and the feelings of a woman poised at a time of transition. Drabble explains that Rosamund 'was what she was, she was of her age, caught at the opening of an era that she didn't know how to enter' (Drabble,2011). As John Mullan puts it, the protagonist, a woman of her time, 'inhabits a world of contradictory mores' as she experiences it, unmarried mothers 'are still stigmatised, notably by doctors and nurses, but her twenty-something friends live lives of easy permissiveness' (Mullan,2011). Rosamund's 'adventure is pregnancy and motherhood, and her freedom is the option, new and still tentative in the 1960s, to become a single parent without stigma' (Hadley,2015).

Rosamund has been brought up by a feminist mother with an unshakeable sense that women are equal to men: 'My mother, you know was a great feminist. She brought me up to be equal. She made there be no questions, no difference. I was equal. I am equal' (M,24). She names her baby Octavia after the Victorian social reformer, Octavia Hill (M,166) and describes herself as 'one of those Bernard Shaw women who wants children but no husband' (M,102). However, Rosamund's maternal legacy has also taught her to be self-reliant, to behave with the courtesy, politeness, rationality and self-restraint characteristic of the educated middle-classes, and to eschew the expression of extreme emotion. Her pregnancy forces her to understand how the body imposes

physical restrictions on equality: 'I was trapped in a human limit for the first time in my life, and I was going to have to learn how to live inside it' (M,58).

The incident in *The Millstone* which made a powerful impact upon its first readers, and for which the novel is still often remembered, is that in which Rosamund's daughter, Octavia, has a heart operation, and Rosamund angrily confronts the hospital authorities and demands access to her baby which she has been prevented from seeing. This is derived directly from Drabble's personal experience when one of her children was diagnosed with a heart lesion. Rosamund's anxieties about the hospital regulations were very much the author's. As Drabble explains: 'She was braver than I, but I did have a sense of writing on behalf of many mothers as she confronted hospital authority. I dramatised my predicament, as writers do, but I didn't think that dishonest. The issue was real, and I think my treatment of it was useful' (Drabble,2011).

Rosamund's impassioned outcry in the hospital ward is at once an example of a feminist epiphany which changes the subject's outlook on life for ever and a powerful contestation of the patriarchal attitudes which the authorities in the hospital represent. After that, her consciousness is altered and she finds herself stronger than before: 'up till that moment I had been inwardly convinced that too much worry would rot my nature beyond any hope of fruit or even of flower. But then, however fleetingly, I felt that I could take what I had been given to take' (M,137). She admits this inner strength is new to her as she feels, for the first time since Octavia's birth, a sense of agency and adequacy. As a child, she used 'to endure any discomfort rather than cause offence' because to her 'the pain of causing trouble was greater than anything that I myself within myself could endure' (M,140). However, she finds herself with a new assertiveness because of the presence of her own child; 'with Octavia, I cannot inflict all hardship on myself alone: what I take for myself, she gets too' (M,140).

As Tessa Hadley puts it, the 'novel is a paean for motherhood, yet it isn't sentimental or ecstatic' (Hadley,2015). In consequence of her pregnancy and

motherhood, Rosamund steps out of the privileged middle-class cocoon that had sheltered her from the realities of other women's lives. Pregnancy and motherhood force Rosamund to be more aware of herself; to reconsider her relationships to other women while she is developing her new identity. Motherhood brings Rosamund 'an awareness of the facts and feeling of maternity very remote from scholarly life' and it 'arouses a feeling of affinity and oneness with other women, though different in status' (Tapaswi,2004,p.103). Her first visit to the clinic is a 'revelation ... an initiation into reality' (M,31) and she is 'reduced almost to tears by the variety of human misery that presented itself' (M,52). After six months' attendance Rosamund's pregnancy has enabled her to establish contact with women of other social classes: 'I felt more in common with the ladies of the clinic than with my own acquaintances' (M,56).

In this chapter I have shown how Drabble's first five novels prefigure and engage with many of the concerns about sexuality, marriage, work, reproductive rights, and the inequality between the sexes which would be taken up by feminists in the women's liberation movement in the following decades. The novels of the 1960s are all woman-centred and the preoccupations of her protagonists are frequently those of the graduate wife and the working mother whose backgrounds are very like her own. Drabble locates her fiction in the historical present; at a time when the expectations and experiences of women were changing rapidly, but she does not romanticise the sexual revolution. In a society which is becoming more liberal, tolerant and open in its social attitudes (changes with which she is fully in sympathy), but which remains male-dominated, her women struggle to find ways to combine marriage, children, and work, although none of them are able to do so to their own satisfaction.

## CHAPTER 2

### Margaret Drabble and the 'Condition of England'

Margaret Drabble's first five novels already considered, so closely linked, as I have shown, to the social and cultural conditions of their time, all clearly belong to the 'realist tradition' in English literature. Drabble has always been committed to the realist tradition of writing closely associated with the nineteenth-century novel, valuing her intimate knowledge of English literary traditions and expressing her particular admiration for Victorian fiction. Drabble controversially allied herself with tradition rather than modernist literary experimentation as a young novelist at a very early stage in her career when she famously remarked (in a radio programme in 1967); 'I'd rather be at the end of a dying tradition, which I admire than at the beginning of a tradition which I deplore' (Bergonzi,1972,p.65). Fifty years later the influence of the Victorian novelists is still pronounced in her work.

As José Francisco Fernández writes in his recent edition of Drabble's short fiction: 'Margaret Drabble has never disowned the tradition of the social realist novel and has always admitted the powerful influence on her work of the great English novelists of the nineteenth century, like George Eliot. She has often stated that in her writing she is arguing back, continuing their story' (Fernández,2011,p.xviii). Drabble's traditional treatment of modern and contemporary subject matter makes her a distinctive voice in the literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Indeed, she has been described as 'the chronicler of contemporary Britain' (Rose,P.,1980). Her significance arises, to a great extent, from her ability to appropriate, inflect and update the English literary tradition for the purpose of addressing the social, political and moral changes of her own society in her novels. Rose suggests that she will be 'the novelist people will turn to a hundred years from now to find out how things were, the person who will have done for late-20th-century London what Dickens did for Victorian London' (Rose,P.,1980) accessing the Dickens tradition of social comment and social responsibility.

Like the Victorian novelists that she admires, Drabble aims at bringing the reality of English people's lives into her writing by concentrating on familiar things and ordinary people. She sets her novels in contemporary society and her work provides both a commentary and a critique of social decline. Although the focus of her earlier novels seems to be on individual lives, and especially on the concerns of young educated middle-class women, her later novels offer a more comprehensive view of contemporary society, increasingly focusing on wider society rather than the individual self. Individuals (not only women) are connected to the whole community.

*The Needle's Eye* (1972), the first of Drabble's novels with a male protagonist, marked an important change of direction. From this point onwards, her fiction has increasingly reflected her social conscience, commitment to social democracy and 'left-of-centre political attitudes' (Marwick, 1991, p. 178). When she wrote *The Ice Age* (1977) Drabble still retained an ameliorative view of history and the hope that the future would be better than the present, but she has subsequently become more pessimistic. Looking back in 2000, she called the twentieth century 'A Beastly Century' (Drabble, 2001a, p. 160) having by this time come to believe that 'things have gotten worse, socio-economically' (Perović, 2014). She expands on this in a later interview: 'My position is very familiar to *Guardian* readers. I don't feel there's a party that represents me now. It's hard to feel that there's a sense of social progress. I used to feel that we were all moving forward, but we weren't really' (Allardice, 2011).

This chapter engages with the representation of the social, economic and political realities of modern Britain in Drabble's novels of the 1970s which are characterised by economic stagnation and political unrest. In 1979 Margaret Thatcher became British Prime Minister, holding the position until 1990; the longest serving PM for over 150 years. I analyse how industrial disputes, unemployment, the economic crisis, the condition of the property market, the 'Troubles' in Ireland and the changes in society specifically associated with the Thatcher regime all have a direct bearing on Drabble's fiction. As Raymond Williams rightly points out, 'we cannot separate literature

and art from other kinds of social practices, in such a way as to make them subject to quite special and distinct laws. They may have quite specific features as practices, but they cannot be separated from the general social process' (Williams, 1980, p.44).

I wish to argue that Drabble is essentially a 'condition-of England novelist' but with one important difference from her Victorian predecessors. For Drabble the 'condition of England' is inseparable from the history of Britain's involvement overseas and the effects of this involvement on the changing nature of English society. I use the words England and English advisedly rather than Britain and British because Scotland and Wales are hardly referred to in Drabble's fiction and the two nations did not feature in theoretical and political discussions at the time that the novels that I discuss in this chapter were published with the frequency and insistence that they do in debate today. Before dealing with *The Needle's Eye*, *The Ice Age* (1977), *The Middle Ground* (1980), and *The Radiant Way* (1987) as examples of modern condition-of-England novels, it is useful to compare Drabble to mid-Victorian novelists who dealt with the 'condition-of-England question' in their writings.

The condition-of-England novel took its name from the 'condition of England question', a phrase coined by Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), the Scottish writer and historian, in the essay 'Chartism' (1839) concerned with the impoverished living conditions of the English working class. In the essay, Carlyle 'confronted the growing threat of class war posed by the new political articulacy of industrial workers' and began by offering definitions of what he called 'the condition of England question' which were derived 'from the observation of the state of a nation attempting to come to terms with its parliamentary and social reforms aimed at deflecting revolution' (Sanders, 1994, p.404).

The term the 'condition-of-England novel' refers to the sub-genre of fiction published in Victorian England during and after the period of the 1840s, a time of rapid industrialization, violent revolutions on the continent of Europe, and Chartist political

agitations at home. Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845), Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854) and *Little Dorrit* (1855-1857), Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854) and *Mary Barton* (1848) are all in their different ways concerned with the state of English society.

These novels emerged in a time of crisis and unrest in society clearly addressing the need for the reader to think about the state of the entire country and 'seemed to be both an enactment of the problem of imagining the whole of a nation and a utopian prefiguring of such a vision of healing unity' (Connor, 1995, p.44). The 'reformist drive' is essential to these social-problem novels (Wheeler, 1985, p.37) as it is in Drabble's work.

The novels which I discuss in this chapter marked an important growth in consciousness about the nature of society and helped to raise the collective awareness of the reading public, teaching the middle and upper classes about the 'real' conditions of the populace of which they were assumed to be largely unaware. In *North and South*, for example, the protagonist, Margaret Hale points out the extent of poverty and dehumanization in the local factory, which the factory owner, Robert Thornton, had taken completely for granted, having had no experience with which to compare the destitution and misery in his own backyard with the better conditions for the poor that prevailed in other parts of the country:

"'I see men here going about in the streets who look ground down by some pinching sorrow or care – who are not only sufferers but haters. Now, in the South, we have our poor but there is not that terrible expression in their countenances of a sullen sense of injustice which I see here. You do not know the South, Mr Thornton', she concluded, collapsing into a determined silence, and angry with herself for having said so much.'" (Gaskell, 1855, p.77)

The 'social-problem,' 'industrial,' or 'condition-of-England' novels all engaged directly with the deleterious consequences of urban growth and with the economic and social gulf that separated the rich and the poor. They often provided detailed descriptions of poverty and inequality thus contributing to a series of important mid-Victorian debates about the spiritual and material foundations of English society. As its

title suggests, Disraeli's *Sybil, or The Two Nations* reports to its reader the perilous condition of society by focusing on the widening gap between the rich and the poor:

'Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws' (Disraeli, 1871, p.76).

*Hard Times* demonstrates how the lives of all people, rich and poor, are shaped by the great changes of industrialization affecting not only working-class characters like Stephen Blackpool but also the factory owner, Josiah Bounderby and the Gradgrinds. *North and South* is based on the author's first-hand knowledge of the poor in the Manchester slums obtained in her time as a Unitarian minister's wife in that city. In the novel, Margaret Hale must learn to visit the working-class Higgins family as a true friend and not as a condescending patron. *Shirley* also shows social unrest: the riots in the cloth-making district of Yorkshire, reflecting the prevalent anxiety about the gap between the rich and the poor. That anxiety is voiced by the eponymous protagonist.

Written, in the main, by middle-class writers, these novels focus on the social, political, economic and even religious upheavals of the country. As is the case with Margaret Hale's intervention in the cotton strikes in *North and South*, the novels can sometimes suggest a solution to social chaos. Gaskell's protagonist urges Thornton to adopt a moderate and compassionate attitude by talking to the striking workers, turning away the blackleg labourers, and preventing the arrival of the troops:

"Mr Thornton", said Margaret, shaking all over with her passion, "go down this instant, if you are not a coward. Go down and face them like a man. Save these poor strangers whom you have decoyed here. Speak to your workmen as if they were human beings. Speak to them kindly. Don't let the soldiers come in and cut down poor creatures who are driven mad." (Gaskell, 1855, p.173)

Gaskell and other novelists use their fiction to diagnose the 'condition of England'; to depict unrest, and to raise awareness about social, economic, and political issues. Similarly, Drabble's novels not only expose the social problems of a specific time



in English history, but they also attempt to describe and analyse the problems; to give them new shape and meaning. Drabble declares that those whom she 'most admire[s]' are the people who strive to retain their links with their communities' (Rose, E.1985,p.25). The most important Victorian author who chronicled English provincial life is George Eliot. The provincial town of the book's title is a microcosm of English society. *Middlemarch* (1871-2) engages with social, historical and moral issues in England from 1829 and the years leading up to the 1832 Reform Act, and with many events of local and national significance, such as the unrest among the farm labourers and the death of the reigning monarch, George IV and the subsequent political upheaval, as they impact on the day-to-day lives of the residents of the town.

Like Eliot, Drabble fictionalises her home town to make her political points. Drabble first introduces the reader to the figurative provincial town of Northam, loosely based on Sheffield where Drabble was born and in which she grew up, in her fourth novel, *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967). She returns to Northam frequently in subsequent novels; *The Ice Age* (1977), *The Radiant Way* (1987), *A Natural Curiosity* (1989), *The Gates of Ivory* (1991), *The Witch of Exmoor* (1996) and *The Peppered Moth* (2000). Northam, which she uses as a representative northern city, also reappears in Drabble's short story, 'Stepping Westward: A Topographical Tale' published in her collection; *A Day in the Life of a Smiling Woman* in 2011. Northam is located in industrial South Yorkshire and is a down-to-earth place when contrasted to the sophistication of London. As in Gaskell's *North and South*, the two settings of impoverished north and affluent south are deployed in Drabble's fiction in order to depict the wide gap between what Drabble still feels are 'two nations'; to show the different ways of living, to examine the choices available for individuals, and to demonstrate the practical consequences of the major geographical division between north and south in English society. The contrast between the two is particularly marked in *The Radiant Way* which illustrates the notion of 'a prospering innovative South (the Midlands, and everything to the south, but

excluding Wales), and a backward, depressed North (everything beyond the Midlands)' (Marwick, 1990, p. 198).

One key difference, however, between Dickens, and other Victorian 'condition of England' novelists and Drabble is in their attitudes to the British Empire and its cultural and political legacy. The Victorian authors did not deal explicitly in their novels with the consequences of British imperial expansion which reached its zenith during the Victorian era. Indeed, for such novelists, as for most people across the whole political spectrum in mid-Victorian Britain, the consolidation of the British Empire was assumed to be for the good.

Addressing the relationship between the British Empire and the Victorian novel, Cannon Schmitt takes as a starting point the statement made by the omniscient narrator at the opening of *Dombey and Son* (1846-8): 'The earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and moon were made to give them light' (Dickens, 1999, p. 2). It might, of course, be argued that the novel illustrates the fundamentally misguided nature of Dombey's sense of entitlement and his obsession with imperial trade, however Schmitt contends that the quotation is indicative of the unquestioning certainties and confidence that underpinned the British imperial presence. The Victorian novel, he argues, in addition to its role of educating and entertaining the reader, 'disseminated and naturalized the correctness, desirability, and inevitability of British imperial rule' (Schmitt, 2004, p. 5).

Schmitt sees Dickens and his contemporary novelists essentially as 'apologists for empire' in so far as their fictions reflected an 'Anglocentric world view and a sense of obvious, perhaps divinely sanctioned British superiority' (Schmitt, 2004, p. 5).

Moreover, because of the far-reaching influence of the Victorian novel as an instrument of instruction as well as entertainment, texts such as *Dombey and Son* might be understood not simply to have reflected but in fact to have disseminated and naturalized the correctness, desirability, and inevitability of British imperial rule. The earth was made for the British to govern, Dickens and other novelists seem to say, and the sun and moon were made to give them light; history

signifies nothing but a prelude to their rule, futurity nothing but its triumphant, infinite extension. (Schmitt,2004,p.5)

Schmitt arguably misses the point that the whole novel illustrates the wrongness of Dombey's misplaced confidence. Drabble does not escape the past by focusing exclusively on the present. Instead she connects the contemporary 'condition of England' to history in order to demonstrate the impact of the British Empire (the Commonwealth as it came to be known after the former colonies gained their independence from the Second World War onwards) at the end of the twentieth-century and the start of the twenty-first.

Drabble's fiction deals with the lived consequences of Britain's domination of other countries in the world. For her, the 'condition of England' is inseparable from the history of Britain's presence overseas and the effects of this presence on the English mainland. She does not restrict herself to English society or European countries but depicts turbulent events in the other continents and her fiction frequently demonstrates her deeply-held conviction that war and violence are almost always unjustifiable. Drabble sees herself 'as a social historian documenting social change and asking questions rather than providing the answers about society' (Anderton,1994,p.185).

Drabble has been a vehement opponent of Britain's interventions in Ireland, Iraq and Lebanon, a strong supporter of Peace in Kurdistan, the campaigning group working for a peaceful solution to the Kurdish question founded in 1994, and has written powerfully about the atrocities in Cambodia. I discuss *The Ice Age* and *The Middle Ground*, which addresses the absence of a homeland for the Kurdish people, in this chapter and *The Gates of Ivory* which is concerned with the Pol Pot regime in chapter three.

From *The Middle Ground* (1980) onward Drabble's fiction moves outwards to focus on characters in the trouble spots of the world ranging from the situation of the Kurds in *The Middle Ground* to the plight of one woman in a little-known place, the Western Sahara, who is resisting the occupation of her country by the colonizing power,

Morocco, in *The Dark Flood Rises* (2016). Her fiction is concerned with, mediates, and helps to shape, a multicultural society at home, and to create the sense of a people redefining their identity after the loss of their overseas territories. Drabble's writing tackles the cultural, economic and political changes in a world changed by mass migration which is the subject matter of her very last novel.

### **The Historical Context to the Fiction**

The 1960s had witnessed 'a preoccupation with Britain's economic weaknesses', but 'this made little impression upon ordinary people: standards of living continued to improve on the whole' (Pugh,2012,p.327). The 1970s were difficult for Britain politically with four general elections, four Prime Ministers and the declaration of a state of emergency five times. Successive governments 'scarcely seemed to be in control; both a Labour and a Conservative government broke down over major policies, and within each party an extremist wing began to gather strength. In this brittle and adversarial climate the longstanding political consensus dissolved' (Pugh,2012,p.327).

This was a decade of political instability and economic crisis marked by social tension, economic crisis, inflation, mass unemployment, rolling power cuts and petrol shortages. Britain's wealth-producing capacity declined compared to that of other European countries. Dissatisfaction with the economic downturn led to a succession of strikes and labour disputes. Trade unions went on strike to demand larger pay rises while governments, Labour and Conservative alike, sought to place a limit on pay rises in order to control inflation. The signs of crisis began to appear during the years of Edward Heath's Conservative government from 1970 to 74 starting with 'a runaway housing boom, a splurge of new banks of a distinctly shaky and shady variety, and widespread bankruptcies as industry turned up for the more competitive climate of the European economic community' (Hall,1988,p.38).

In addition to industrial disputes and the economic crisis, Prime Ministers from Heath onwards had to contend with the 'Irish Troubles' and armed conflict on the part of republican and Ulster loyalist paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland. The violence subsequently escalated to the mainland of Britain in a military campaign conducted by the Provisional IRA. The 'price explosion following the Arab-Israeli war of October 1973 and the oil blockade' led to 'the head-on confrontation with the National Union of Mineworkers and a lengthy national coal strike in February 1974' (Morgan,2001,p.317). The strike in which the country was subjected to regular power cuts ended with industry being placed on a three-day working week in order to save fuel which contributed to the defeat of Heath's government in the 1974 general election (Loader & Mulcahy,2003,p.9).

Harold Wilson who held power for the second time from 1974 to 1976 resigned to be followed by another Labour politician, James Callaghan, who succeeded him from 1976 to 79. In *The Middle Ground*, Drabble depicts a seemingly endless succession of strikes: 'The social workers' strike and the dustmen's strike ended, and new strikes, by schoolteachers, sewage maintenance workers and civil servants began' (MG,212). Some of the characters are caught up in strike action: 'Stella herself, though she voted Tory, had come out on strike when called upon by her union the year before: what else could I do, she asked. I felt I had to' (MG,140).

In some cities in England 'left-wing local councils used the rates to raise money to defend and promote a range of "progressive" causes' (Lavalette & Mooney,2000,p.206). Sheffield, under the leadership of David Blunkett, a city which is fictionalized, albeit still recognisable, forms the backdrop for political discussions between different characters in several of Drabble's novels. The city pursued a set of policies (cheap public transport, etc) which were radically different from the policies of the Thatcher's government and its municipal socialism acquired it the reputation as the 'Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire' in the 1970s and 1980s.

Public antipathy to the ill-fated 'Winter of Discontent' in 1979 and the moral revulsion produced by the actions of striking workers in the public sector, including grave diggers, rubbish collectors and ambulance drivers, is generally thought to have played a key role in bringing down the Callaghan government. Finally, in 1979, the Conservative Party won the fourth general election of the decade and Margaret Thatcher, later known as the "Iron Lady," became the first female British Prime Minister in Britain while the Republican Ronald Reagan was elected President of the United States in 1981 holding the position until 1989. In *The Radiant Way* Thatcher is referred to as a paradox: 'a woman prime minister who was in fact a mother but was not nevertheless thereby motherly' (RW,17).

There was a remarkable growth in the size and influence of the left within the Labour Party after Margaret Thatcher's electoral victory in 1979. In response, the Social Democratic Party (SDP), a centrist political party was founded in 1981 by four senior moderate figures in the Labour Party. The SDP and the division of the Labour Party is a subject of contention in *The Radiant Way*. The Iranian revolution which deposed the pro-western Shah also took place in 1979 with the formation of a new government under Ayatollah Khomeini making Iran the world's first Islamic republic. The Gulf War between Iraq and Iran in which Drabble took a close interest (as she had done in the civil war which broke out in Lebanon in 1975) began in 1980 and lasted until 1988. By the end of *The Radiant Way* 'The gallant miners have been defeated: in the inelegant words of the Prime Minister, they had been "seen off"' (RW,391). The defeat of the miners after the year-long strike of 1984-5 leaves the nation 'divided as never before,' and 'the Labour movement is in ruins' (RW,391).

### **The Needle's Eye (1972)**

Although Britain in the 1970s is characterized by economic stagnation and political instability, that is not the whole story. Sections of the population experienced improvements in their living standards. Most ordinary families were better off and were, for instance, able to afford 'the package holiday abroad, which 30 years earlier would have seemed like something from science fiction' (BBC 16 April 2012). More people aspired to own their own home. Many of them 'finally had the chance to get on the property ladder as the Bank of England relaxed its lending rules' (ibid.).

The problems attendant on inherited property and the desire to acquire property and material possessions are central concerns in Drabble's first novel of the 1970s, *The Needle's Eye* (1972). This deals explicitly with the moral dilemmas and practical consequences of one woman's conscious decision to reject materialistic values. The father of the protagonist Rose Vertue Vassiliou, whose business is threatened by worsening labour relations, gets angry when Rose pays for a political magazine in favour of strike action (NE,86) and cuts off her allowance as a punishment. She defies his authority and moves far away from home to live with her boyfriend 'without a penny' in the basement of the magazine (NE,90).

Rose feels herself to be 'a free' and 'a mature' woman (NE,110) and goes against her father's wishes by marrying her lover, Christopher. Asked what each feels about being disinherited by Rose's parents, both Rose and Christopher replied that 'they had never wanted money, all they wanted was each other' (NE,96). Soon after, Rose dedicates her inheritance to a small African country to alleviate the misery of the surviving civilians after a civil war and responds to an appeal for funds to build a school (NE,100) which is burned down shortly after it was built. Christopher has 'not been pretending to want her for the money,' but 'the bitter disagreement of their marriage had sprung from her wilful determination to disinherit herself, against his will and expectations' (NE,55). Christopher finds Rose's behaviour unreasonable and blames her for wasting her money and ruining her children's future.

The title of the novel is taken from Matthew, 19: 24 and refers to a saying of Jesus recorded in the New Testament: 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God'. These words are spoken to a man whom Jesus instructs to give away his possessions to the poor. The man is thus faced with a challenge to choose between Mammon or God. *The Needle's Eye's* thematic concerns come from this Biblical reference.

Rose does precisely what that rich man was unwilling to do and seeing her inheritance as an obstacle in the way of her leading a principled and virtuous life, this young woman gives her money away to the poor. As Myer puts it, what Drabble writes about is the 'conflicts between the religious tradition and the modern mind' (Myer,1974,p.30). *The Needle's Eye* interestingly inflects an age-old question posed in the Bible by asking 'what does it means to be good in the modern world'?

Drabble uses religious vocabulary ('faith', 'grace', 'martyr' etc.) throughout the novel, although Rose's predicament ('what is the good life?') is essentially represented as a secular conundrum. Like herself, Drabble's protagonists are well-educated, 'often cynical people living in a society of existential choices and situational ethics, and yet they use concepts such a providence, sin, and grace in contemplating their lives' (Moran,1983,p.18).

While steeped in the language of the Bible (all three of her children have Biblical names: Adam, Joe and Rebecca) Drabble does not subscribe to the traditional Christian notion of a male deity: 'I have more confidence in myself as a mother than in Him as a Father' (Myer,1974,p.14). 'I'm really not quite sure what my theological position is' (Hardin,1973,p.284). In an interview published in *The Independent* in 2009 she states that 'I'm not a believer but I remain very impressed by Quaker faith and behaviour' (Sale,2009). Her parents' attitude to religion was tendentially liberal; they had a great respect for the Quakers. Her mother was 'an atheist- but they were sympathetic to Quaker values and in later years joined the Society of Friends' (Creighton,1985,p.19).



Drabble herself attended The Mount, the Friends' boarding school in York run by the Quakers (Hardin,1973,p.276) where she was taught to believe in the light of God and in God's presence in all individuals (Creighton,1985,p.19).

Drabble's early exposure to Quaker values was to have a profound impact upon her writing. The influences of Quaker ideas and practices can be observed in the emphasis she places on living simply, on equality, truth and peace and on the principle of accepting responsibility for one's own actions. The Quakers set high store on simplicity. Although well-known Quaker families such as the Rowntree's of York, who endowed the Mount School, have made their wealth through manufacturing and business, they have an ambivalent attitude to material possessions, and, through their work with the Rowntree Trust and other charitable bodies, they have a long history of philanthropic activity in the community and of giving to the poor.

In *The Needle's Eye* Drabble deals with the dilemma of how to be good and generous in a materialist world. Rose 'hopes to do good' by giving away her money, seeking out the dispossessed, and living in a squalid working-class district. Rose's disavowal of material possessions was not unknown at a time when shabbiness (hence the term 'shabby chic') was affected in some stylish circles. Her distrust of acquisitiveness and her equation of property with dishonesty dates back to an incident in childhood when she overheard her parents discussing 'over-insuring' their property after a neighbourhood burglary. Rose remembers making a pledge at that specific moment: 'I'll never possess anything, I said to myself, that I fear to lose. It was a very solemn vow' (NE,74).

Rose chooses poverty to prove that love is more important than money. In contrast to what other people may think about her she has tried hard to be 'normal' all her life (NE,46). Rejecting the values of consumption and consumerism, she lives as modestly as she can. For instance, she keeps wearing the same dress for twelve years.

Drabble declared that she could identify with Rose's ascetism and idealism with which she had some personal sympathy:

'I was very keen that I shouldn't buy any new clothes until I had finished the book: that Rose wouldn't have done it. I was incredibly shabby by the end of the book. I've slightly rejected that now. I mean, I'm still shabby but that's because I can't be bothered to go and buy the clothes. It ceased to be a strong principle. But in a way I was testing out the principle by writing the book. That really is one of the reasons for writing: that you test out a certain life style' (Milton, 1978)

As Drabble explains, Rose's view is that 'wealth had destroyed her mother -- a fairly reasonable thing to think. If her mother hadn't been so utterly idle, she might not have been so completely bored. So Rose psychologically sees her salvation in getting rid of the money and having something to do' (Hardin, 1973, p. 278). However, almost all of her misery; the breakdown of her marriage, her alienation from her parents, and her impoverishment arises from her decision to disinherit herself. An important question is whether or not Rose has done right to give away her inheritance and to put her ideals above the well-being of her family.

Rose's parents 'considered her dangerously mad, as had her husband and her solicitors' (NE, 54) when she refuses to apply for maintenance against their advice and does a variety of badly paid jobs, such as serving dinners at the school and supervising the launderette (NE, 44). Rose's act of charity infuriates Christopher who believes that she has 'had no right, in the circumstances, to alienate so large a sum of money from her children and his' (NE, 66).

The behaviour of Christopher in the novel is that of a wife-abuser and *The Needle's Eye* was written in the context of the feminist campaigns against domestic violence that gained momentum in the 1970s. The first refuge for women who had suffered abuse from violent husbands was set up by Erin Pizzey in Chiswick in 1971. When Christopher is accused of being violent and cruel during the custody trial, he turns the accusation around with the misogynistic claim that it is his wife who is 'violent and abusive' and that her unreasonable beliefs have led to the ruin of their lives, as well as their children's. Moreover, she is 'a thoroughly unreasonable person' and he wants the

court to reconsider the custody of their children because she is an incompetent mother (NE,71).

Rose's friend, Simon, however, sees her from a different angle, although the way of life that she has chosen freely, a life of poverty, is the one from which he had once escaped. He greatly admires Rose for her morality, honesty, rejection of materialism, and her determination to do whatever may be necessary to live out her values. Gradually, Simon becomes aware that Rose is a woman of remarkable integrity and courage and his admiration for her changes into something deeper. However, he cannot understand her attitude to her day to day activities or why she says 'I do them all with love. Getting up, drawing the curtains, shopping, going to bed' (NE,97). For Rose work has become akin to a sacrament and the allusion here to George Herbert's hymn, 'Teach me My God and King' is unmistakeable

All may of Thee partake:  
Nothing can be so mean,  
Which with his tincture (for Thy sake)  
Will not grow bright and clean.

A servant with this clause  
Makes drudgery divine:  
Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws,  
Makes that and th' action fine. (Orrick,2011,p.146)  
Simon's whole life has, in contrast, been conducted, not with love but with 'a strong sense of obligation' (NE,98). 'How could I know what you mean...when nothing that I do is done with any love at all?' (NE,98). He wishes he could arrive at a similar 'state of grace' (NE,98). Simon finds Rose pleasingly different from his wife, Julie whose style of life is radically different. Julie has an independent income and is an excessive consumer. Her act of purchasing a new dress for herself, while already possessing dozens, of others, alarms her husband; 'Fundamentally it shocked him, this acquisitiveness, this relentless pursuit of unnecessary garments, this desire to buy in order to placate nice, friendly, profiteering, obsequious boutique owners' (NE,169).

Rose seeks faith, independence and self-assertion in the small domestic world; her shabby, decaying but comfortable home in an unfashionable part of London which

has painstakingly been constructed as a labour of love: 'All this you see, I created it for myself. Stone by stone and step by step. I carved it out, I created it by faith, I believed in it, and then very slowly, it began to exist. And now it exists. It's like God. It requires faith' (NE,44).

To the consternations of many feminists who disliked the ending, Rose returns to Christopher, who has abused her physically and verbally, not for herself, but for the sake of the children whom she has come to believe love and need both of their parents in equal measure. As Joyce Carol Oates points out, there has already been much misery and sacrifice in Rose's life; 'savagely-observed acts of marital savagery, the bizarre lovelessness that passes for domestic "love", a sad squalid legal bout that forces Rose, ultimately, to sacrifice her own remarkable integrity for the superficial conformity of marriage "for the sake of the children"' (Oates,1972). The return to her husband is simply another in a long sequence of painful events. However, Margaret Rowe believes that the purpose of the ending is to demonstrate that 'Rose is inexorably trammelled by maternity' (Rowe,2005,p.423).

### **The Ice Age (1977)**

The historian Dominic Sandbrook frequently refers to *The Ice Age* in his study of the period in which the novel is set. In *State of Emergency: The Way We Were: Britain, 1970-1974* Sandbrook uses *The Ice Age* to support his argument that the years 1970-74 were uneasy, troubled and crisis-ridden (Sandbrook,2010). The title of the novel is a metaphor for the economic and social "freeze" of the mid-1970s when, as Joanne Creighton puts it, 'Britain is suffering an age of "ice" - variously depicted in the novel by imagery of cold, paralysis, imprisonment, enforced inactivity, and death. The individuals are dwarfed by the age which shapes them' (Creighton,1985,p.94). The novel has a wintry setting and depicts characters trapped within their frozen lives and experiencing all manner of disruption and difficulties because of strikes, bad weather, and the IRA

bombing campaigns. It highlights the crash of the property market which puts an end to many people's aspirations of prospering on the property ladder:

A huge icy fist, with large cold fingers, was squeezing and chilling the people of Britain, that great and puissant nation, slowing down their blood, locking them into immobility, fixing them in a solid stasis, like fish in a frozen river: there they all were in their large houses and their small houses, with their first mortgages and second mortgages, in their rented flats and council flats and basement bedsits and their caravans: stuck, congealed, amongst possessions, in attitudes, in achievements they had hoped next month to shed, and with which they were now condemned to live. (IA,62)

Drabble states that the idea for *The Ice Age* came from reading the national papers in which she found no shortage of economic analysis, 'but nothing on the subject of declining Britain in fiction at all' (Milton,1978). She decided to write a novel to remedy the gap between the preoccupation with the economic crisis shown by the media and its absence in fiction. The novel focuses on economic and social malaise. The 'public world remains frozen, alien, and amoral; private relations are guilt-ridden and deterministic. There is no good in the public world, but we cannot blame its evils, for which no one is responsible' (Gardiner,1983,p.78).

Drabble's concern in *The Ice Age* is largely with the state of the economy. The radio news, to which Anthony Keating and Alison Murray listen, reinforces their sense of crisis: 'As usual, it was all bad. The pound was sinking, more deaths in Northern Ireland, a new strike at Leyland, the storm damage throughout the country had destroyed millions of pounds' worth of property, the doctors were threatening to strike again over private beds, there would be a potato shortage, the Americans were still complaining about Concorde' (IA,175).

As John Corner and Sylvia Herby suggest in their introduction to *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture*, the self-made individuals of the enterprise culture 'refuse the certainties of the old patrician aristocratic order, they overturn the stately world in which everyone know their place' (Corner & Harvey,1991,p.9). The state of the economy has a strong impact upon the lives of the characters although the underlying economic causes their own unhappiness eludes them. Scapegoating is rife

as is the practice of and attributing the blame and responsibility for the crisis in which they find themselves to others at random.

All over the nation, families who had listened to the news looked at one another and said, "Goodness me" or "Whatever next" or "I give up" or "Well, fuck that", before embarking on an evening's viewing of colour television, or a large hot meal, or a trip to the pub, or a choral society evening. All over the country, people blamed other people for all the things that were going wrong— the trades unions, the present government, the miners, the car workers, the seamen, the Arabs, the Irish, their own husbands, their own wives, their own idle good-for-nothing offspring, comprehensive education. Nobody knew whose fault it really was, but most people managed to complain fairly forcefully about somebody: only a few were stunned into honourable silence. (IA,62)

Drabble highlights the plight of ordinary people, the divisions between generations, the decline of good manners and the breakdown of traditional communities. The latter is embodied in the eviction of Aunt Evie from her terrace slum in which she was happy and had enjoyed the 'rewards of old age honour, civility, [and] streets of friends', to a 'nice suburban semi' in which she 'moped briefly behind lace curtains, despised by her suburban neighbours, and then died: of loneliness' (IA,88).

The characters of *The Ice Age* are in a state of a midlife reappraisal of self. The old values no longer pertain but have not been replaced by anything better. This is not, according to Drabble 'a particularly personal novel. It was more a novel describing catastrophe of various friends of mine and of Britain in general' (Lauritzen,1985,pp.249-250). Thus, as Joanne Creighton puts it: 'what is happening to individuals clearly reflects, in turn, what is happening to the British nation as a whole— which is depicted as getting older, tired, staid, facing crisis and going through some strange and disorienting metamorphosis' (Creighton,1985,p.92).

*The Ice Age* draws parallels between the contemporary situation in English society and the lives of the characters in order to demonstrate the effects of economic stagnation and the retreat from the liberal values of the postwar consensus. The state of the nation runs parallel to the life of businessman, Anthony Keating, in a process that Lynn Veach Sadler describes as the interplay between 'microcosm (Anthony) and

macrocosm (his world)' (Sadler, 1986, p. 103). Anthony is Drabble's first male protagonist. At the age of thirty-eight, Anthony's universe has been rocked by a combination of a heart attack and the prospect of financial ruin. His life 'which had recently been far too full, had suddenly become extraordinarily empty' (IA, 39). This had been a 'terrible year, a terrible world. Two of his acquaintances in prison, one dead by assassination, himself in debt by many thousands. It had all looked so different, four years ago, three years ago. So hopeful, so prosperous, so safe. So expansive' (IA, 18).

Anthony, a property developer, is recovering from a heart attack brought about by his financial reversal of fortune and his associate the millionaire property speculator, Len Wincobank, is in prison for illegal property deals. This brings to mind *Little Dorrit* (1857), in which Dickens is concerned with speculation, bankruptcy, and imprisonment, both physical and psychological and the debtors' prison at Marshalsea where those who were unable to work to pay off their debts were incarcerated. *Little Dorrit* traces the interaction of a plethora of characters in London in two books entitled 'Poverty' and 'Riches'. Moreover, readers are directed to 'sympathize with the economically downtrodden and those beaten down by social institutions, such as Daniel Doyce, who is driven to exasperation by a bureaucracy designed to reward officeholders instead of helping him patent his invention' (Colatrella, 2015, p. 346) while rapacious landlords charge extortionate rent to the tenants of Bleeding Heart Yard. Drabble's use of the prison motif and the jailing of the self-made property millionaire in *The Ice Age* is equally carefully thought-out: 'I kept on putting other people into prison and using the prison imagery— and ice and stasis and frozen paralysis and so on— and that became highly deliberate' (Lauritzen, 1985, p. 253).

Anthony is 'at one with the spirit of the age' (IA, 34) having abandoned the liberal ideals of his upbringing and discovered through his newfound love of money making a very different community in which nobody 'read novels' or 'the arts pages of newspapers' or discussed 'the problems of the under privileged' (IA, 33). He has jettisoned his career in television and joined the world of big business and corporate capital to become a

property investor in a risk-taking enterprise: This is the new Anthony: 'Enough apology, enough politeness, enough self-seeking high-minded well-meaning well-respected idleness, enough of the quite-well-paid middle-status gentlemen's jobs, enough of the Oxbridge Arts graduate. They had killed the country, sapped initiative, destroyed the economy,' he reflects (IA,34).

Private property as a desideratum features largely in the novel as it did in Margaret Thatcher's plan for a 'property-owning democracy' to be brought about through the sale of council houses. The 'right to buy' for council tenants was one of the defining policies of the Thatcher governments although the sale of council houses had been assiduously promoted by the Conservative government of Ted Heath in the early 1970s. Anthony asks but cannot answer the question: 'why it was that some people considered the owning of property particularly wicked: why was it more wicked to own a strip of land with a house on it than to own a sausage, a bicycle, a second hand fur coat, or a colour television set?' (IA,65). What Anthony had not anticipated, however, was the sudden and dramatic collapse of the property market: 'What had happened to those days of easy money in the early seventies, what had happened to the boom, to all those spectacular profits?' (IA,13). He reflects on the crisis and its consequences:

"Go for growth", had been the slogan, and everybody had gone for it. Now some were bankrupt, some were in jail, some had committed suicide, and only the biggest had survived. Casualties of the slump and recession strewn the business pages of the newspapers, hit the front-page headlines. Old men were convicted of corruption and hustled off to prison, banks collapsed and shares fell to nothing. (IA,14)

Anthony blames himself rather than the economic condition for his business failure; 'It was, of course, his own fault, that he had stayed into such a minefield. Whatever else has been accidental, this had been his own choice' (IA,19). The events in the novel pre-date Margaret Thatcher's coming to power in 1979 but not her rise to power within the Conservative Party nor the set of ideas about the relationship between the individual and the state with which she had come to be associated much earlier in her career. Anthony's attitudes reflect his acceptance of the Thatcherite position; the



responsibly for the individual's success or failure rests squarely on their own shoulders. Thatcher herself came from a modest background: she was the daughter of a grocer from Grantham who left the provinces to study at Oxford University and then married a successful businessman whose wealth she acquired. Among the virtues that she most admired were 'thrift, hard work, self-reliance, independence and responsibility' (Cannadine,1998,p.173).

Drabble critiques these values through the responses of her characters. Being 'self-made' is depicted as a virtue by certain characters in *The Ice Age*. Anthony admires Len because 'knew all the arguments against what he was doing as well as those in favour of it: because he was self-made, had started from scratch, without a rich Oxbridge friend to back him' (IA,33). Maureen Kirby also embodies Thatcherite individualism and the will to get rich above all other considerations: She started as a hairdresser and was offered an equal business partnership with her boss which she refused. Maureen's mother comments on her daughter and the individualistic values of the generation she represents; 'You girls these days, its self, self, self, money, money, money' (IA,56).

The novel reflects Drabble's well-known distaste for the United States and her concern that England will come to resemble the worst aspects of urban America. Anthony, who owns a house in London and another in the country, admits that London has become 'unpleasant' and that it is 'going the way of New York - garbage-strewn, transport-choked, dirty, violent' (IA,65). So, he decides to 'opt out' and move to the country where he 'could perhaps lead a life away from London. A peaceful life with a peaceful rhythm' (IA,175). Anthony praises his life in a house in a provincial town 'the structure was good. In fact, fine. Beautiful. It was a fine house [and] he was proud of it' (IA,61). Afterwards, when he revisits London to inspect his other house there, he finds a woman delivering a baby. He thinks it 'not really surprising that young girls were reduced to having babies on other people's uncarpeted floors, for how could anyone without a wealthy father of an enormous income ever afford to buy a floor of his own, these days?' (IA,175).

Alison, Anthony's second wife, returns to England from Communist Wallacia to be shocked by 'the ruination of the city [which] became monstrous, inhuman, ludicrous' (IA,144). She suffers a nervous breakdown through her inability to adapt to her unfamiliar surroundings and complains about the property developers who have produced the 'modern architecture, brutal architecture, concrete and cement' which has led to creating the new, ugly face of the country (IA,39). Brought up in the beauty of rural Hampshire, she feels totally disorientated: 'When I was in Krusograd, I wanted so much to come home. But now I'm back, I don't like it. It's changed. It's not the same' (IA,176).

Anthony can neither return to the values of his past nor discover any alternative. Alison, the moral centre of the narrative, observes that he is torn in two. She talks about 'the folly of Anthony's brand of escapism, about the dirt at St Pancras station, about the monstrous mess that the developers had made of Northam, about the wickedness of Len Wincobank and his like, and the naïve folly of Anthony's getting mixed up in such a money-grabbing immoral corrupt line of business.... She spoke of the state of the nation' (IA,175).

Alison was once an actress with facial features as 'typically English as the English Rose' (IA,37) but is anxious about her own physical decline: 'The country was growing old. Like herself. The scars on the hillsides were the wrinkles round her own eyes: irremovable' (IA,166). Alison is also aware of her country's fading international reputation: 'England was a safe, shabby, mangey old lion now: anyone could tweak her tail' (IA,92). The museum in Wallacia has demonstrated 'the superiority of culture to commerce' (IA,110). She feels deeply disappointed in the people of her home country who had for two centuries 'spent like lords, and were now bankrupt, living in the ruins of their own grandiose excesses' (IA,166).

Reading the morning papers Alison realizes that she has no picture of the future, either her own, or that of the country. 'I belong to the wrong generation, she thought, the generation that had its certainties when young. We worked hard when young, we had a

conception. But instead of solidifying into attitudes, opinions, convictions, however bigoted, we have fragmented and dissolved into uncertainty' (IA,224).

Alison leaves Anthony to rescue her daughter Jane, imprisoned after a traffic accident in a Balkan country, Wallacia. Drabble invented this fictitious place because she did not 'want to deal with real politics. The visual memories were drawn from Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia' (Milton,1978). The idea of self-reliance as opposed to the acceptance of responsibility for others has been a *leit motif* in the novel. Somewhat ironically, Anthony accepts responsibility for helping those who are weaker than himself rather than a dogmatic stand on self-reliance, while the more liberal Alison declines to do so. Alison criticises her daughter for her lack of responsibility: 'I'm sorry for you, Jane, you've got yourself in an awful mess, but just you remember that *you* got *yourself* in it. There's no appeal, you know. There's no way you can be excused. You have to pay your own penalty, I can't pay it for you' (IA,149).

While Alison abandons her troubled daughter, the more sympathetic Anthony starts his journey to Eastern Europe to help his step-daughter get out of prison but is imprisoned instead and takes the place of Jane in custody. Anthony discovers a kind of inner peace within the harsh environment of the prison and starts writing a book about God. He now 'writes for himself and has lost interest in any market' (IA,285).

In *The Ice Age* Drabble depicts two societies; England of the 1970s in which the privatising ethos of popular capitalism is rampant and an imaginary Eastern European socialist country which has a collectivist ethos as opposed to a corporate one, but neither of the two societies is represented as appealing. The conclusion of *The Ice Age* is ambiguous: 'The bird will fly off, fluttering away its tiny life. There, we leave Anthony' (IA,287). There is a rider in which Drabble makes the point that Alison's fate is inseparable from that of her daughter who is wholly dependent on her: 'Alison, there is no leaving. Alison can neither live nor die. Alison has Molly [her daughter with special

needs]. Her life is beyond imagining. It will not be imagined. Britain will recover, but not Alison Murray' (IA,287).

While she was writing *The Ice Age* Drabble had a Lebanese friend staying with her, a lecturer at the university at Beirut who had left because of the civil war. Drabble explains that 'it was talking to him that made me feel I ought to put England's problems into some larger context' (Milton,1978). Perhaps that was why she turned her attention to the Irish Troubles. Militant Republicans extended their military operations to the British mainland in 1973 in a series of bombings including King's Cross Station in 1973, the Houses of Parliament and the Tower of London in 1974, and the siege of Balcombe Street in 1975. In 1997, the Provisional IRA declared a historic cease-fire and the Good Friday Agreement was signed with the agreement of all the major parties and overwhelmingly ratified by voters in the North and in the Republic of Ireland in two referenda held in 1998. The Good Friday Agreement thus marked the abandonment of armed hostilities and set up a power-sharing assembly bringing an end to the thirty years of 'the Troubles'. However, in the period between the late 1960s and the cease-fire, 'paramilitary organizations on both sides of the conflict in Northern Ireland are reported to have killed between 3,000 and 4,000 people, of which the majority were civilians' (Halibozeck, Kovacich, & Jones,2007,p.20). In *The Ice Age* Kitty Friedmann has her foot blown off by an arbitrarily placed republican bomb and her husband, Max is killed while they are celebrating their Ruby Wedding Anniversary (IA,10). The Arab-Israeli War fought by a coalition of Arab states led by Egypt and Syria against Israel broke out in October 1973 to restore territories that had been occupied by Israel since the end of the Six-day war in 1967. This leads the narrator of *The Ice Age* to comment:

Perhaps it was a good thing that it had been an Irish bomb, and not a Palestinian one. (Max had donated liberally to Israel.) Even Kitty, who had been heard to plead the Zionist and Palestinian causes in the same sentence, unaware of any contradiction, might have been forced to blame the Arabs, if she had been made to think they were really after Max. Which, of course, they had not been. (IA,11)

## **The Middle Ground (1980)**

*The Middle Ground* is narrated by an omniscient narrator interweaving the characters' past experience with the present. The novel examines human relationships during the 1980s in London and the *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times, through the differing viewpoints of a single generation and their daily lives. As Phyllis Rose puts it, 'Through the static of fact and opinion, through the luncheon and dinner party chatter, behind the characters' anxieties and implied by their self-questioning, an imposing entity takes shape: contemporary Britain' (Rose, P.,1980).

The action in the narrative takes place within a space of two months. Unlike her scheme for her other novels, here Drabble reveals characters during a short-lived collective moment in their lives and does not give a detailed, continuing account of the events in one or two lives. The particulars of the novel's depiction of middle-class life in London seems to mark Drabble's partial return to the private worlds of her earlier novels. However, what distinguishes *The Middle Ground* from previous novels is its involvement with the 'middle years'. The characters on whom Drabble focuses are no longer the young adults of her 1960s novels but have aged, as has the author. This suggests the strongly autobiographical underpinning of all her work. They are in '[t]he middle years, caught between children and parents, free of neither: the past stretches back too densely, it is too thickly populated, the future has not yet thinned out' (MG,182).

As in *The Ice Age*, Drabble draws attention to class distinctions and to the social mobility that marked her generation of educated women who had made their way up from modest backgrounds. In *The Middle Ground* Kate Armstrong is a professional woman but her father, Walter Fletcher, had worked in a pumping station and she remembers him being 'vocal in campaigns for better pay, better working conditions, better status' (MG,18). One reason why Drabble made him a sewage worker was because other novels had dealt with coal miners and other high status manual workers in the labour movement 'but I don't think we have ever read about a sewage worker in

a novel. So there was an element of sheer perversity— wanting to write about somebody in a profession that was never written about' (Lauritzen, 1985, p. 254). Kate's first partner, Danny Blick, is the son of a dustman who likes to scavenge in rubbish (MG, 30). She herself is accustomed to frugality, 'cannot bear to waste water and has been known to leap up from other people's dining tables to switch off a dripping tap, to return smiling defiantly and apologetically with an amusing account of the price of each wasted drop in man hours and money' (MG, 19). As Joanne Creighton suggests, 'not only does the 'ground' upon which the characters stand spread out internationally; it must also reach down to metaphoric depths— into the sewers' (Creighton, 1985, p. 104).

Although Kate, a successful and ambitious journalist and social commentator, is the main character, a group of her contemporaries all struggle to make sense of this difficult period of their lives questioning the value of what they do for a living; they feel that their careers have lost their initial excitement and sheen. As a journalist, Kate's career had begun with 'new-wave women's pieces' (MG, 39). However, feminist ideas having lost their novelty Kate has become 'bloody sick of bloody women' (MG, 8) and disenchanted with the expectations that have trapped her in 'a narrow tunnel' of 'stale repetition' (MG, 50) stifling her creativity. She begrudges the time spent in turning things into articles, 'annexing them, distorting them, colouring them in her own limited range of colours' (MG, 97). Her current project is a television documentary that charts the lives of women whom she has known since she was a child. However, the interviews are all dissimilar and it is up to the editor to impose sense and meaning upon them and she muses that one 'can make any point one wants, without even faking the evidence' (MG, 203). They can be used to support either a 'picture of women's innate conservatism' 'no recognisable pattern [or] general statement about Women Today' (MG, 196).

Like Drabble herself Kate has become irritated by being labelled a 'woman writer'. She has also become increasingly aware of the media's capacity to distort and *The Middle Ground* rehearses the positions about the unreliability of news reports and documentary evidence that are to become familiar in *The Gates of Ivory* and elsewhere.

Another character, Evelyn Stennett, has dedicated her life to public service. She has become a social worker and is dealing with poor mothers and neglected working class children. In her job, she observes the 'disease of affluence' and concludes that this not only affects the lives of children of poor families by filling them with 'feelings of failure and rancour and despair' (MG,142), but also the children of rich families who are given excessive access to material things.

Although most of the characters are from the middle-class including Kate and her friends, there are some from working-class backgrounds as well: Irene is from Bradford. 'A working-class kid, ran away from home when she was fifteen, ended up in Hackney with a lot of female layabouts, decided she was a Lesbian, got into all sorts of funny business - drugs, ouija, God knows what' (MG,229). Mrs Oakley, a care worker who herself cannot treat children properly, assesses the mothers at the Day Care Centre during a staff meeting; 'These mothers, they're not fit to go near their own children', 'they wander in here, smoking, dropping litter, tramping in mud, they upset the children. Teach them bad habits, bad language, they don't seem to have any control' (MG,143).

Crime, domestic violence, and racism all feature in *The Middle Ground*. An ambulance fails to arrive when summoned to a scene of domestic violence: 'You know how long it took to get that ambulance there? They ought to be shot. And all because the voice on the line was Pakistani. Not that it wasn't a miracle to find a telephone in that district' (MG,227). 'Racial and class antagonism scream out from graffiti or wink from the corners of polite conversation... Strife among classes and among ethnic, racial, and nationalist groups recurs ominously throughout the novel' (Bromberg,1983,p.477). There are racist slogans on the underground platform: 'NIGGERS GO HOME,' 'KILL THE BLACK CUNTS WHO ARE RUINING OUR COUNTRY,' 'MUSLIM DOGS' (MG,105).

The socially-privileged Kate and Evelyn do not feel the effects of the economic decline in their private lives although Evelyn's clientele do. When Evelyn's life is

compared to the lives of those she is dealing with in her job as a social worker, the reader feels a wide gap between the middle and working class:

After a day of struggling with the inarticulate and the bureaucratic, a day of being abused on one doorstep in the vilest language, welcomed over another to dirty floorcloths and the dank smell of too many small children and sour milk; after an encounter with a distraught thirty-year-old seventeen-stone woman with the voice and face and mental capacity of a child, who wanted her seventy-five-year-old father put away before she killed him or he killed her; after an interview with a weeping devoted foster mother whose foster child had shot a fireman on a ladder with an airgun; after such a day, what a relief to hear people talk of sex and poetry, to eat lemon chicken and green salad and Brie, to sit in one's own home. (MG,209)

### **Iraq and the Middle East**

*The Middle Ground* focuses on the interactions that take place in a capital city that is no longer monocultural but multicultural, multi-racial, and sexually and ethnically diverse. Drabble is concerned with alterity and explores how white middle-class people like Kate and Evelyn interact with the 'other' as represented by different religious and ethnic groups; Jewish, Muslim, Arab, Pakistani, Irish, black as well as with lesbians and gays, and trade union activists. At a dinner party with Mujid and other friends Kate observes that there at least three unconnected conversations being conducted at one and the same time. One is about Jewish identity, another about feminism and the third about the politics of the Lebanon. As Kate concludes; 'The ideologies of the late twentieth century mingled but did not mix' (MG,99). This makes Hugo feel that he is witnessing 'the hopelessness of communication, the bared roots of intransigence' (MG,99). He puts the question: 'Will anyone ever again be able to write, with confidence, a book that assumes the significance of one culture only, will anyone ever be able to stand upright in one nationality' (MG,170).

In *The Middle Ground* Drabble demonstrates informed knowledge and understanding of the Kurdish liberation movement through her use of two characters, the English Hugo and the Iraqi Mujid. Hugo has studied archaeology and anthropology



in Cambridge and chooses to visit the mountains of Kurdistan in northern Iraq in order to conduct his first research project about the principles of social organization among the Bizhari people. However, he changes his topic of research to Kurdish nationalism after he becomes the prisoner of the 'KDP army.'<sup>2</sup> Hugo recognises from the beginning that 'the Kurds were not renowned for their peace-loving dispositions— indeed this was one of the reasons why he found them attractive— but he had not foreseen that he would actually be taken prisoner and held as hostage in a militant local upsurge of the prolonged Kurdish battle for independence' (MG,173). Despite being held captive, he lives a 'comfortable' and 'organized' life and rapidly becomes familiar with their language. It is explained to him that he has been detained 'in order to publicize their cause; as the son of a British diplomat' (MG,174). Hugo listens to stories about the 'ill-fated Mahabad Republic,' 'the heroic march of Mullah Mustafa to the Soviet Union,' and 'ancient tales of atrocities and betrayals by Turks, Persians, Iraqi, Syrians, Armenians' (MG,174). After his release, Hugo returns to England and 'sells his story to a Sunday paper 'earning more from it than he would have done from years of research. Academic life no longer seemed alluring' (MG,175). His captivity has marked the end of his career as an anthropologist and the start of a more exciting future as a journalist specialising in Middle Eastern affairs. He then decides to write a novel about himself but eventually gives up because 'the more I try to tell the truth, the worse I write' (MG,161). At the end of the novel Hugo has decided to go back to Iraq.

*The Middle Ground* engages with the issues raised by the Kurdish people, and with Kurdistan, the homeland of the Kurdish people, the land of a 'strife-torn nation' (MG,98). The Kurds are still the world's largest nation still without a state of their own. Kurdistan becomes a topic in discussions involving Mujid, a refugee from Baghdad who is 'teaching and pursuing some doctorate at the University, or would be if he had not got into serious trouble by appearing at a demonstration in favour of Kurdish independence'

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<sup>2</sup> The Kurdistan Democratic Party is still one of the main ruling political parties in what is currently Iraqi Kurdistan.

(MG,82). Mujid articulates what is, in effect, Drabble's own well-known dislike of things American (MG,92). In 2003, she wrote in *The Daily Telegraph*: 'My anti-Americanism has become almost uncontrollable. It has possessed me, like a disease. It rises up in my throat like acid reflux, that fashionable American sickness. I now loathe the United States and what it has done to Iraq and the rest of the helpless world' (Drabble,2003).

The representation of Mujid runs counter to the notion of 'otherness' as inimical to the English way of life and to the threat supposedly posed to the nation by aliens, terrorists and immigrants (a conflation of external and internal danger) who were succoured by the liberal intellectual elite. Although Mujid is an Arab he believes in Kurdish independence. 'His parents are anti-Kurd, but he is pro-Kurd' (MG,84). He can hardly believe Kate's ignorance about the Kurdish question and the nature of the Ba'ath government (MG,84). Yet one of the slogans that Kate and Mujid read together on the underground platform in London is 'STOP IRAQI SLAUGHTER OF KURDS' (MG,105). Mujid is both a Muslim and a Marxist, a thoughtful young man who is bemused by the feminist graffiti that appears on the advertisements for boots, brassieres and bridal gowns that Kate points out to him, but as someone to whom this is all new the wit of the feminist slogans escapes him. He was introduced to Kate via Beatrice Mourre, his mother-in-law, who is part French and part Lebanese whom Kate had got to know in hospital as both were having babies nearly nineteen years earlier. In one of her postcards, Beatrice informs Kate that her daughter, Simone has become "'very political", and a convert to the Muslim cause, though the Mourres were Christian Maronites' (MG,83). Simone has become engaged to Mujid whom she met at the University. She is still in Beirut to finish her doctorate, although her parents have left for Paris after news that their eighteen-year-old son has been killed in a street battle in the city. Kate thinks about 'civil war, of Beirut in flames, of bombs and massacres' (MG,83). She compares Beatrice's son who 'had grown up only to die' with her own son who is safely studying architecture, 'far from these dangers' (MG,83).

When Kate's friends know that Kate has accepted Mujid into her home they exhibit their own prejudice in warning that he is probably a terrorist. She retorts; 'of course, he's not a terrorist, he's just a boy. And he's got nowhere else to go' (MG,84). In fact, he is a man of nearly thirty, and gives Kate lessons on politics which she considers the 'next stage in her education' (MG,87). He waits for Kate to return from work 'to harangue her on the triviality and social bias of English television, on the poor coverage of Middle East affairs in the media, on the pro-Israel, anti-Soviet line of the press' (MG,84-85). She finds herself wondering what Mujid made of the television programme *London Today*, 'trying to see it through his eyes' (MG,104) although she finds it somewhat embarrassing to see Britain 'through censorious foreign eyes' (MG,89). She thinks of Mujid as 'an extra conscience and a pedagogue' (MG,85). She feels that she cannot throw Mujid out, but 'must learn to love him' and must do her bit 'for international understanding' (MG,86).

The significance of Mujid in Kate's personal life lies in the fact that he makes no unwelcome connection with her past. Furthermore, his presence helps Kate to make sense of her life and through talking to him, she 'feels herself close to some interesting discovery about human nature' (MG,87). Mujid has helped Kate to free herself from 'the grip of the representative'. She ceases to think of Mujid as just an Iraqi but as a friend. She is struck by how unlike he is to 'what would have been her idea of an Iraqi, had she ever had one' (MG,260). She abandons her own generalisations, misrepresentations, and stereotypes and comes to accept diversity and difference: 'How had she managed to acquire the deadly notion that everything she did or thought had to be *exemplary*, had to *mean something*, not only for herself, but also for that vast quaking seething tenuous mass of otherness, for other people?' (MG,229). Mujid observes how the generalisation has led to misrepresentation:

The Olympian omniscient narrator enters the mind of Mujid to list examples of the ignorance about Arabs that rankle but which those around him take for granted. In

contrast to Hugo and Kate who comment in the first-person, Mujid's opinion is narrated in the third-person and not his own personal voice.

Mujid is puzzled... by the manifestations of anti-Arab feeling in this country, by the inability of most people to distinguish between "les émirs" from Saudi Arabia reclining in vast suites in the Wellington Hospital, and the poor Egyptian and Jordanian students struggling to learn engineering on grants ...; between the ethnic archaic figures of the Iraqi National Dance Company ... and the Iraqi terrorists who shot an ex-Minister outside the International Hotel. (MG,169)

### **The Radiant Way (1987)**

The period from 1979 onwards was 'a period of renewed class and cultural division' as 'a byproduct of Thatcherism' and 'the systematic effect of a top-down class antagonism' (Connor,1995,p.65). *The Radiant Way* begins with a significant landmark in English history, a new decade which was heralded on New Year's Eve, 1980, a few months into the Conservative government which had been elected to power in 1979. Characters with different educational and professional backgrounds have gathered to celebrate the end of 'an eclectic, fragmented, purposeless decade' (RW,32). The new decade is supposed to usher in major industrial, social, and economic changes in English society. The New Year's Eve party is in Liz's spacious house in Harley Street, a prestigious upper-class residential area. Most of the topics discussed by the guests have a political flavour: 'In other corners and other rooms, dozens of topics floated gaily on the lively, slightly choppy waters, their pennants bobbing and fluttering in the end-of-year, the terminal breeze: the approaching steel strike, the brave new era of threatened privatization, the abuse of North Sea oil resources [...]' (RW,26).

Public Ownership and Clause 4 are the topics of dispute between a supporter of Thatcherite policies and Giles, whom the narrator characterizes as 'the man of the Left' (RW,33). Giles launches into an invective against the Conservatives; "'Wolves!'" shouted Giles drunkenly, "wolves, that's what they are, the pack of them, they're traitors

to the human race, scavengers, look at them, look at them, wolves is too good a word for them, jackals, hyenas, that's what they are, hyenas!" (RW,33). The policies of the Labour Party are also judged and found wanting, referred to dismissively as 'that ghastly, trailing decaying albatross-corpse of the Left, Public ownership and Clause 4' (RW,33).

Drabble then shifts the scene from London to Northam, to show how 'the Other Nation' (RW,47) lives and celebrates the new decade. She initially focuses on the city centre and presents a mixture of lonely old people, the middle-aged, and young couples with children awaiting the departure of the old year. They live in unrenovated houses and have been affected by the governmental policies. Then the focus moves to another part of the town, a fashionable suburb, where left-wing teachers, councillors, social workers, journalists and members of the professional class (who represent the kind of progressive politics for which Sheffield was known in the 1970s as discussed earlier about David Blunkett) have gathered for the New Year's celebration. They 'were high on a recent freak by-trend to the Right and given, in their own view, a renewed popular blessing to their defiant, daring programme of high social expenditure. Socialism begins at home, they told one another' (RW,48). Northam's elderly historian is watching them with silent outrage; he 'did not trust this new wave of optimism' (RW,48).

Later, the novel zooms in on the house of Eddie Duckworth, newly elected as the president of the Chamber of Commerce. Duckworth has faith in the new government's plans to 'put a stop to inflation, high interest rates, rocketing domestic and industrial rates, shameful capitulation to the unions, centralized bureaucratic planning, and the consequent decay of the manufacturing industries' (RW,48). The celebrations show Thatcherite policies as the source of hope and satisfaction for some people, but a cause of anxiety and distress for others.

As a politically-committed novelist concerned about social issues, Drabble uses the nineteenth-century trope of the 'two nations' to demonstrate the social, economic,

political and cultural divisions within English society. However, the division of England into north and south by many Victorian novelists affirms the moral superiority of London and the South over the North and the great manufacturing cities of Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield and Liverpool and Bradford with their large working-class populations. *The Radiant Way* not only reveals the differences between these two dissimilar worlds, but also demonstrates social divisions within the two worlds themselves. In other words, Drabble aims to show that the north is not a monolith and has its own demographic diversity and the same is true to London. Poverty, unemployment, and violence are also to be found in those parts of London where Alix, Brian and Esther live and work. While wealthy people owned houses in London as second homes in the 1970 others were seeking decent homes and were unable to find them. Alix's son Nicholas 'moves out of his squat' and shares a flat with his girlfriend Ilse in a condemned building awaiting demolition (RW,238). They prepare the rooms with some junk furniture and live pretty 'in the heart of urban desolation' (RW,240). Drabble has specifically chosen to write about Harrow Road to make possible a contrast with Harley Street where Liz lives. The contrast between these two real places reveals that in London each district has its own social meaning. She wants her readers to 'get these extraordinary violent contrasts between the very rich and the very poor within half a mile of one another' (Peyre,2011,p.116). Once again, she shows that she is haunted by the image of 'The Two Nations'.

In *A Writer's Britain: Landscape in Literature* Drabble expresses her admiration for Dickens's representation of London which is full of ambiguity: 'He denounces but he loves: the confusion itself has an irresistible appeal for him' (WB,207). She shares Dickens's ambivalent attitudes to the city and his ability to represent both its sordidness and its magnetic lure, mystery and vibrancy: 'His London is dirty, but it is also wonderfully mysterious and dramatic' (WB,209). Some of the descriptions of London in *The Radiant Way* are associated with images of death and decay: 'London has become difficult. Not impossible, but difficult. Even Esther who likes urban life, is becoming

distressed by the visual impact of some stretches of Ladbroke Grove, by the apartment blocks of the Harrow Road, by the strange surreal landscape under the arches of the motorway' (RW,192). The streets are a 'landscape of nightmare, an extreme, end-of-the-world, dreamlike parody of urban nemesis' (RW,244). However, for all its visual squalor, Esther does not want to leave London, and this can be seen as a reflection of Drabble's own ambivalence about the city and her sympathy for Dickens's conflicted attitude to nineteenth-century London.

Drabble acknowledges her interest 'in the state-of-England novel, in depicting where people stand in certain social moments' (Lewis, J. E. 1988,p.144). The theme of the 'two-nations' is predominant in *The Radiant Way*. The setting switches back and forth from London to Northam and attempts to give a realistic depiction of the conditions of life there as well as in London. As Drabble commented at the time: 'I have rather lost touch with the North of England so I had to go and visit it on purpose and talk to people... whereas the London stuff comes naturally because I lived with it much longer' (Peyre,2011,p.116).

The title of *The Radiant Way* refers to a children's primer which Charles Headleand 'had learned at the age of four to read at his mother's knee' (RW,174). The book was used as a reader in many primary schools after the war. It epitomizes an ameliorative view of history and a path leading forward; the Welfare State, peace, social reform, progress, prosperity and educational advance. The title also inspired Charles to make a documentary about class divisions in the education system of the post-war era during his time as a television executive in 1965. The documentary wins the approval of a credulous audience who are unable to see the ways in which their sympathies are being directed: 'It was great television: Charles let his people speak for themselves, they condemned themselves in their own words from their own mouths, they won sympathy by the way they stood at a bus stop or fed their rabbits or bought a copy of *Exchange and Mart* at the corner shop: or so, at least, it seemed to the British public, which was still innocent in its response to the television documentary (RW,180).

The date 1965 is significant because of major reorganisations in the education system. The 'Labour Government issued its Circular 10/65, designed to end selection at eleven-plus and introduce comprehensive education' (RW,174) thus removing a tiered education system consisting of grammar and secondary modern schools. This had segregated children into secondary modern and selective grammar schools which had creamed off the minority of academic pupils. Hereafter children of different academic abilities would be taught in the same institution side by side.

*The Radiant Way* follows the paths of three women in their mid-forties; Liz Headleand, Alix Bowen and Esther Breuer through the social and political changes of England in the 1980s. They met twenty-five years before at Cambridge University, and are 'the *creme de la creme* of their generation' and they 'share characteristics, impressions, memories, even speech patterns' (RW,88,108). Their friendship continues throughout the trilogy:

They ... were not to know for many years, were never fully to understand what it was that held them together - a sense of being on the margins of English life, perhaps, a sense of being outsiders, looking in from a cold street through a lighted window into a warm lit room that later might prove to be their own? Removed from the mainstream by a mad mother, by a deviant ideology, by refugee status and the war-sickness of Middle Europe?... They thought they found one another interesting. And so they became friends. (RW,90)

Drabble relates their concerns to those of the larger society in which they live. She therefore makes her 'protagonists' problems and crises representative of England's and explore[s] individual trajectories as indicating possibilities for social change' (Greene,1992,p.304) addressing the ways that these women understand and respond to the contemporary life of England through their professions and relationships: As Drabble told Janet Lewis, 'I've less sense of the uniqueness of the individual and more awareness of my characters as being part of a larger order or process' (Lewis, J. E. 1988,p.144).

Each of the three protagonists has left their childhood home and has made her ways to London. Like Clara Maugham, Liz Headleand is desperate to escape from Northam and her mother. Liz doubts that her marriage to Charles is a true escape from



her past. 'She knows she is not the true princess, but only a fake princess, a scullery maid dressed up by a Cambridge scholarship and her own wits, and rescued by a dubious prince' (RW,189). Later, Liz's sister, Shirley, notes the emotional and spiritual links between mother and daughter: 'My God, she's beginning to look like our mother. God help her, that's what she's beginning to look like' (RW,225).

Liz would like 'to "make sense of things, to understand." By things she meant herself. Or she thought she meant herself' (RW,85). She becomes a psychiatrist and asks questions about the self. Her friend, Alix, would like "'to change things." By things she did not mean herself. Or thought she did not mean herself' (RW,85). She becomes an outreach worker and teaches part-time in a reformatory for young women. She is greatly interested in the 'social structure' (RW,72). Esther would like 'to acquire interesting information' (RW,85). She becomes a professional art historian. The three women have dissimilar political points of view, three different careers, and three different attitudes to life: introspection, social commitment and intellectual detachment.

Of the three, it is only Esther, the art historian, who cultivates detachment and is able to make a complete separation between art, politics and life. Her world is the world of aesthetics and for her this is sufficient unto itself. Although her own family are Holocaust survivors and her own parents fled from the Nazis in Austria she does not see it as her responsibility to probe into the causes of human suffering. 'What I can't see', said Esther to Alix, 'is what any of this has got to do with you. Or with me. It's simply not our problem. We didn't make it, and that's that' (RW,343).

Liz escapes from the north by moving to London. She was born into a lower-middle-class family in Northam but with hard work gets to the University of Cambridge and tries to break away from her roots. Her mother represents everything she wants to rid herself of and she has left the responsibility of taking care of her to her younger sister, Shirley. Although Liz has witnessed class barriers at first hand she attempts to deny their existence from her professional perspective as a psychotherapist:

Liz maintained that psychiatric problems observed no class or economic frontiers, that most forms of disturbance manifest themselves equally among the rich and the poor, that the dynamics of family abuse, the incidence of senile dementia or Down's syndrome, the distribution of drug addiction or schizophrenia were largely unaffected by income, by environment.... If you're talking about *suffering*, Liz had been known to say when the subject was broached, the rich suffer as much as the poor. (RW,128)

Alix, her husband, Brian, and Esther are all 'less immune to the spirit of 1980, to the policies of the new government, for which none of them voted. The Thatcherite ethos does not suit them as it suits Liz' (RW,185) who embodies Thatcher's values of ambition, aspiration and self-help. As Abbott and Ryan explain; Thatcher 'was seeking to create a market-economy where people would be rewarded for taking control of their own destinies by making economic opportunities for themselves. Personal responsibility and drive became the pre-eminent social and economic values' (Abbott and Ryan,2006,p.167).

Liz has not allowed herself to be held back by her class origins, has overcome social and economic constraints, and established her high status professional career. Improving her social position by moving to Harley Street makes Liz exceedingly proud and self-satisfied: 'Liz still, after all these years, found satisfaction in giving her address. Each time a shop assistant or a clerk or a tradesman wrote down Dr E. Headleand, Harley Street, the same thrill of self-affirmation, of self-definition would be re-enacted. Liz Ablewhite of Abercorn Avenue had become Liz Headleand of Harley Street, London W1' (RW,18).

Liz ignores the social and economic consequences of Thatcherite policies and instead puts the blame for poverty and failure on the individual. When her brother-in-law, Cliff, who fails to run his own small enterprise successfully, kills himself, Liz coldly refers to him as 'Another failed-small-business suicide' (NC,109). The Conservative government's emphasis on privatization and the free market suits Liz because she 'is not threatened by cuts in public spending, by the decline of the National Health Service,' and her

'judicious blend of public and private practice' (RW,181) makes her business prosper.

In contrast, Alix is from a radical intellectual middle-class family having read English at Cambridge and lived in poverty after the death of her first husband. Like Rose in *The Needle's Eye* she tries to live a morally good life and works part time as a civil servant and teaches English language and literature to women in prison. Alix, and her second husband, Brian, who is from a working-class background and works in adult education have the same political opinions; they believe in post-war consensus and in the Welfare state. Due to the government's spending cuts their jobs are endangered and life begins to be difficult for them both. As Gayle Greene describes their situations, they 'are vulnerable in their work to cuts in welfare spending and vulnerable in themselves because they care. Moreover, their marriage is in trouble, and the problem is political, for Brian is being drawn to the militant left just as Alix is losing faith in any sort of political action' (Greene,1992,p.317). In the end they are forced to move to Northam where Alix finds a new job working for a famous poet, but this, unlike her previous ones, is not socially useful: 'She has had enough, for the time being, of trying to serve the community. There is no point in it' (RW,392). Alix concludes; 'There is no hope, in the present social system, of putting anything right. The only hope is in revolution, and Alix does not think revolution likely' (RW,392).

Drabble dissects class relationships and addresses the gap between the rich and the poor. Her characters are socially mobile and the class barrier can be crossed upward and downward. As we have seen so far, Clara Maugham in *Jerusalem the Golden*, another refugee from Northam, makes her way in society after studying in London. Likewise, Simon Camish of *The Needle's Eye* is born into poverty, but achieves success in his profession and becomes a barrister. In contrast, Rose Vassiliou voluntarily chose to live with few material possessions although born into family wealth. Similarly, Anthony Keating in *The Ice Age* is catapulted downwards when failing in his risk-taking financial path of becoming a property investor.

*The Radiant Way* focuses on social class and social conflict during the first few years of Thatcher's period in office at a time when the importance of the traditional class divisions was being minimized by a new political party, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) that had recently emerged on the British political scene. In the novel Drabble refers to the Social Democrats who have launched a new political party in 1981 pledging to 'reconcile the nation' and 'heal divisions between classes'; 'a new political party boldly declared that it would attempt to find a way out of the impasse of class conflict' (RW,228). However, class tensions and conflicts are still very much in evidence. *The Radiant Way* stresses the fact that while large parts of the south were largely unaffected, areas in the north such as Northam, were suffering from mass unemployment and the economic downturn. Emphasizing the difference in living conditions between the two, Drabble commented that 'the whole unemployment situation which does not exist in the South is very much a phenomenon of the North of England' (Peyre,2011,p.116).

In *The Radiant Way*, Charles Headleand voices his fear of vandalism after parking a hired car: 'They'll strip it,... they'll syphon off the petrol and nick the tyres' (RW,309). However, Alix reminds him 'this is Northam, not the Harrow Road. They haven't learnt bad habits yet, up here' (RW,309). When Charles observes that there are no other cars within view Brian attributes their absence to two reasons: 'people don't need cars because public transport is so cheap in Northam' (RW,309). However, the other reason is that 'unemployment in these flats is something like eighty-five per cent.... The statistics inform us that only eight per cent of households in this block have a car' (RW,309).

Interviewed at the time of writing, Drabble described this novel as being about 'contemporary Britain— social attitudes, the way people behave, the way they dress or think— through a variety of viewpoints' (Hannay,1987,p.133). A couple of years later, she went further claiming that it was 'about the decline of

western civilisation' (Kenyon,1989,p.36). The depiction of England – Scotland is never mentioned – in the first half of the decade, as shown in *The Radiant Way*, is deeply pessimistic with all hope of amelioration, progress and social consensus dashed. As the novel progresses, the social gap widens and poverty and political divisions increase.

In 1980 the 'steel strike continues, a bitter prelude to the miners' strike that will follow. Class rhetoric flourishes. Long-cherished notions of progress are inspected, exposed, left out to die in the cold. Survival of the fittest seems to be the new-old doctrine' (RW,172). Inflation, strikes, unemployment, discontent, and social divisions are all explicitly referred to in a novel which shows how when people like Alix are politicised and they come to see all issues politically. Every aspect of life has been politicised in *The Radiant Way*; and it is thus 'difficult to avoid politics' (RW,376).

After the winter of discontent, the Conservatives had run a successful election campaign emphasizing the Labour government's economic failings. Unemployment had risen to very high levels and the Conservative's most noted advertising campaign in the run up to the 1979 General Election had depicted a poster with a long line of people queuing for the unemployment office with the memorable slogan 'Labour isn't working' and the phrase 'Britain's better off with the Conservatives' in a smaller typeface below. In *The Radiant Way* Drabble refers to the poster which was part of a Saatchi and Saatchi advertising campaign: 'Unemployment rises steadily, but the Tory Party is not yet often reminded of its election poster which portrayed a long dole queue with the slogan 'Labour isn't working'. People have short memories, many of them are carried along with the new tide. They are fit' (RW,172).

*The Radiant Way* (1987) is the first part of a trilogy followed by *A Natural Curiosity* (1989) and *The Gates of Ivory* (1991). Drabble notes at the start of *A Natural Curiosity*; 'I had not intended to write a sequel [to *The Radiant Way*], but felt that the earlier novel was in some way unfinished, that it had asked questions it had not answered, and introduced people who had hardly been allowed to speak' (NC). In both

these novels, Drabble continues to address international political concerns with Pol Pot, Vietnam, the Khmer Rouge and Cambodia. In the opening scene of *The Gates of Ivory*, she speaks directly to the reader and asks them to '[i]magine yourself standing by a bridge over a river on the border between Thailand and Cambodia. Behind you...all the Good Times of the West. Before you, the Bad Time of Cambodia' (GI,3). Here, Drabble ventures beyond the condition of England to the condition of the world in new and challenging ways that I shall explore further in my next chapter.

## CHAPTER 3

### Beyond the Condition of England: From the Local to the Universal

*The Radiant Way* trilogy consists of *The Radiant Way* (1987), *A Natural Curiosity* (1989) and *The Gates of Ivory* (1991) and is largely centred on the lives of privileged people but it also illustrates Drabble's concerns for the marginalized who have failed to make much of their lives. The author represents not only her concerns for those who live on the fringes of English society but also her anxiety about the deprived and the displaced elsewhere in the world. The trilogy explores the interactions between the two. Several characters consider moving elsewhere in England or else leaving the country to go abroad because of the economic crisis. Due to the impossibility of finding a satisfactory dwelling in London, Ilse and Nicholas search for a new home in the countryside. In *The Radiant Way*, Alix and Brian move from south to the north because of Brian's unemployment. Unable to identify with the changes taking place in England, the cosmopolitan art critic Esther departs for Italy which is more congenial.

One of the themes of the trilogy is the rise of a global consciousness which is linked to the other changes of consciousness at that time. Drabble is interested in socio-political issues not only in England but also on a worldwide scale. Her characters inhabit a world of terrorism, warfare, economic disparities, social instability and political crisis and as she develops as a writer she adopts a pattern of moving from local issues to universal crises in her fiction and from the condition of England to the world beyond. Thus, global consciousness is linked to attitudes to the changing socio political and physical landscape in which the characters are dissatisfied with their present environment. In the final novel in the trilogy, *The Gates of Ivory* Stephen Cox, the

novelist moves to South East Asia on a journey to discover the truth about the Pol Pot regime.

This chapter addresses the question of human evil in the final two books of the trilogy. Drabble examines how human being can embrace either good or evil and is interested in the existence of absolute good and absolute evil and in situations in which a human being's capacity for evil manifests itself in Britain's ancient history and in the brutality of twentieth-century Cambodia. She thus reveals her deep interest in ethics as well as in politics. In *A Natural Curiosity* evil is expressed in the behaviour of the serial murderer Paul Whitmore who is interested in the pagan cult of the severed head. It is 'almost as if she had invented him, as an illustration of whatever it is she wishes to discover about human nature' (NC,5) writes Drabble about Alix, who visits Whitmore in prison. In *The Gates of Ivory* human evil filters through to western observers who learn of the excesses of the Khmer Rouge and the deaths of the civilian population.

### **The Importance of Arnold Bennett in the English Literary Tradition and his Attitudes to Provincial Life**

Before discussing the remaining two novels in *The Radiant Way* trilogy I want to examine Drabble's relationship to novelist Arnold Bennett (1867-1931). I wish to establish how Drabble understood, and to some extent shared, Bennett's attitudes to English provincial life, and also his ideas about the importance of characterisation, place, and social realism within the English literary tradition which exercised a profound influence on her own work.

Margaret Drabble published her study of the novelist, Arnold Bennett, *Arnold Bennett: a Biography* in 1974. Drabble expresses her affinity with Bennett and through writing his biography analyses aspects of her own family background, and her own writing and values as well. Drabble emphasizes that Bennett is primarily a social creature, both in his life and literature: 'He was a man who wished to live in society and



to make sense of it and work through it' (AB,342). In *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Drabble summarizes her development as a writer: 'Her early novels deal primarily with the dilemma of the educated young woman caught in the conflicting claims of maternity, sexuality, and intellectual and economic aspiration; her later novels... have a broader canvas, a more ironic relationship with traditional narration, and a wider interest in documenting social change' (OCEL,286). Her middle and later novels, *The Realms of Gold*, *The Ice Age*, *The Middle Ground*, and *The Radiant Way* function as social and political documents exploring contemporary English society and it is here that the influence of Bennett is pronounced.

One of Drabble's key criticisms of Virginia Woolf was her remoteness from the geographical background that she knew and understood herself: 'The North was a foreign country to her, and she did not recognize its signals. The blindness is a common one' (AB,292). An important connection between Drabble and Bennett is their interest in representing English provincial life. As Lorna Sage notes, Drabble's heroines 'usually have their roots in the English provinces, like Drabble herself, who was born in Yorkshire, and questions of people's relations with places from the past are, surprisingly perhaps, quite ... important to her' (Sage,1992,p.90). In *The Pattern in the Carpet: A Personal History with Jigsaws* (2009) Drabble reveals that her aunt's middle name was Bennett and 'as we are from the Potteries, we claim some as yet unverified connection with the great man' (PC,18). In her introduction to the biography, she states:

What interests me more is Bennett's background, his childhood and origins, for they are very similar to my own. My mother's family came from the Potteries, and the Bennett novels seem to me to portray a way of life that still existed when I was a child, and indeed persists in certain areas. My own attitudes to life and work were coloured by many of the same beliefs and rituals, though they were further in the past for me, but as Bennett knew all too well they are attitudes that die hard. He might have been surprised to find how closely I identify with them, after two or three generations of startling change. So, like all books, this has been partly an act of self-exploration. (AB,xii)

Arnold Bennett was born and brought up in Hanley in the Potteries district of Staffordshire, one of the Five Towns frequently appearing in his writings. (There are in

fact six). Bennett changed the names and Tunstall became Turnhill in his fiction, Burslem became Bursley, Hanley became Hanbridge, Stoke became Knype, Longton became Longshaw. Fenton he missed out altogether and it is sometimes known as 'the town that Bennett forgot'. The six towns joined together in 1910 to become the county borough of Stoke-on-Trent and in 1925 this borough was granted city status. Locally it is still known as 'the Potteries'. At the time that Bennett begins to write his early fiction, he describes the Potteries of his childhood and youth as a combination of ugliness and hidden romance:

The towns are mean and ugly in appearance— sombre, shapeless, hard— featured, uncouth; and the vaporous poison of their ovens and chimneys has soiled and shrivelled the surrounding greenness of Nature till there is no country lane within miles but what presents a gaunt travesty of rural charms. Nothing could be more prosaic than the aspect of the huddled streets; nothing more seemingly remote from romance. Yet romance dwells even here, though unsuspected by its very makers— the romance which always attends the alchemic processes of skilled, transmuting labour. (Hepburn,1979,p.38)

In 'Mr. Arnold Bennett', published in the *London Mercury* in 1924, J. B. Priestley argued that a clearer understanding of Bennett's work would be achieved if his fiction were viewed as the product of an author whose life is shaped by three developmental divisions:

There is, first, his childhood, education and early manhood in the Five Towns. From 1867 to the beginning of the 'Nineties, young E. A. Bennett, brisk as a bee, was unconsciously hiving facts and impressions, scenes and characters for the day when Arnold Bennett, already a smart journalist with a story or two to his credit, should seek a new element for his fiction and suddenly pluck out these fat golden honeycombs.... The second period is that of his early years in London, when he was engaged in journalism and ingenious pot - boiling of various kinds. He became a very successful journalist, and has remained one ever since; most of his lighter novels, whatever else they may be, are certainly good journalism.... [The] last set of influences ... is the result of his early interest in French, chiefly modern French literature (at a time when his acquaintance with our own literature was only slight), and of an equal interest in French life that finally led to his living in France for nearly ten years. (Hepburn,1997,pp.434-437)

Drabble explains that, like Bennett, she 'always feel[s] a need in novels to describe precisely where people live' (Preussner,1979-80,p.572). She considers an author's first-hand knowledge of place to be very important: 'It cannot be done from

within: the contrasts and the fine shades can be perceived only by a man who has lived elsewhere. Bennett himself was neither the expert from London nor the proud provincial; but he knew both' (AB,145). She notes that both Bennett and D. H. Lawrence were affected by their early environments, as she was by hers. They grew up in the potteries and Nottinghamshire respectively and 'Both turned their backs on the districts that nourished them, yet both commemorate them in novels inspired by a mingled love and hatred' (WB,217). Lawrence, for example describes Alvina, the heroine of *The Lost Girl*, as being smitten with 'nostalgia for the repulsive, heavy-footed Midlands' (Lawrence,p.48).

Bennett, like Drabble, deliberately turned his back on his birthplace, but he did return from time to time. On one such visit in 1897 he noted that 'the grim and original beauty of certain aspects of the Potteries ... has fully revealed itself for the first time' (AB,5). Drabble has also chosen not to live in the area in which she grew up. She too had a similar revelatory experience in returning to the North and discovering it as owning a strange beauty that she had not remembered.

In the third chapter of the Bennett biography Drabble writes; 'I should acknowledge at this point my own debt to Bennett, in my novel *Jerusalem the Golden*, which was profoundly affected by his attitudes, though as they are of course also a part of my own background I can't quite distinguish what came from where' (AB,48). She explains that 'my novel is almost as much an appreciation of Bennett as this book is meant to be' (AB,47-48). In *Jerusalem the Golden* her heroine, Clara Maugham, like Bennett's first hero, Richard Larch in *A Man from the North* (1989), is 'obsessed with escape' from the repressive environment of the north (AB,48). Clara rejects the apparent moral of her favourite story: 'The Golden Windows', namely that 'one must see the beauty in what one has, and not search for it elsewhere' (JG,169). Drabble recounts having had a similar experience but coming to a different conclusion when she went back again to Sheffield (on which Clara's home town of Northam was based) in order to research her novel:

After the flat dull overbuilt sprawl of London, it was Sheffield that looked like Jerusalem. I wrote the book from memory, and then decided I'd better go back and check up that I'd remembered right, so I went up for a night, arriving after dark and staying in the Station Hotel. In the morning I was expecting to look out of the window and see those soul-destroying grim industrial perspectives, but in fact I looked out, the sun was shining, the hillsides were glittering, green fields fringed the horizon, it was all bright and sparkling and beautiful. I felt as though I had maligned the place completely in my memory. After the flat dull overbuilt sprawl of London, it was Sheffield that looked like Jerusalem. (AB,5)

Drabble describes Bennett's fiction not as 'mere documentary', but 'creative imagination at its most powerful' (AB,279). She values Bennett's association of the landscape with woman-centred perspectives: 'perhaps I am merely falling into the trap of finding the North more "real" than the South. Either way, we owe our thanks to Bennett' who 'saw and dared to say things that women hadn't got round to saying for themselves' (AB,183). Bennett's contemporaries criticized his novels as 'a mere catalogue of domestic furniture' (TWF,72) and Drabble's fiction has been criticized for the same reason: for overly detailed description of where people live. As Loma Sage puts it, her characters 'are characterized far less by their looks or their talk than by their domestic interiors' (Sage,1979,p.75).

Simon Camish in *The Needle's Eye* (1972) is originally from the north, but lives in London and never goes back. He has no cause to return as everyone including his mother has moved (NE,22). Simon explains that he does not particularly dislike the north, but his wife 'was from the same region, and had always hated it with a real passion, and now could hardly be dragged there for any reason' (NE,23). Rose, who likes Norfolk, remarks that it is 'Sad, to hate the place where one was born' and Simon agrees that it is sad, but common (NE,23).

Drabble calls *The Death of Simon Fuge*, which was published in a collection called *The Grim Smile of the Five Towns* in 1907, 'one of the greatest short stories in the English language' (Drabble,2008b). John Wain greatly admired the story, remarking that 'in using very telling detail, it says as much as a novel, it says easily as much as a novel of a hundred thousand words could say on this theme' and naming it

'the best thing that Arnold Bennett ever did' (Wain,2008,pp.9,12). Bennett focuses on Loring, a ceramics expert, from the British Museum who visits the Potteries for the first time in order to consult the head of the committee of management of the Wedgwood Institute about loan exhibits. Loring, very much a Londoner, very much a metropolitan, arrives just after the London newspapers have announced the unexpected death of a famous painter from the region. He goes to see a group of strange provincial people who have little appreciation of their local artist. Loring reads two posters: *The Daily Telegraph* offers: 'Death of Simon Fuge' and the *Staffordshire Signal* reads: 'HANBRIDGE RATES LIVELY MEETING, KNYPE FC: NEW CENTRE-FORWARD'. Loring attempts to discuss the differences between the two posters with his host, Brindley, who tells him that the new centre-forward is a question of national importance: 'You don't understand these things. If Knype Football Club was put into the League Second Division, ten thousand homes would go into mourning. Who the devil was Simon Fuge?' (Bennett,1907,p.292). The story depicts the contrast between provincial and metropolitan culture. Whenever Loring brings up the name of Simon Fuge, all the Staffordshire residents are concerned to talk about is his mysterious relationships with two sisters. Simon's character appears too cosmopolitan to win the approval of the locals for whom the choice of a centre-forward for their team is far more important. Ian Jack has pointed out two striking characteristics about this story: its modernity; 'how the same event can inspire two different sets of memory and how these find their place in two different cultures, two different kinds of newspaper' and Arnold Bennett's ingenious and compassionate portrayal of both sides, 'the metropolitan versus the provincial, in which nobody comes out as a fool' (Jack,2003).

### **Connecting the Internal life with the External World**

Drabble explains that for Bennett 'houses expressed souls. People were not disembodied spirits, and the houses that they built were as much a part of them as their

bodies' (AB,3). The houses in Drabble's fiction, like the houses in Bennett's fiction, are strongly linked to the characters' inner feelings, to their social status and aspirations and for both of the authors houses are used to link the past of the characters with their present. In *The Radiant Way*, Liz Headleand's 'largest dreams, her most foolish fantasies, had been enacted in bricks and mortar and mantelshelves and tiled floors and plaster ceilings' (RW,18). The fashionable house in Harley Street represents Liz's social ascent. She 'had reached too high, travelled too far, from Abercorn Avenue, and the house in which her mother had walled herself up: a semi-detached house, a twenties' house, a frozen house, a house held in a time warp, stuffed with her dead father's suits and shoes, stuffed with ancient magazines and medicine bottles. A pupa, a chrysalis, it had been to her and to Shirley, but to her mother a tomb' (RW,121).

In Drabble as in Bennett, domestic interiors are frequently used to recall childhood. The past and the places of memory, which are commonly associated with the north of England, are mingled with the feelings of the characters in the present. In *The Needle's Eye*, Rose's house reminds Simon of his grandmother's, a known landscape in the North. He feels pleased: 'He could not have said why the similarity, or rather the perception and recognition of it, so pleased him, as he had never cared for his grandmother's house after very early infancy' (NE,38).

When in *The Realms of Gold*, Frances Wingate goes into Mays Cottage, she finds that 'the cottage felt all right. It even had a feeling of home. It had none of the rural bleakness of Eel Cottage, none of that open struggle. Nature had gently enfolded it, had embraced and taken it and thicketed it in, with many thorns and briars; nature had wanted it and had not rejected it' (RG,316). The beauty of her son's house with its artistically furnished interior in contrast to its dingy exterior takes Alix by surprise in *The Radiant Way*. The exterior of the house is not promising: the house 'stood alone, at the end of a dingy little terrace cul-de-sac, with boarded windows, awaiting demolition, a detached house ... in terminal decay' in Stockwell (RW,238). Viewing his home, Alix's

'heart overflowed with penitence, with admiration: twenty times nicer it was than her own home' (RW,239).

The residences in Drabble's fiction usually reveal features connected with the characters' lives and delineate the limits of individual choice. The occupation of particular dwellings also indicates membership of a certain social stratum. In *The Millstone*, for instance, Rosamond lives in a flat that belongs to her parents, which dangerously misrepresents her status as people assumed that she is rather rich because of the location of the flat on Marylebone High Street (M,9). Drabble compares and contrasts particular locations, types of housing and the different ways of living in London and in Northam. In *The Ice Age* Charles confesses that it gives him 'pleasure to invite all [the people] round to his Harley Street home' because he is proud of his residence and its locality (IA,176).

Virginia Woolf criticised Bennett for being a materialist and lacking concern with the inner lives of his characters. But Bennett's commitment to the exterior of his characters and his interest in material things is due to his belief in the need to understand outside circumstances in order to understand interiority. Drabble points out that Bennett observes interior scenes closely in order 'to describe in loving detail the stability, the solidity of the world in which his characters live' (TWF,68). Drabble, however, considers that Bennett's domestic scenes 'surely owe something to Woman as well as to memory' and suggests that knowledge of furnishing and home management 'was not wasted' since Bennett becomes 'one of the few novelists who can write with sympathy and detail about the domestic preoccupations of women' (AB,56).

She gives as an example, this description of Anna's kitchen in *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902) which not only includes the suggestive details of everyday life but also describes the 'soul' or essence of his central character which she argues is revealed through the way a provincial housewife has managed to create a sense of beauty and harmony. 'This is the nicest room, I know.... Do you know when I came in here the other

night, and you were sitting at the table there, I thought the place looked like a picture' (Bennett, 1903, p. 152).

Anna's kitchen was the only satisfactory apartment in the house. Its furniture included a dresser of the simple and dignified kind which is now assiduously collected by amateurs of old oak. It had four long narrow shelves holding plates and saucers; the cups were hung in a row on small brass hooks screwed into the fronts of the shelves... Everything in this kitchen was absolutely bright and spotless, as clean as a cat in patterns, except the ceiling, darkened by fumes of gas. Everything was in perfect order, and had the humanized air of use and occupation which nothing but use and occupation can impart to senseless objects. It was a kitchen where, in the housewife's phrase, you might eat off the floor, and to any Bursley matron it would have constituted the highest possible certificate of Anna's character, not only as housewife but as elder sister. (Bennett, 1903, pp. 149-152)

Like Bennett, Drabble writes precise descriptions of her characters' surroundings to connect the inner world of her characters to the outer and social world, especially when she deals with the desire of the women characters attempting to escape the dullness of their domestic lives; Shirley's story for example. The exact description of the contents of the pedal bin ('an empty egg box, an empty tomato tin, the scrapings of last night's spaghetti, some apple peel, some kitchen roll, a browning lettuce leaf, a cigarette carton, a tonic bottle') prompts a series of associations reflecting the boredom of her experience at home. Drabble connects the internal of Shirley's life with her external world showing the boundaries of a bored housewife's horizons as seen through Shirley's eyes and her inner sense of restlessness and despair in a way that owes something to Bennett:

She crosses to the sink, pours away half her unwanted cup of instant coffee, washes the cup, washes a foil milk bottle top, puts her foot on the pedal bin, opens it, drops in the foil top, gazes absently for a moment at an empty egg box, an empty tomato tin, the scrapings of last night's spaghetti, some apple peel, some kitchen roll, a browning lettuce leaf, a cigarette carton, a tonic bottle... For it is trivial, it is all trivial, coffee mornings, eating, drinking, the National Theatre, shopping outings, reading books, embroidery, evening classes, country walks, wiping surfaces, emptying waste-paper baskets, Bond Street... Sex and small children had provided a brief purpose, the energy they generated had made sense of the world for a while, had forged a pattern, a community: clinics, playgrounds, parks, nursery groups... An idle flutter of garbage over an empty pavement. Coldness,



nothingness, grips Shirley as she stands in her kitchen. She knows herself to be biologically dead. Her spirit shudders: she has seen a vision, of waste matter, of meaningless after-life, of refuse, of decay. An egg box and a tin can in a blue and white plastic pedal bin. So might one stand for ever. She lifts her foot. The lid drops. (RW,200)

### **John Boynton Priestley and Virginia Woolf**

In his *English Journey*, an account to his travels in England in 1933 which was published in 1934, Bradford-born novelist and literary journalist, J. B. Priestley wrote about the living conditions of the poor in northern England who were suffering from poverty, hopelessness and idleness. Priestley 'wanted to rub the nose of southern middle-class Britain in the reality of the other nation' (Marr,2008,p.xxii). *English Journey* inspired George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) which describes the conditions of the poor and unemployed and the terrible working condition of the miners in Lancashire. In her article, *In the Path of Priestley*, Drabble points out that *English Journey* 'has even been credited with winning the 1945 election for the Labour Party' (Drabble,2008b). In 1942 Priestley was responsible for a popular series of weekly radio broadcasts expressing his aspirations for a new and democratic Britain and became influential in the campaign for state welfare which began to transform the social landscape of Britain after the Second World War.

Priestley's own fiction and perspective often resemble those of Arnold Bennett. 'The admiration for and use of Bennett are conscious' (Gindin,1992,p.46). In *English Journey*, Priestley begins 'his account of Bennett's territory of the Potteries with respectful recall of Bennett's fiction and then wonders why none of the people he meets talk of Bennett who describes them so well' (Gindin,1992,p.46). The chapter entitled 'To The Potteries' in *English Journey* is described by Drabble as 'humane, indignant, personal, impassioned and charged with the energy of his restless curiosity. He does not spare his adjectives, describing the neighbourhood as grim, smoky, dingy, dirty, shabby, preposterous and, in sum, "extremely ugly", but he describes other quirky

aspects of its intensely individual character in a manner that makes the reader long to follow in his footsteps. And this is just what I did' (Drabble,2008b).

It was on October 13, 1932, that Priestley, in his role as the leading *Evening Standard* book critic, reviewed Woolf's *The Second Common Reader* along with books by her friends Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson. While the review criticised Nicolson, it praised Sackville-West, and described Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* as 'one of the most moving and beautiful pieces of fiction of our time' (Baxendale,2007,p.24). Nevertheless, Priestley slighted Woolf not only by referring to her as 'the High Priestess of Bloomsbury,' a term Bennett had coined earlier, but also by the patronizing observation that her novels belonged to the type written by 'terrifically sensitive, cultured, invalidish ladies with private means' (Cuddy-Keane,2003,p.29). The review offended Woolf and she expressed her 'unadulterated disgust' in a letter she wrote to Sackville-West (Baxendale,2007,p.24).

The situation escalated when the BBC invited Priestley just four days after the review appeared to give a radio talk under the title 'To a Highbrow,' mocking those who reject anything 'popular' for the sake of distancing themselves and appearing intellectual and he urged them to be a 'broadbrow' instead (Baxendale,2007,p.24). A week later, Harold Nicolson rebuffed Priestley in a talk on the BBC under the title 'To a Lowbrow'. Unsettled by the 'battle of the brows,' Woolf penned a letter to the editor of *The New Statesman* engaging in the topical debate about the meanings of 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow'. The letter was not sent, but published posthumously under the title of 'Middlebrow'. She argues that the highbrows spent their days thinking and their creative pursuits made them neglect their physical and material needs; the highbrow 'is the man or woman of thoroughbred intelligence who rides his mind at a gallop across country in pursuit of an idea. That is why I have always been so proud to be called a highbrow' (Collini,2006,p.118). Representative highbrows include Shakespeare, Dickens, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Charlotte Bronte, and Jane Austen.

Woolf argues that lowbrows are concerned with everyday living and thus they keep society functioning but they depend on the highbrows to entertain them and show them what their lives actually look like through their books. A lowbrow, Woolf defines as someone who lacks intelligence and does not possess vitality; 'a man or a woman of thoroughbred vitality who rides his body in pursuit of a living at a gallop across life' (Seaton,2014,p.151). Woolf states that highbrows and lowbrows are mutually dependant. As Simon Stewart sums it up thus: 'the former being incapable of dealing with the practicalities of day-to-day life and thus relying on the latter, the lowbrows needing to be entertained and seeking the means of self-reflection provided by the former' (Stewart,2016,p.96). Woolf proudly counts herself among the highbrows whom she respects and honours and she shows some affection for the lowbrow. However, she expresses her contempt for the 'middlebrow', who she thinks is wholly committed neither to art nor to life and seeks the favour of the highbrow and the lowbrow: 'The middlebrow is the man, or woman, of middlebred intelligence who ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige' (Stewart,2016,p.96).

One important link between Priestley and Bennett is the fact that they were both criticised by Woolf and that their literary reputations suffered accordingly because she described them both as 'tradesmen of letters'. Mocking their supposedly hypocritical relationship with money and status, Woolf speculates in her diary: 'At the age of 50 Priestly will be saying, "why don't the highbrows admire me? It isn't true that I write only for money." He will be enormously rich; but there will be that thorn in his side— or so I hope' (Gale,2008,p.18). Woolf goes on: 'Yet I have not read, & I daresay shall never read, a book by Priestley' and getting to the heart of the matter, she concludes her diary entry with this statement: 'And I invent this phrase for Bennett & Priestley "the tradesmen of letters"' (Gale,2008,p.18). James Gindin argues that neither Bennett nor Priestley 'denied the materialism of his focus' and both of them thought that the 'verbal recall of

material fabric of experience gave fiction a richer texture, the judgement against the materialist is more social and metaphysical snobbery than literary criticism' (Gindin,1992,p.46).

Maggie Gale explains that Woolf's dismissal of Priestley is 'indicative of both class snobbery and of what Priestley identified as the ready position of the new critics to undermine writers whose work gained popularity in a growing market' (Gale,2008,p.19). Furthermore, ironically Woolf's diaries are 'full of details about how much she earned from reviewing and criticism, and she often notes the number of her books sold, pleased that her name is getting known' (Gale,2008,p.19).

For a long time subsequently, Priestley received 'neither the attention he deserved, nor was he seen as a particularly significant thinker' although he received 'more credit later in his life, and particularly fulsome tributes when he died' (Fagge,2012,p.2). Priestley's importance has begun to be reassessed and John Baxendale argues that 'no one did more' than Priestley 'to think through England's twentieth century experience, or strove harder to shape its national imaginary' (Baxendale,2007,p.4).

### **Arnold Bennett and Virginia Woolf**

On the 28 March, 1923 Bennett published an article, "Is the Novel Decaying?" in *Cassell's Weekly* in which he stated that 'The foundation of good fiction is character-creating, and nothing else' and noted that the young novelists 'display all manner of good qualities - originality of view, ingenuity of presentment, sound common sense, and even style,' but they do not create real characters and therefore, Bennett 'cannot yet descry any coming big novelists' (Hynes,1968,p.87). Illustrating this argument, Bennett referred to a recent novel published by a promising young writer: 'I have seldom read a cleverer book than Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, a novel which has made a great stir

in a small world. It is packed and bursting with originality, and it is exquisitely written. But the characters do not vitally survive in the mind, because the author has been obsessed by details of originality and cleverness' (Hynes, 1968, p. 88). On 1 December 1923, Virginia Woolf published her reply in *The Nation and Athenaeum*. This contained a critique of Edwardian writers and was a shorter version of a subsequent work of the same title, 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' published in 1924 which was to do incalculable damage to his reputation.

In her essay, 'Character in Fiction', Woolf called the books of the Edwardians (Bennett, Wells and Galsworthy) odd: 'For they leave one with so strange a feeling of incompleteness and dissatisfaction. In order to complete them it seems necessary to do something.... That done, the restlessness is laid, the book finished; it can be put upon the shelf, and need never be read again' (Woolf, 2008, p. 44). But with the work of other novelists it is different. For example, she considered Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* as 'complete in itself,' 'self-contained,' and said that it 'leaves one with no desire to do anything, except indeed to read the book again, and to understand it better' (Woolf, 2008, p. 44). Woolf talked about the importance of describing the character of the individual and criticised Bennett for failing to truly capture character. She supported her argument with the example of Hilda Lessways, a character in Bennett novel of the same title who she says is never brought to life because of Bennett's preoccupation with information and descriptive detail.

we cannot hear her mother's voice, or Hilda's voice; we can only hear Mr. Bennett's voice telling us facts about rents and freeholds and copyholds and fines.... he is trying to make us imagine for him; he is trying to hypnotise us into a belief that, because he has made a house, there must be a person living there. With all his powers of observation, which are marvellous, with all his sympathy and humanity, which are great, Mr. Bennett has never once looked at Mrs. Brown in her corner (Woolf, 2008, p. 47).

Bennett argues that the contemporary generation of 'Georgian' authors have failed as writers because they have not created real, convincing characters. However, Woolf challenges Bennett's concept of 'reality': 'Mr. Bennett says that it is only if the

characters are real that the novel has any chance of surviving. Otherwise, die it must. But, I ask myself, what is reality? And who are the judges of reality? A character may be real to Mr. Bennett and quite unreal to me' (Woolf,2005b,p.26).

In a recent Introduction to *To The Lighthouse* (1927), Drabble argues that Virginia Woolf is 'very consciously modernist... She had divorced herself... from attempts at conventional plot-filled narration... and from detailed realistic descriptions of material objects and social background' (Drabble,1992,pp.xii-xxv). In 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' (1924) Woolf analyses the state of modern fiction by contrasting two generations of writers: the Edwardians and the Georgians: 'I will suggest that we range Edwardians and Georgians into two camps: Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett, and Mr. Galsworthy I will call the Edwardians; Mr. Forster, Mr. Lawrence, Mr. Strachey, Mr. Joyce, and Mr. Eliot I will call the Georgians' (Woolf,2005b,p.22). At the start of her essay, Woolf writes about the momentous changes associated with modernism, observing: '[I]n or about December 1910 human character changed' and this change caused an effect: 'All human relations have shifted— those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature' (Woolf,2005b,pp.21,22). Woolf recognises that the tools of one generation are useless to the next: 'the Edwardian tools are the wrong ones for us to use' (Woolf,2005b,p.30). She suggests that writers are supposed to capture the rapidly changing modern world and therefore 'the Georgian writer had to begin by throwing away the method that was in use at the moment' (Woolf,2005b,p.30). She explains that the Georgians may have not yet mastered their art and have difficulties, but they strive towards telling the truth: 'we must reconcile ourselves to a season of failures and fragments. We must reflect that where so much strength is spent on finding a way of telling the truth, the truth itself is bound to reach us in rather an exhausted and chaotic condition' (Woolf,2005b,p.32).

In this important critical essay Woolf argues that the inner life of a character is far more complex than the material circumstances that surround her. Woolf imagines a figure she names Mrs. Brown, an elderly lady met by chance in a train carriage journeying through London. Woolf examines the various literary methods that could be employed to capture Mrs. Brown's character and the world she inhabits. Bennett, whom she believes has overburdened his characters with a mass of details and thus sacrificed the individual for the sake of verisimilitude, is one of Woolf's targets in this essay. Therefore, the material world and the inner life of the character cannot be held in balance. Woolf writes; 'I believe that all novels begin with an old lady in the corner opposite. I believe that all novels, that is to say, deal with character, and that is to express character - not to preach doctrine, sing songs or celebrate the glories of the British Empire' (Woolf,2005b,p.26). Woolf criticises Bennett for being concerned only with the surface of things. She argues if Mr. Bennett had seen Mrs. Brown and decided to have her as a central character in his fiction, his procedure would have been as follows:

'Begin by saying that her father kept a shop in Harrogate. Ascertain the rent. Ascertain the wages of shop assistants in the year 1878. Discover what her mother died of. Describe cancer. Describe calico. Describe – But I cried: "Stop! Stop!" And I regret to say that I threw that ugly, that clumsy, that incongruous tool out of the window, for I knew that if I began describing the cancer and the calico, my Mrs. Brown, that vision to which I cling though I know no way of imparting it to you, would have been dulled and tarnished and vanished for ever' (Woolf,2005b,p.30).

'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,' did much to damage Bennett's critical reputation. In the years before 1924, as James Hepburn has explained, 'reviewers of Bennett's novels very often expressed admiration for his psychological subtlety. The *Clayhanger* trilogy was especially praised' (Hepburn,1997,p.443). In recent years, some critics have agreed that Woolf's attack was 'ill-considered and that it attacked Bennett on [her] own weakest points' (Hepburn,1997,p.442). However, in its time, the essay was considered as a 'signpost for the young' and since then it has been regarded as 'a key document of the revolution in life and literature in the twentieth century' (Hepburn,1997,p.442). It was not until the 1990s that a more positive view of Bennett's work became widely accepted.

The English critic John Carey has had a major influence on this reassessment as he praises Bennett in his book *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (1992), declaring Bennett his 'hero' because his writings 'represent a systematic dismemberment of the intellectuals' case against the masses' (Carey,1992,p.152). Carey laments the fact that Bennett's reputation does not match his achievement: Bennett 'has never been popular with intellectuals' as a result ... his novels are still undervalued by literary academics, syllabus devisers and other official censors. Many students of English literature know of him, if at all, only through Virginia Woolf's scornful estimate in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", and they naturally, though mistakenly, assume that Bennett, not Woolf, is diminished by that sally' (Carey,1992,p.152).

For Woolf, descriptions of material things are unimportant because such descriptions do not tell the reader anything of importance about their inner selves. What is important are the psychological and spiritual dimensions of the character. However, Bennett does have some characters with depth, for example, the two sisters in *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908). As the author explains in the preface the novel dramatizes an incident that took place in a restaurant in Paris where he was dining in 1903. He describes an old woman who came in as 'a fat, shapeless, ugly, and grotesque,' with 'a ridiculous voice, and ridiculous gestures' (Bennett,2009,p.5). Unable to settle comfortably with her lumpy parcels, she has become a source of amusement to some customers and causes other irritation. Bennett explains:

I reflected, concerning the grotesque diner: "This woman was once young, slim, perhaps beautiful; certainly free from these ridiculous mannerisms. Very probably she is unconscious of her singularities. Her case is a tragedy. One ought to be able to make a heartrending novel out of the history of a woman such as she." Every stout, ageing woman is not grotesque—far from it! – but there is an extreme pathos in the mere fact that every stout ageing woman was once a young girl with the unique charm of youth in her form and movements and in her mind. And the fact that the change from the young girl to the stout ageing woman is made up of an infinite number of infinitesimal changes, each unperceived by her, only intensifies the pathos. It was at this instance that I was visited by the idea of writing the book which ultimately became *The Old Wives' Tale*.... (Bennett,2009,p.6)



Bennett embodies the feelings of the old woman pained by the mockery of two beautiful young waitresses. He describes the processes of physical, emotional and mental changes that the old woman had gone through since she was a young girl. The old woman's current state is compared to her early one. This transformation is in effect a portrait of two women: a sympathetic woman and an unprepossessing ordinary one. The laughter of the two young waitresses is indicative of the generation gap.

### **A Natural Curiosity (1989)**

In 1985, Drabble published an article, 'A Novelist in a Derelict City' in *The New York Times*, clarifying her ambivalent view of the North and highly critical of the effects on the people of Sheffield (Northam) of the policies practised by the Thatcher government: 'The manufacturing North and the Midlands accuse Mrs. Thatcher's Government of knowing nothing of their situation, of caring nothing for them and of never traveling north of Watford - a commuter town just outside Greater London arbitrarily selected as a symbol of the unseen frontier' (Drabble, 1985).

In this landmark essay Drabble contrasts the national fascination in the 1980s with costume drama, period history, and televised accounts of the Raj, contrasting the public interest in Britain's lost imperial splendour with the lamentable state of the country in which 'television screens are full of nostalgic visions of our past days of glory, and as we gaze at beautifully costumed portrayals of British rule in India, our own cities plunge into poverty while clinging to memories of the past that made them great' (Drabble, 1985). Drabble conjectures that 'There must be a way forward, a way to prevent them from becoming the worst slums of Europe, but we haven't found it yet, and up North, in towns like Sheffield, they could be forgiven for thinking that we, as a nation, haven't begun to try to work for a solution' (Drabble, 1985). This negativity about the state of the

nation is still evident a decade later in 1997 when Drabble restates her earlier position: 'Britain's past has been greater than its future' (WE,58).

In *A Natural Curiosity* (1989), Drabble continued to represent the distinctions between the north and the south of England and is still concerned about the interpenetration of private concerns with public issues. She pays particular attention to the increasing violence and psychosis in English society and focusing on the social, economic and political life of England including psychotic violence of the present and its parallels in the history of the Celtic tribes after the Roman conquest of Britain and their pagan ritual of the severed head. As Gail Cunningham suggests, 'this pathology and psychosis derive not merely from the characters of Paul Whitmore and his insanely cruel mother, but more significantly from the socially sanctioned mass psychosis of Britain in the late 1980s' (Cunningham,1991,p.139). Cunningham notes that the novel 'abounds in grotesque images of blood, flesh and carnage, of butcher's shops, of revolting culinary concoctions in suburban kitchens, of disgusting edibles in a motorway cafe' (Cunningham,1991,p.139). Alix watches many reports of abnormality, violence and decapitation in the television news and the narrator lists a series of atrocities and bizarre incidents that have been reported during a single month. Some of the criminals, just like Paul Whitmore, the serial killer, cannot begin to rationalise their own behaviour.

That month, in England, a tramp had been burned to death "for a laugh" by two youths as he sheltered in his cardboard hut.

A man in Hansborough had slept two nights in bed with his girlfriend without noticing she was dead. "I suppose I must have been drunk," he said.

A prisoner bullied his cell-mate in Wormwood Scrubs to commit suicide "because he was a nutter".

A man was tried for cutting off his girlfriend's mother's head and then murdering a passing stranger with a crossbow. He had put the head on his girlfriend's pillow and tucked the rest of the woman into the bedclothes: "To give my girlfriend a fright," he said. He said he did not know why he had killed the stranger on the pavement.

A skinhead "rent collector" was remanded in custody for terrorizing fellow-squatters and torturing one to death by means of wire, glass and scalding water. (NC,207)

Roberta Rubenstein suggests that *A Natural Curiosity* attempts to understand 'social pathology and deviancy' (Rubenstein,1992,p.95) and that while the modern world ostensibly appears to be civilized, 'human society has not advanced far beyond its early destructive pathological tendencies' (Rubenstein,1992,p.99). Renée Ward believes that the novel is concerned with 'the role of history and myth in contemporary society, particularly in relationship to women' and that Drabble suggests 'the past informs contemporary life, that history cannot necessarily be understood as separate from or unconnected to the present' (Ward,2014,p.461).

*A Natural Curiosity* starts where *The Radiant Way* left off, tracking the lives of the three middle-aged women and their network of friends, relatives and acquaintances. As Drabble explains in her Author's Note, the novel 'picks up some of the characters and stories, while adding others' (NC). The novel begins in January 1987 and deals with events until the end of May, covering a few months of the year when Margaret Thatcher won her third and last General Election victory. There is a reference to the election at the end of the novel when Liz and Alix visit Italy and meet Esther who is planning to move back to England: 'They all three wander back toward their hired Renault, talking of England and its prospects, of the approaching June election, of the way the wind blows' (NC,308).

Drabble's female characters in *A Natural Curiosity* all struggle to survive in a patriarchal society having to make personal sacrifices for their families. When Brian, Alix's husband, moves to the North to work, Alix is displaced from the professional world and she devotes her life to caring for her family and to a part-time job as a literary assistant to the poet, Howard Beaver. Other female characters; Angela Whitmore, Shirley Harper and Liz Headleand occupy the traditional roles of mothers, wives and homemakers. Art-historian Esther is now living in Italy, psychotherapist Liz is under-occupied, and so the focus is on Alix and her visits to Paul Whitmore, the Harrow Road murderer with a scholarly interest in Roman history. Despite all the negative diagnoses of the country the three female characters seem to have done rather well in England.

Liz clearly states; 'It's not so bad here, you know. Or not for people like us' (NC,222). Alix ironically says: 'England's not a bad country. It's just a mean, cold, ugly, divided, tired, clapped-out post-industrial slag-heap covered in polystyrene hamburger cartons. It's not a bad country at all. I love it' (NC,308).

We have already seen that Drabble's early novels are autobiographical: 'The books are expressions of different aspects of me' (Hardin,1973,p.291). As Joanne Creighton observes, Drabble's protagonists 'have generally followed the course of her own life' (Creighton,1985,p.14). In an interview with David Plante, an American novelist resident in London, Drabble explains her feelings of being an outsider who does not belong: 'But I don't feel I can get inside, either. I'm not from London, I'm from Yorkshire, and that makes me a foreigner in London' (Plante,1988). Plante argues that almost all Drabble's characters feel this way also. In *The Radiant Way*, for example, Alix's husband Brian is portrayed 'as a solid northern working-class socialist and a gentleman of the Left, [who] feels more at home in northern society than in alien-London, as in the north, the Left has deeper roots; greater confidence; and a strong sense of history, tradition, community, and place' (IA,87).

There are also contrasts between provincial and metropolitan life in other novels. In *The Witch of Exmoor* (1996), for example, Frieda is much more comfortable in the provinces than in the chaos of London, and isolates herself in a 'Victorian castle by the sea' (WE,11) and withdraws to the countryside because she prefers to be alone. She 'does not miss London' (WE,72) because she 'had grown to hate London. She had come to hate the human race,' too (WE,44).

Drabble's fiction reflects the tension between the north of her childhood and the south of her maturity. She addresses the cultural and economic differences between the north and the south and her earlier writings tend to represent the north as a place lacking in choice and variety. In these novels, Drabble's women characters have a low opinion of their provincial origins and attempt to escape from their restrictive living conditions

and narrow social lives. Drabble herself used her Cambridge education as a method of leaving home and establishing her own life away from her family.

Drabble had very little to do with the north in her early novels; *A Summer Bird-cage* (1963), *The Garrick Year* (1964) and *The Millstone* (1965). It is not until *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967), based on her childhood memories of Sheffield, that she returns to her own northern roots to portray Clara, who is waiting for her opportunity to escape from Northam. In her final year at university in London, Clara finds the world she has been dreaming of 'a truly terrestrial paradise, where beautiful people, in beautiful houses spoke of beautiful things' (JG,37).

*A Natural Curiosity* gives prominence to Alix Bowen, who returns with Brian, her Yorkshire-born husband, to Northam out of economic necessity, and to Shirley Harper, Liz Headleand's sister, who has also left home but is now resident again in Northam. In this novel it seems that the north and the south have exchanged their respective status. Shirley is a 'bored, underemployed, mildly depressed' woman fearing to become too like her mother and worrying that her daughter Celia would lead this 'protected, quiet, refined life in Northam. A provincial life, a middle-class life, an old-fashioned life' (MG,199).

As we have seen, Drabble was an outspoken critic of Margaret Thatcher and an impassioned defender of the welfare state. In an interview with Kevin Courrier in 1987, Drabble claimed that 'What Margaret Thatcher has been trying to do is to shift us into an anti-welfare, anti-public spending economy.... Today we have a high unemployment rate in England and this has been used as an instrument in policy by the Thatcher government to keep wage claims down and keep inflation down. I think that is immoral' (Courrier,1987).

The effects of Thatcher's economic policies are visible in poverty-stricken faces and Shirley finds the state of society beyond Northam worse than that from which she has run away. Shocked by what she finds at a motorway stop in the south, Shirley who

'has never seen such a miserable collection of people, such a gallery of unfortunates,' asks;

What has gone wrong? Is this some outing for the disadvantaged, the disabled? No, it is Britain, round about Budget Day, March 1987. Shirley is appalled.... Is this the prosperous south, the land of the microchip? Everybody looks half dead, ill from the ill wind. Their faces are white, pink, grey, chapped, washed-out, ill nourished, unhealthy, sickly, sickening.... Shirley does not know whether to feel sorry for these tramps, these refugees, these motorway wanderers, or whether she feels she has nothing to do with them at all. Is she still part of the human race? Is this the human race, or are these shadows, ghosts, lingering afterthoughts? This cannot be what is meant. (NC,128-129)

*A Natural Curiosity* shows that the south is not necessarily prosperous and that the north has changed, and it is no longer the repressive place that it was. The author is able to represent these changes with an understanding eye. There is a sense that at this stage in her career Drabble has accepted the changes and feels more positive about them. Drabble presents a rather different image of Northam life in this novel than she has before. The city is shown to appreciate and take pride in its fine art and culture heritage and to have acquired its own pride as a city of culture.

While in an Art Gallery celebrating the centenary of the death of Northam's one well-known nineteenth-century artist, Simon Blessed ('The new Northam had taken Simon Blessed back to its bosom, now he had proved to be both kind and deviant'). Alix reflects on the guests and concludes that 'Northam had a good heart. One would not guess this from the national press, but here, in this civic gathering, one could not but warm to Northam's style' (NC,103). Another positive image of Northam relates to its relatively low levels of crime: 'The local television news comes to an end. The police are appealing for witnesses to a mugging in the underpass leading from Northam Bus Station to Northam Railway Station. Muggings are rare in Northam. They are still in news' (NC,141). However, although some ideas about the north and the south have been reversed, the old division between the rich and the poor still continues: 'The gap widens, even here, in the Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire, between those who take buses and those who do not' (NC,258).

Drabble establishes a link between England's past and England's present at the very beginning of the novel when Alix is on her way to meet Paul in Porston Prison which 'is sited in the heartland of the ancient territory of the Brigantes' (NC,5). Alix takes with her a gift, a book on one of his favourite topics, 'Roman Britain and the resistance of the Brigantes' (NC,2). While she is driving, Alix reflects on how she and her husband Brian had discussed the Brigantes, whom they referred to as 'the Ancients' (NC,2) and those whom they resisted, 'the Romans' and debated which of the two were worse. For Brian, the Brigantes were no better than the Romans: 'Hadn't they burned people alive in wicker cages? Hadn't they consulted the gods by inspecting the twisting entrails of their tortured and sacrificed victims?' (NC,3). Alix immediately compares the Celts to 'her murderer': 'A bit like P. Whitmore, you mean?' (NC,1,3). Renée Ward argues that this 'parallels the atrocities of the modern-day "Horror of Harrow Road" (as the press calls Paul) to the bloodshed of conquest in Britain during the first century' (Ward,2014,p.463).

As a teacher and social worker, Alix has a deep fascination with 'prison, discipline, conviction, violence and the criminal mentality' (NC,5). Although as an adult she is deeply law-abiding, she has been haunted as a child by 'the idea that one day she would find herself in the dock accused of a terrible crime which she had not committed' (NC,19). She wants to understand the pathological behaviour of Whitmore, who has decapitated four women; the severed head of one woman has wound up in Alix's own car in the previous novel. Alix forms a relationship with Paul, visits him in prison and helps him track down his family. She justifies her actions by considering him to be an enigma that she needs to work out: 'When she has measured him, she will know the answer to herself and to the whole matter' (NC,27). Her motivation is to satisfy a natural curiosity. The more curious these characters are, the more alive they become. Liz's 'curiosity is at a low ebb. It occurs to her that not only may she die before she satisfies it, but that she may also lose it before she dies. Curiosity has kept her alive' (NC,22).

There are many links between 'ancient crimes' (NC,8) and the injustices in modern Britain. Drabble links Britain's past to the present by associating Alix, who seeks her revenge by rebelling against the injustice meted out to Paul and the deprived and abused dogs of Hartley Court, is linked with Boudica, a queen of the Iceni tribe (sometimes spelled as Boadicea). On his death, Boudica's husband Prasutagus, an ally of Rome, left half of his kingdom to the Roman emperor, and half to his wife. However, the Romans demanded extra taxation and wanted Boudica to give up her throne and to establish Roman dominion over the Iceni. Boudica tried to free herself, her family, and her people from oppressive Roman rule and raised a massive army and led an unsuccessful uprising against the occupying forces of the Roman Empire in 60-61 AD. Angela Whitmore is also described in ways that recall the ancient queen of the Iceni. At Hartley Court, 'Paul Whitmore's mother was unmistakable. She had a hairstyle of arranged and carved red solid waves rising from her square brow' (NC,197)

Drabble also refers in passing to the 'faithless queen Cartimandua, who had sold her people to the Romans' (RW,64) as an indirect forewarning of Margaret Thatcher's betrayal of 'The Other Nation' through her relationship with President Reagan and the United States. Cartimandua (c. AD 43-c. 69), a British warrior queen who ruled over a Celtic people living in northern England, known to us today through the writings of the Roman historian Tacitus, allied her followers with the Romans conquerors. In 51 AD, Caratacus, the leader of the Catuvellauni tribe, was defeated after offering resistance to the Roman army and fled to Cartimandua for sanctuary, but she surrendered him to the Romans. In reaction, a large portion of her people revolted against her betrayal of a fellow British leader.

The parallel between Cartimandua and Margaret Thatcher becomes explicit in *A Natural Curiosity* in which Thatcher is shown as a traitor to her country: 'the Prime Minister, duplicitous Britannia, striking deals with a powerful America, abandoning the ancient culture of her own folk' (NC,3). Delving into ancient Celtic history, Drabble attempts to establish parallels with the behaviour of the Prime Minister in contemporary



Britain: 'The treacherous Celtic queen, gold-torqued, magnificent, betraying her people for the civilizations and comforts of the Romans: the rejected consort, hiding out in the snow with his bands of warriors. North and South, the Two Nations' (NC,3).

Alix compares Thatcher to Cartimandua, the 'duplicitous Britannia' complete with the 'stiff hair styles' reminiscent of the ancient warrior queen (NC,3). Brian feels unease about the alliance between Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan and Alix reads Brian a passage describing how the ancient Britons came to enjoy living in Roman-style towns with baths and shops: 'and so, little by little, the Britons were led on to the amenities that make vice agreeable: arcades, baths, and sumptuous banquets. They called such novelties "civilization", when they were in reality only a feature of their enslavement' (NC,3). Brian agrees that Americanization has influenced British culture for the worse and notes the prevalence of 'Coca-Cola, McDonald's, blue jeans, jacuzzis' (NC,3).

One of the stereotypes that Drabble uses is that of the queen as a female savage. Alix and Brian consider the televised portrayals of Cartimandua as the leader of a savage people who 'burned people alive' and 'tortured and sacrificed their victims' (NC,3). In reflecting upon his mother, Angela, Paul Whitmore links the Brigantian queen to the modern period. Writing a letter to the prison governor, he remembers her as 'a woman, sitting in a chair.... Her hair stands out from her head in a shining halo of stiff silver spikes, some six inches long. A fevered smell of burning fills the room' (NC,17). This image brings to mind the burning and torture of victims associated with Cartimandua: the spikes of Angela's hair are reminiscent of the tools of Brigantian torture.

On her drive to find Whitmore's mother, Alix takes a rural route, avoiding the great industrial conurbations that straddle the middle of England. The omniscient narrator tells us that Alix 'is not here provoked into much political thought about the nature of the north and How Britain Votes, and you may be spared her occasional reflections on these themes, for this is not a political novel, and anyway her reflections

are repetitive and do not seem to be getting her anywhere very fast' (NC,193). The narrator further informs the reader that this is not a political novel. 'No, not a political novel. More a pathological novel. A psychotic novel. Sorry about that. It won't happen again. Sorry' (NC,193-194).

Angela challenges Alix's presence at Hartley Court standing with 'her hands on her hips, glowering, her red hair in a blazing crest' (NC,285). Alix finds out that it is Angela's neglectful parenting that has led to Paul's behaviour. When Alix visits William Whitmore, Paul's father, who is a butcher, she asks him if he could ever forgive his son. 'Forgive? Forgive? What's the point of that?' he replies, 'I don't blame the boy.... It's *her* I blame.... *Her*' (NC,137). Despite these words Alix is able to forgive when she learns that Angela 'is clearly off her rocker,' Alix agrees with Brian that she is 'not responsible' for her actions (NC,290) and in fact she is dealt with very leniently by the courts when she is not able to care adequately for the dogs at Hartley Court because her poor mental state is recognised. Angela is proved to be as ill-equipped to handle her dogs as she was to handle her son. Renée Ward argues that this is a paradox:

the warrior queen's specific identity as a female both causes and excuses her behavior. She is condemned for cruelty and mental instability precisely because she is a woman, a member of the weaker gender, while she is simultaneously exonerated of her cruel acts for the very same reason. This paradox appears in Tacitus and Dio, in their accounts of the Celtic queens. Drabble similarly captures the absurdity of this paradox in Angela Whitmore's character, in her connection to both Cartimandua and Boudica, as well as in Alix's and the legal system's treatment of her. (Ward,2014,p.471)

Alix, who is very different to Angela, ineffectively attempts to reconcile Paul with his biological mother. Angela warns Alix not to return and asks her to tell Paul that his mother is dead. When Angela has been physically violent to her, Alix fights back throwing an open tin of dog food, punching her, and, 'mad-eyed,' she 'brandishes [her] small knife' (NC,286). Alix reports the atrocities of the kennels to the authorities and after that she bathes in a nearby stream and 'rises, dripping, newly baptized' (NC,288) feeling a new sense of self as she takes responsibility of her actions. 'She is a criminal. A self-confessed criminal. She had committed Bodily Harm. Maybe even Grievous Bodily

Harm.... Alix the criminal feels light of heart' (NC,287). In fighting back against Angela in a key scene Alix is playing the role of Paul's surrogate mother fighting the *Medusa*-like monster who has ruined his life. Drabble is here mixing myth, history and modern-day horror in a novel which is 'realist' but with a difference.

Paul Whitmore takes a special interest in the Celtic cults of the severed head. Alix has many questions to ask Liz, but they are not quite formulated even to herself: 'The Ancient Britons, the Romans. If Paul Whitmore had not become obsessed by them, would his mania have taken another form? Is some innocent secondary schoolteacher in north Staffordshire as implicated in his decapitations as the evil Angela and the butcher's shop?' (NC,165). One evening, while watching a television programme, Alix hears that 'As the cross is to Christianity, so the severed head to the Celtic religion' (NC,165). Thinking about this, she realises that 'Paul has never mentioned anything to do with such aspects of his interest in the past. Severed heads,' Alix finds out that according to the Celts, 'The soul resided in the head' (NC,166).

There is a reference to Sir Thomas More (1477-1535) who was the author of *Utopia* (1516), a perfect imaginary world and one free of animal slaughter 'on the grounds that the butchering of animals brutalizes men' (NC,193). More, the Chancellor of England, was one of the most highly placed confidants of Henry VIII, but when he refused to take the Oath of Supremacy he was beheaded, and his severed head was placed at the gate of London Tower as a warning to others who might oppose the King. It comes into Alix's mind that More's daughter had collected her father's head from the spike on London Bridge before it was thrown into the River Thames, as was the custom, and she kept it until her death (NC,193).

Alix explains: 'But this could surely have nothing to do with anything, except to remind one that severed heads were a commonplace of history, of history much more recent than that of the Celts. Remember Madame Tussaud's. A morbid fascination. These days, Alix sees severed heads wherever she looks. She collects them. Morbidly.

They pop up like King Charles's head in the memoir of Dickens's Mr Dick' (NC,193-194). Alix visits Madame Tussaud's where she understands why her mother considers the exhibits unsuitable; all Alix could see is 'Gloomy, morbid, grisly. Horrible history' (NC,64). In the Chamber of Horrors, where Paul Whitmore had been when he was ten, Alix sees the severed heads of Louis and Marie Antoinette and other historical figures (NC,65).

Alix goes in pursuit of Paul's father, and eventually of his mother, and finds that Paul himself does not frighten her: 'His victims had not found him frightening either, until too late. He had killed quickly, quietly. Mercy killing. He had been much more turned on by the posthumous butchery. The revenge on a passive, silenced, uncomplaining sacrifice' (NC,192). Furthermore, Paul is described as 'distressing rather than frightening. He instilled sorrow, not fear. Sorrow for human distress, for waste, for error' (NC,192). Searching for answers to the riddle of human behaviour and relationships, Drabble tackles the relationships of morality to material and psychological factors through the private lives of her characters and their social relationships.

Drabble's main characters are motivated to understand what is going on round them. Liz states that 'what I do suffer from is curiosity. I want to know what really happened ... At the beginning. When human nature began. At the beginning of human time. And I know I'll never know. But I can't stop looking' (NC,75). Drabble points to the debate about the importance of nature and nurture when tackling the moral-social conundrums of the novel. Alix believes in the importance of nurture and that if she can identify the reasons for Paul's behaviour, she should be able to find answers within herself regarding the pathological tendencies in human nature and eventually she would not only redeem him, but mankind as well. 'Nature and nurture. She would like to acquit Mankind, and if she can acquit P. Whitmore, then she can acquit absolutely anybody. Anybody and everybody. Nurture and nature. Alix cannot help believing in the nurture argument, as the nature argument is so *unfair*' (NC,21).

Alix and Liz again enact a debate taking place in Drabble herself and her generation. Alix considers the instances of brutality recorded in ancient texts from the Bible, to the Koran, to Sophocles and the Veda. Liz wonders if 'the whole of human history is nothing but a history of deepening psychosis? That something went wrong at the beginning of human nature, of human nurture, that humanity mistook itself fatally, for ever? False revelations, hoax riddles, grinning sphinxes from prehistory. Murder, arson, pillage, savagery' (NC,24-25).

Alix strives to find a natural psychological cause for Paul's monstrosity and her curiosity finally enables her to discover the truth behind the violence; maternal neglect, maltreatment and abandonment. Even before meeting his mother, Alix 'is convinced that Angela is a very nasty bit of work. She has little to go on, but she has a smell of her, an instinct. The Bad Mother.... The Runaway Mother.... Can she be blamed for the disaster of P. Whitmore and the deaths of his random victims?' (NC,165). Alix's first visit to Angela has confirmed Alix's suspicions: Angela refers to her son as 'pig' and refuses to have anything to do with him (NC,201).

Alix concludes that Angela has not loved Paul, and 'as a result he had killed several innocent strangers' (NC,225). During her second visit, Alix is shocked and appalled to find more evidence of Angela's cruelty and discovers a room full of dogs either dead or dying of starvation in a heap below a horse's head suspended just out of their reach (NC,283). Alix has vindicated her theory about Paul: 'He had been mothered by a mad woman, a fury, a harpy, a gorgon. He had been tormented, like the dogs, in a punishment block, with bloody treats hanging out of reach over his head' (NC,287). 'All evil is error, some believe. Nobody knowingly chooses evil,' Drabble concludes (NC,192).

Alix realises that the remedy for human misfortune is unconditional love and generosity. However, at the end of the novel, Liz and Esther question Alix's explanation. Alix presents them with 'her version of the murderer, and they have, by and large,

accepted it. Yes, they concede, Paul Whitmore has clearly been unhinged by maternal neglect, by maternal hatred, by punitive discrimination in his early years. An abused child' (NC,302). Liz hesitates to point out that Paul's father is a perfectly normal, indeed quite kind-hearted chap, and that many children grow up fairly normal without any parental kindness at all. At least they do not grow up into mass murderers' (NC,302). Esther points out that Paul is 'not just any old sort of murderer' and tells Alix, 'he's your murderer,' and explains that Alix has persevered in her quest because she 'knew he was going to turn out to be the kind of person he turns out to be' (NC,303). Alix concludes: 'So, I haven't proved anything. I've just confirmed my own prejudices about human nature. I've been travelling around a closed circuit. A closed system. Me and my murderer together. It wasn't a theorem, it was a circuit' (NC,303).

Although Alix has been preoccupied with the murderer Paul Whitmore and Beaver's literary works, she is still interested in politics and has not 'quite detached herself' from it and she cannot 'wean herself away together' (NC,56). Alix

cannot help looking for a way forward, for a new consensus that will unite her and Brian and Perry Blinkhorn and Otto Werner and their absent friend Stephen Cox, Stephen, the most extreme of all.... Clutching at straws, at men of straw. For does not everything else she reads suggest that we are moving towards a new intolerance, a new negation of 'progress,' a culture where education is openly used not to liberalize and unite, but to segregate and divide? (NC,56-57).

While Brian remains as a supporter of Old Labour, Alix is looking forward for the new modern consensus in politics represented by New Labour and its leader Tony Blair who had modernised the party discarding some of its traditional policies such as nationalisation in order to regain the trust of the electorate and widen its electoral appeal among the middle classes. Brian 'has learned nothing from the last few years. He stands where he did. He is an unreconstructed socialist. He has not learned doubt. Alix has learned doubt, but not Brian' (NC,54). Brian is described as much less altered in his outlook than his friend Perry Blinkhorn of Northam City Council, 'a man of the New Hard Pragmatic Middle Left' (NC,54). Perry has reinvented his image in keeping with the new times and 'has become respectable, even fashionable: the press has stopped describing

him as "loony," has started to quote him as a moderate, a man of ideas, as a possible straw in the wind of a new future' (NC,145). Brian is also 'far less reconstructed' than his friend, the economist Otto Werner, who 'has left for Washington, as part of the Brain Drain. Brian is way, way out of date.... And out there, amongst the people, he fancies he finds some unreconstructed socialists like himself' (NC,54).

Alix, brought up by her socialist parents, grows up with a solid principle to socialist ideals and spent her holidays 'working ... for no pay' (RW,89). She remains left-wing. Her parents' political behaviour affects her, and she has developed a real interest in the Soviet Union and in Soviet Communism. There is a vivid conversation between Alix and her history teacher, Miss Fawcett, who is distressed to hear Alix defending the Soviet Union and Joseph Stalin to her classmates. She tells Alix, 'You're an intelligent girl, Alix' and 'I'm sure you are just trying out ideas, but these matters are too serious to play with, you know, too serious to make games of' (NC,227). Alix replies that she is not 'making games,' but 'interested in communism' and she thinks it is 'a good idea' (NC,227). Alix

had spoken of equality, of sharing, or her dislike of divisions of wealth and class. Her ideas were muddled, half-baked, she had no hope of defending them, she was acutely uncomfortable during this interrogation, for Miss Fawcett was a historian, she knew about the Soviet Union and the Second World War and the Treaty of Yalta and the show trials of the thirties and the death of Trotsky. She knew the god that failed. Alix knew next to nothing about any of this. (NC,227)

However, what change there has been is at a surface level and little has changed in the inefficient way that the country is managed or the lack of professionalism in appointments. As one example, Charles Headleand is asked to be the manager of the Royal Geographers Association RGA while he dislikes both geography and travelling: 'Of course, in England, that was how things done. The less you know about something, the more likely you were to be asked to run it. That was how people got appointed in this country; at random, to run things about which they knew absolutely nothing' (NC,247-248). As the political situation deteriorates it is difficult for Alix to stay optimistic. She 'watched the grim images that filled her little screen, and heard the righteous voices of unreason in the terminal struggle of warring factions in her own land' (RW,343).

Alix is disillusioned about the loss of egalitarian values and principles. She feels deep pessimism about the political climate and does not understand how the Labour Party had 'alienated genuine supporters like Alix' (Wittlinger,2002,p.129). 'Where was a voice to speak to her, for her, for England? Where was Cromwell, where Winstanley? Was the country done for, finished off struggling and twitching in the last artificially prolonged struggles of old age?' Alix wonders (RW,343). Cromwell had got rid of the monarchy and led the country through its only period of Republican rule while Winstanley had led the "True Levellers" who had fought for the common ownership of land which had been privatised by enclosures in the seventeenth-century digging up hedges and planting crops to restore the land to the people.

### **The Gates of Ivory (1991)**

As Drabble explains in her author statement on the British Council website, determining the scope of a novel and organizing its voices precedes establishing plot, structure, characters, and images in the process of composition:

I sometimes ask myself whether I enjoy writing. The answer is yes, but a qualified yes. I only enjoy it when it's going well. Starting a new book is always hard work, and work that moreover for months feels pointless (why bother? why not do something else?) or ill directed (why this subject? why not something more global, more domestic, less domestic?): I walk around, looking for plot, structure, characters, images, trying not to repeat or imitate or listen too much to the wrong voices. This is a dreary time, comfortless, irritable, unsatisfying. When the book begins to move, everything changes, and everything I see or hear or read seems to be part of, to contribute to the new pattern. This is exciting. It's the only time when I forget time. Past the half way mark, a novel almost writes itself. Events beget events, characters insist on seeing one another again, and I just sit and transcribe. I get quite cheerful and communicative. A strange process. (Drabble,2018)

*The Gates of Ivory* (1991) completes the trilogy that began with *The Radiant Way* and is concerned with the dynamics of the characters' political and social interactions in England and in countries in south east Asia. The novel takes the reader up to June 1988, one year into Thatcher's third and last term in office. Drabble combines historical events



and fictional ones, using conversations, media news, and references to literary sources, to provide information on individual characters in eastern and western countries after the Vietnam war. Geoffrey Nunberg argues that the novel is essentially a form of information: 'Information, in the socially important sense - stuff that is storable, transferable and meaningful independent of context - is neither eternal nor ubiquitous' (Nunberg,2011). Similarly, Richard Menke in *Telegraphic Realism* (2008) explores 'how fiction could begin imagining itself as a medium and information system in an age of new media' (Menke,2008,p.3).

*The Gates of Ivory* opens on a note of uncertainty about form: 'This is a novel-if novel it be' (GI,3). In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Drabble admits that she is unsure about the type of novel she is writing. She refers to 'a discourse' which is sort of 'sociological' and then explains that her intention was to write 'a proper-shaped novel, a Conradian novel of this man who goes to Cambodia and gets lost in the jungle' (Wachtel,1996). But she found she 'couldn't do that' and thus ended up with instead, 'a broken narrative' holding 'bits of information,' the sources for which are included in an attached bibliography. She realises that she 'wandered into some territory between fact and fiction and ravings' (Wachtel,1996).

In *The Gates of Ivory* Drabble means to give that sense 'of how in one day, you can go through in your daily life: good news, bad news, personal happiness, world tragedy, followed by learning you've got a terrible illness, so all this is part of the texture of life, but it's not the texture of history which reduces everything to simplicity' (Peyre,2011,p.125). Drabble seeks to contrast what is happening in England with what is happening elsewhere. For this, she needs to 'do a sort of Europe-versus-the-rest-of-the-world book, the third world, the deprived world' (Peyre,2011,p.123). *The Gates of Ivory* is a 'state of the nation' novel, in so far as it shows how England is affected by, responds to, or fails to respond to, international crisis.

England is referred to as a 'poor country' and a 'post-industrial country' (GI,61). Its institutions, public health care, in particular, are described as unreliable or run down at the time of the third Thatcher administration. There is social deprivation and public services, and public transport, in particular, are failing the people who need them. A traffic jam in London suggests stasis across the entire metropolis: 'This is the way things are, increasingly, in London. It would not surprise them if the whole city came to a perpetual halt' (GI,449). Alix, who looks back approvingly on the post-war consensus, wonders if any Labour government would be able to save them.

"I *suppose*", said Alix, dubiously, staring around her at unswept pavements, a deluxe fish and chip shop, a teenage mother wheeling two babies in a kneeling balloon-topped double push chair, an old man with a Tesco plastic bag rifling through the contents of a garbage bin, and her wealthier fellow-citizens yawning or tapping angrily at their expensive car wheels, "I suppose I'd rather be sitting here stuck in this car than sitting stuck on a bus or down the tube. I'm beginning to think public transport is a lost cause. Do you think the Labour government will be able to rescue it?" (GI,450)

The quality of the medical care that the National Health Services is able to provide has been a recurrent concern in Drabble's fiction and the health service has shown to be important in her characters' lives. Rosamund in *The Millstone*, for example, says 'I am devoted to the National Health Service' in a central confrontational scene when she demands access to her sick baby in Great Ormond Street hospital (M,148). Decades later, there are references to the deteriorating public healthcare in *The Gates of Ivory*. When Brian falls ill Alix regrets not having taken out the private health insurance when promoted by the Thatcher government. Indeed Alix 'wished they could purchase respect with money' (GI,433). Alix 'had lost faith in the National Health Service, and had weakly wished that Brian had taken out private medical insurance decades ago' because he 'could now be spared the shabby ward, the communal lavatory, the colourless drained old men with stubble beards, the plastic bed curtains, the walking drips, the smells, the institutional cooking, the pert bossy little nurses' (GI,433). This is in contrast to the excellent quality of the care received by Liz for possible toxic shock in a private, 'ultra-modern, futuristically equipped' hospital in

Bangkok (GI,405) because she had bothered to make the right connections by taking out private medical insurance before she left England to search for Stephen in Cambodia.

Drabble states that she has several purposes in writing *The Gates of Ivory*. She intended to write a book which 'contrasted with what was happening in Britain. In the West we complain all the time about how dreadful are the times we're having and how poor we are, how wretched Europe is' (Peyre,2011,p.122). Drabble further explains that she has wanted to write a book which 'indicated that things were even worse in other parts of the world' and which is 'partly about communication and about the speed with which we would travel around and the very quick awareness we have now of tragedies in other parts of the world' (Peyre,2011,pp.122-123).

In this novel Drabble moves her moral focus from England into Cambodia. Being set in South-East Asia, Cambodia and Thailand as well as England, *The Gates of Ivory* transcends the borders of the nation-state. This is in contrast to *The Radiant Way* which was 'a cry of anguish and rage at the decline of a fairly decent society into heartlessness and squalor' (Annan,1992,p.15) during the early Thatcher years in England. In *The Radiant Way* Drabble 'took a serial murder known in the tabloids as "the Notting Hill rapist," renamed him "the Horror of the Harrow Road," and used him as a symbol and symptom of what was wrong with Britain' (Annan,1992,p.15). Roger Bowen points out that: 'As the trilogy sends her metropolitan characters in search of the outer limits of a known and knowable community, Drabble begins to diagnose a condition of the world rather than a condition of England' (Bowen,1999,p.279). Drabble writes about Cambodia from an English viewpoint rather than a Cambodian one: she does not investigate the motives of the Khmer Rouge or the causes of its rise and initial support among the people. Indeed the novel is largely about how western Europeans react to the catastrophes that befall people in developing countries. Drabble depicts capitalism under Thatcher in the late 1980s as a western phenomenon but the unfettered greed

and that has overtaken western Europe and the United States moves outward from England to the world:

Capitalism and competition have triumphed, religion has withered away, and there is no longer any place in the West for self-sacrifice, dedication, brotherly love, compassion, community. In the sixties, it had seemed that the West would soon be sated, that it would fall sick of its own greed and glut. There was no limit to man's greed. He could eat and eat and swell and swell and yet want more and more. This was the lesson of the eighties. Avarice and greed have no natural limits.... There will never be a point at which men agree they have enough, and that the other lot can have the leftovers for free (GI, 124-125).

The character of William in *The Gates of Ivory* is based upon William Shawcross (b.1946). In the novel, William, who is surrounded by completely fictional characters by the border bridge, is a 'young man with curly hair ... the son of the British Chief Prosecutor at Nuremberg' (GI,3). The 'real' William Shawcross is a journalist specialising in Southeast Asia. In *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia* (1979), Shawcross is critical of America's secret and illegal war with Cambodia from 1969 to 1973. Although Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger claimed that the bombing was necessary to eliminate the North Vietnamese army attacking American troops across the border, Shawcross condemned the American invasion of Cambodia and insisted that the bombings not only spread the conflict, but also led to the rise of the Khmer Rouge and the consequent geopolitical disaster in Cambodia.

Shawcross provided an authoritative account of the Cambodian tragedy in his acclaimed study of the work of the international relief agencies, *The Quality of Mercy: Cambodia, Holocaust and Modern Conscience* (1984). Drabble acknowledges *The Quality of Mercy* as an important influence on her novel and lists it in a bibliography at the end. She states that 'Whenever I used to meet William, I always found him engaging, quick-witted and very interesting. I've only met him once since his conversion. It's very depressing what's happened to him' (Cowley, 2003). The 'conversion' to which Drabble refers is not a religious conversion, but a political one and her criticism related to Shawcross's subsequent support of the Iraq war. In another book, *Allies: The US, Britain, Europe and the War in Iraq* (2004), Shawcross argues that the 2003 war on Iraq

led by George W. Bush, Tony Blair, and their coalition allies was just and necessary. In contrast, Drabble was at the forefront of the many artists and intellectuals who were vehemently opposed to the allied invasion of Iraq. Shawcross, in his turn, criticised Drabble for her naivety: 'The United States had just freed that nation from one of the most monstrous tyrannies of the twenty-first century. As Drabble was writing in London, Iraqi women and children were scrabbling through the dirt of the latest mass graves to be found, searching desperately for the remains of relatives murdered by Saddam' (Shawcross,2004,p.183).

In contrast to her previous novels, Drabble sets up geographical, political, social and ideological contrasts in a global framework rather than an English one. One important contrast is presented in the very first sentence of the novel which states that this is about 'Good Time and Bad Time' (GI,3). The focus of the narrative is on the way that the way of life of people in England who are by no means heartless or uncaring can carry on undisturbed alongside the horrors of Pol Pot's time in Cambodia and the refugee camps at the border and that one makes virtually no difference to one another. Brian attributes the concept of 'Good Time and Bad Time' to the critic George Steiner, who uses 'Good Time and Bad Time' in one of his discussions of the Holocaust, while Stephen thinks 'Good Time and Bad Time' was coined by William Shawcross. In an authorial intervention, Drabble states that 'Both were right' (GI,365). Steiner is concerned philosophically with the nature of time and the connections which were made or were not made at the time of the Holocaust between 'two orders of simultaneous experience' which are 'so different, so irreconcilable to any common norm of human values, their coexistence is so hideous a paradox' (Steiner,1984,p.247). He takes the example of the people in a Polish village, next to a concentration camp in Treblinka which was designed as a Nazi extermination camp in occupied Poland during World War II, who pretend not to know what was happening a mile down the road and carry on with their ordinary daily lives:

the overwhelming plurality of human beings, two miles away on the Polish farms, 5,000 miles away in New York, were sleeping or eating or going to a film or making love or worrying about the dentist. This is where my imagination balks. The two orders of simultaneous experience are so different, so irreconcilable to any common norm of human values, their coexistence is so hideous a paradox— Treblinka is both because some men have built it and almost all other men let it be— that I puzzle over time. Are there, as science-fiction and Gnostic speculation imply, different species of time in the same world, 'good times' and enveloping folds of inhuman time, in which men fall into the slow hands of living damnation? (Steiner, 1984, p.247).

In 'Bad Time' Stephen witnesses the scene of one of the worst cases of genocide since the Second World War. Drabble keeps referring back to England in 'Good Time'. However, she writes about the 'Bad Time' in England too so the reader can discern differences and parallels as well. The introduction is set on the border between Thailand and Cambodia on a bridge linking these two separated worlds: Thailand as a modern and relatively westernized place is contrasted to Cambodia. However, the news and gossip that come across that bridge, give the sense of 'interpenetration' rather than separation. The experiences of 'Good Time and Bad Time' are described as follows:

Good Time and Bad Time coexist. We in Good Time receive messengers who stumble across the bridge or through the river, maimed and bleeding, shocked and starving. They try to tell us what is like over there, and we try to listen. We invoke them with libations of aid, with barely and blood, with rice and water, and they flock to the dark trenches, moaning and fluttering in their thousands. We are seized with panic and pity and fear. Can we believe these stories from beyond the tomb? Can it be these things happen in our world, our time?

The dead and dying travel fast these days. We can devour thousands at breakfast with our toast and coffee, and thousands more on the evening news. It would be easy to say that we grow fat and greedy, that we thrive on atrocities, that we eagerly consume suffering. It is not as simple as that. We need them as they need us. There is a relationship between Good Time and Bad Time. There are interpenetrations. Some cross the bridge into the Bad Time, into the Underworld, and return to tell the tale. Some go deliberately. Some step into Bad Time suddenly. It may be waiting, there, in the next room. (GI, 3-4)

'Good Time' and 'Bad Time', however, appear to correlate mainly with life in the prosperous, politically stable west, and with the misery in countries in the East ruled

over by militarized, violent, repressive regimes. Some of the witnesses in Drabble's novel relay the stories of 'Bad Time' to their distant neighbours. However, the stumbling messengers who cross the bridge do not do so as messengers to convey coherent information, but because they are fleeing in fear for their lives. Shawcross makes the point that 'memory is being destroyed in democratic societies as well. Our sense of impotence seems to grow in direct proportion to the spread of our knowledge. And so, in self-protection, does our sense of indifference, or at least our ability to recall, to identify' (Shawcross, 1984, p.23).

Drabble here, as in a subsequent novel, *The Pure Gold Baby* (2013) in which the work of aid workers is discussed, wants to raise concerns about the media coverage of, and the lack of public interest in, the news of distant disasters: Shawcross points to the 'flood of instant information in the world today' and the irony that this information 'sometimes seems not to further but to retard education; not to excite, but to dampen curiosity; not to enlighten, but merely to dismay. The poet Archibald MacLeish once noted, "We are deluged with facts but we have lost or are losing our human ability to feel them"' (Shawcross, 1984, p.23). Moreover, international news coverage is selective and at times non-existence. While some areas of the world 'are bathed in the glare of publicity,' there are areas where 'are only glimmers of light; others are in total darkness' (Shawcross, 1984, p.23). Shawcross gives as an example of disproportionate news coverage the reports of 8,000 people dead in an Iranian earthquake and during the week in which the Western media were occupied in reporting the attempts to rescue a small boy who had fallen down a well in Southern Italy. 'The earthquake was another in the long litany of catastrophes, in which personal involvements were so hard to feel' (Shawcross, 1984, p.23).

*The Gates of Ivory* pinpoints the difficulty of distinguishing the true messages which have come through the gates of horn and can be trusted from the false messages which have come through the gates of ivory and deceive. It is not easy or even often possible to identify which is true and which is false. In a discussion with Brian about the

Cambodians and Vietnamese, Stephen is the more sceptical of the two as he tends 'not to believe anything he was told. He stuck to the view that there were more than two sides to every story, and that it was almost impossible to tell what was happening' (GI,17).

Drabble here intimates the complexity of the relationship between reality, symbols and society and the significations and the symbols of culture and the role of creative artists and of the media in mediating, reflecting and popularising human tragedy. Stephen meets a Kampuchean refugee who is playing the role of a Kampuchean refugee in an American semi-fictionalized documentary about Kampuchean refugees. 'He meets extras who have worked on *The Killing Fields*, some of them survivors of the killing fields.... The gates of ivory, the gates of horn. The shadow world' (GI,103). Seeing a documentary about Cambodia, Liz wonders, 'How can one believe anything anyone says? How can one even believe the evidence of one's own eyes? ... They could be actors dressed [as Khmer Rouge]' though 'the bones are bones, it is true. One could be sure of them' (GI,392).

In an interview with Victoria Kingston, Drabble describes the research she undertook to write *The Gates of Ivory*. Drabble could not get a visa to Cambodia, but went instead to Thailand where she 'sat on the border and met people from the aid agencies, and got a lot of material there' (Kingston,2001,p.35). Then, she went to Vietnam to get 'the other side of the picture' and to 'have good links with Cambodia' and to keep in touch with what was happening there (Kingston,2001,p.35). In the novel, Stephen 'had already been rejected by the Vietnamese Embassy, and was pursuing a visa through Oxfam or the Red Cross' (GI,13). Writing *The Gates of Ivory* was not only geographically taxing for Drabble, but emotionally difficult as well. She explains her desire to avoid voyeurism while addressing the reality of the human misery that inspired the news accounts of human misery and appeals for money.



I think I was very interested in the way the global coverage of disasters affects people living their small, bourgeois lives. It seemed a big theme of our time. The phrase "compassion fatigue" hadn't been coined then, but it was about to be. We were all sitting in our comfortable living rooms, watching disasters happening somewhere else. I wasn't quite satisfied with the voyeurism of that and wanted to go and see for myself. I think this is what inspires a lot of VSO workers, whom I greatly honour. On the other hand, I also wanted to explore some of the scandals of the aid agencies. So I was interested in the connection—"interface" is a fashionable word— between the misery in these countries and the way in which we perceive them in the west, through news stories and appeals for money. (Kingston,2001,p.35)

*The Gates of Ivory* is set at the time of the collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and what has been described as 'the end of history':

Brian twiddles the knob and finds a discussion on the World Service about Eastern Europe, in which various experts assure their listeners that, despite glasnost and perestroika in the Soviet Union, the Eastern Europe dictatorship will never be overthrown. The Berlin Wall will stand for ever.

Alix and Brian listen for a few minutes, trustingly. Why should they doubt it? They do not know what is in store for them. They do not know that the End of History will shortly be announced. (GI,451)

Drabble continues to break literary taboos by depicting women's concerns with menstruation, reproduction and feminine hygiene which must be thought about in the middle of war and atrocities. Drabble uses a quotation given to her by a nurse: 'Every nurse's fear was being taken prisoner and not having any Tampax' (GI,159). In a dangerous situation where their lives are at risk, they must still think about what they will do to protect themselves during their next menstrual cycle. In the midst of the chaos all about her Liz's menstruation reappears and it is a shock as she has not menstruated for nearly five months and only intermittently for three years before that (GI,376-377). Another character, Madame Savet Akrun, 'groans, and waits. She is not defecating, she is waiting for the thick dark metallic gouts of blood that she knows will soon be loosed from her. She feels their formation, she awaits their passage' (GI,153). In the violent environment she lives in, she learns to become in tune with her body and her monthly periods: 'now she is in touch with her own rhythms, her own cycle. If she times this squatting carefully, the clotted blood will fall neatly to the dry earth, red to red, and she will wipe herself neatly clean with leaves' (GI,153).

In the war-torn areas of the 'Bad Time' where sanitary pads and towels are forgotten luxuries, women survive and retain control over their bodily functions: 'Women choose to cease to menstruate' (GI,153) in response to their life conditions. In contrast, Hattie Osborne in 'Good Time' is able to come to terms with her reproductive cycle and feels a sense of security, when, and as a result she states: 'When Aaron turns to dust and ashes in my sight, and I in his, there'll be a baby?' (GI,319). When Liz has a meeting with the Minister for the Press to discuss Stephen Cox's destiny she is only concerned about the condition of her skirt when she rises. She is worrying not about death, but leakage:

The entire male world of communism, Marxist-Leninism, inflation, American imperialism, rice production, exchange mechanism, statistics, hostages, the CIA, the SAS and the KGB, the Chinese, the KPNLF, Sihanouk, and Hun Sen, war, death, and Ho's marble mausoleum dissolve and fade before the bleeding root of her body, impaled on its grey-white stump. Woman-being, woman-life, possess her entirely. Shames and humiliations, triumphs and glories, birth and blood. Let enemies fight and die, let people starve. She hopes that the seat of her skirt will not be stained when she rises. (GI,379)

The key focus in *The Gates of Ivory* is on Liz and her quest for Stephen Cox who is led by his insatiable curiosity to the mysterious world of horror in South-East Asia where he vanishes. As one reviewer explains, Stephen, 'who has already won the Booker Prize and has a decent career, journeys to the East for reasons he can't put into words. He needs to face evil—those killing fields, the indescribable poverty and the sadness of "Bad Time"' (See,1992). The novel opens with Liz receiving a mysterious package posted in Kampuchea containing Stephen's fragments of prose manuscripts, diary notebooks, postcards and sketches and two unidentified finger bones. Liz is moved to take action to find out what happened to Stephen and organize others who are available to help although she is not in sympathy with his 'facile and fashionable left-wing anti-Americanism' (GI,142) and his radical views have nothing in common with those who belong to the mainstream left such as Alix Bowen, Liz's stepson Alan Headleand, and Perry Blinkhorn. Indeed Stephen has declared his support for revolution rather than reform believing as he does that 'a deep, violent, volcanic shit is required to

change the way things are. After this cataclysm, human nature, purged and pure, will find its own sweet natural level, freed from 10,000 years of exploitation, encrustation, sediment and satisfaction' (GI,83).

Stephen has been something of a youthful revolutionary. 'He lost faith in Paris in 1968. He has already written one highly successful, cynical novel about that loss of faith', but 'he admits that he is still curious' (GI,83). Brian Bowen thinks that the reason behind his departure for Cambodia is his intention to achieve some kind of artistic renewal (GI,16). The narrator does not share Stephen's world view: 'Communism has failed and capitalism has triumphed and John Stuart Mill's hypothesis has been rendered otiose. But had Pol Pot known that? Stephen has come here to try to find out. He is still curious' (GI,84). Hattie Osborne has a different explanation: 'He must have made quite a bit out of his last couple of novels, since he won the Booker. Then I thought that perhaps he'd just got pissed off with old England, and had really wanted to disappear' (GI,28).

Stephen is represented as an educated English gentleman, the product of an English public-school; an incorrigible idealist having 'a bleak view of human nature as it exists in its known manifestations, and an ecstatic view of its possibilities if ever it were to be released from them. He is that dangerous creature, a dreamer of ideological dreams' (GI,82). Stephen is fascinated by Pol Pot and wants to know how Pol Pot acquired such 'a big, bad, difficult name' because he still has thousands of supporters and is still represented at the UN (GI,14,13). In 1985 he left for 'Kampuchea or Cambodia or whatever the wretched country then called itself' (G1,13) to gather material for a play about Pol Pot (GI,13). When Liz asks Stephen why he has picked Cambodia, 'when the world was full of atrocities waiting for novelists, poets and screenwriters to descend upon them like vultures,' he replied; 'Because it's so extreme, I suppose. [Pol Pot] had a great project, you know... The greatest reconstruction project of the twentieth century. He was going to take Cambodia out of history, and make it self-sufficient. He was going to begin again. I suppose I want to find what was going wrong' (GI,13).

Stephen accompanies some journalists he meets at his hotel and becomes interested in joining their adventures into dangerous territory on the Vietnamese-Cambodian border to interview Khmer Rouge partisans and victims. While it seems likely that Akira, the Japanese photographer in their group, is to be killed, Stephen is held hostage in a private home for some days and falls ill. He thinks of Rimbaud, Edmond Goncourt, Malraux, and Gide, 'those French writers of his youth' who 'had brought him to this pass. They had inspired him, and now they withdrew their breath' (GI,356). There is a warning: 'Beware what you read when young. Beware what you feed upon. It may bring you to this shore, this brink, this bridge' (GI,356). Stephen wonders about his unfinished novel, left in the safe of a hotel in Bangkok, and whether it will be found (GI,357).

The title of the novel is a reference to Book six of Virgil's *Aeneid*, a work to which Drabble returns in *The Seven Sisters* in (2002). There are two gateways in *The Aeneid*, the gate of ivory and the gate of horn. The gate of horn is the place where true dreams are transmitted to the living from the underworld whereas the gate of ivory is the gate through which false dreams and illusions are relayed to the living from the dead. Aeneas accompanies the Cumaean Sibyl through the gate of ivory on his return from the visit to the dead. There is some suggestion that the symbolic use of gates in the novel relates to the true and false dreams generated through socialism and capitalism, but the characters realise that reality is much more complicated.

There are many references to the gates of ivory and gates of horn throughout the novel. One of them is to a book in Miss Porntip's library about films with an Asian setting. They invoke up an 'exotic mirage of an oriental culture that never existed and never will exist. The dreams of the gates of ivory' (GI,102). In another reference, Liz remembers a dream 'in which Stephen returned through the ivory gates to tell her that everything was all right' (GI,417). Stephen might go through the gates of horn because death is about the only reality that one can be certain of. Another reference is to the poet

Rimbaud who 'went off into what was then Abyssinia. The Red Sea, Somalia, the Horn of Africa. Gun-running, dealing in hides and ivory and slaves. But he died in Europe, he went home to die. The gates of ivory, the gates of horn' (GI,166).

Akira, Stephen's companion, is a Japanese journalist who 'continues to defy all evidence, all reason, all history' and he 'proclaims social hope, like a latter-day prophet' (GI,229). Stephen thinks of Cambodia as a great experiment gone wrong, but he is no apologist for Pol Pot: 'the death of a nation, the death of communism, the death of hope' (GI,16). While Akira is still a believer in the revolution, Stephen, who has lost faith in socialism, is defined 'as a man who has for ever lost his faith, who has come here to the graveyard of his own past' (GI,229). 'I can't stick it all together,' Stephen complains to Miss Porntip, the Beauty Queen, whom he meets during his flight to Thailand: 'Sex, politics, the past, myself. I am all in pieces' (GI,105). When she asks, 'Who can stick these things together?', Stephen, laments his failure to construct a personal narrative: 'But in me,... the gaps are so great. I am hardly made of the same human stuff. The same human matter. There is no consistency in me. No glue. No paste. I have no cohesion. I make no sense. I am a vacuum. I am fragments. I am morsels' (GI,105).

In Cambodia, Stephen hears a rumour about Pol Pot. According to the rumour, Pol Pot 'has lost a leg and been fitted with a prosthesis' by Trans-Hab Care although Trans-Hab Care denies the rumour stating that it has fitted 'hundreds of wooden legs to the victims of minefields, but it does not aid the Khmer Rouge' (GI,163). In that moment, Stephen speaks of the poet Rimbaud, 'who tried to vanish, who undid himself and his work and disappeared from the known world into Somalia' and who lost a leg to amputation in 1891 (GI,163). Rimbaud's name ironically sounds the same when spoken as Rambo, the fictitious movie hero-killer. That is why Jack Crane, a character in the novel, denies the imputation that Rambo has lost a leg; this was not in any movie that Jack has ever seen.

Rimbaud and Rambo are both mythmakers and their images haunt the novel. Konstantin Vasiliou, the son of Rose Vasiliou in *The Needle's Eye*, acclaims Rambo who is popular over South East Asia: 'The Filipinos love him. The Indonesians adore him. He is the hero of Malaysia. In Korea he is kind' and Stephen hopes he exaggerates: 'Are all the global villagers working at their VDU's by day and watching Rambo movies by night? Pol Pot, where are you?' (GI,163). He concludes that film is the 'great escape' and we are all 'extras in the great movie of history' (GI,164). While Stephen is struggling with fever at the end of his long journey, the vague nature of the 'real' preoccupies him:

But even as he lay there, he felt a small pride in having got to the other side. It was an end in itself. It was not very interesting, there would be no revelation, no confrontation, no lights from heaven would flash, neither God nor Pol Pot would speak from the burning bush. There would be no message to take back to the shores of the living. There was simply this place. Why trouble oneself with messages? He had got here. Enough books, enough writings, enough reports. Why try to describe the real thing? It was not even very real. It was a shadow of a shadow on the wall of a cave. There was nothing in the locked cabinet. *Laissez passer, laissez passer*. (GI,335-336)

We have seen Drabble's fascination with the origins and causes of evil in the Harrow Road murder and the gruesome cult of the severed head in *A Natural Curiosity*. There is also a ubiquitous sense of evil in *The Gates of Ivory* and the speculation about its nature continues. Liz remembers a discussion with Stephen about whether 'a sense of failure' drives people into 'aggression' or 'a sense of inferiority' breeds 'violence'? (GI,12). Stephen and the political theorist Alan Headleand discuss Liz's questions about group behaviour and 'whether or not people behave worse *en masse* than as individuals' (GI,173). Alan believes that 'man is born free and good of heart. It is society that corrupts, society that forges the manacles. Yet society itself is composed of human beings, is it not? Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had told us that there is no such thing as society. There are only individuals' (GI,174). The reference is to an interview by Margaret Thatcher in *Women's Own* in 1987 in which she seemed to deny the very existence of society and thus gained a certain notoriety: 'There's no such thing [as society]! There are individual men and women and there are families. And no

government can do anything except through people and people must look after themselves first. It is our duty to look after ourselves and then also to look after our neighbour' (Keay,1987,pp.29-30). Alan questions whether or not 'the individual is progressive and flexible, while the mass is primitive and punitive? The mass throws the stones, but the individual hesitates to cast the first stone? Or is the savage selfish individual socialized for the higher good of the group' (GI,174).

The narrator poses other questions about individual and group behaviour and the nature of institutions.

How long would it take, how much social engineering would be required to convert a community of pacifist American Quakers into order-obeying anti-Semitic officers of the *Schutzstaffel*? Or the SS into loyal members of the Red Cross? Would there always be a handful which would refuse to convert? And would they be heroes or villains? Why did the Germans so willingly kill the Jews? Why did the Italians refuse to kill Jews? Which is more surprising, the willingness or the refusal? Was the charismatic leadership of Pol Pot a socializing influence, binding the exploited peasant of Cambodia into a purposeful society? Or was it a barbaric primitive influence, deconstructing the institutions of society and family into "pure unmitigated savagery," into the killing fields of genocide? Is "good" group behaviour generated and fostered by "good" institutions or are institutions in themselves morally neutral? (GI,174-175)

At the end of the trilogy and in the last paragraph of *The Gates of Ivory*, there is the image of an unseen elusive Mitra which is to acquire a life of its own. Mitra

has been much invoked by his mother, by Konstantin Vassiliou, by Stephen Cox, by Liz Headleand, by the *Bangkok Post*, by the charitable agency that used his mother's image to raise funds for its own purposes. But he will not respond to the summons. He will not present himself at Site Ten, he will not reach the family embrace. He will not step back through the gates of horn. He will march on, armed, blooded, bloodied, a rusty Chinese rifle on his back. Many have died and many more will die in their attempt to maim and capture him. He grows and grows, he multiplies. Terribly, he smiles. He is legion. He has not been told that he is living at the end of history. He does not care whether his mother lives or dies. He marches on. He is multitudes. (GI,462)

Mitra's mother, Madame Savet Akrun, becomes an 'icon of sorrow' (GI,151) when Konstantin's photograph of her grieving for her missing son lost in the war is transmitted globally. The image of Mitra is appropriated in different contexts and for

different purposes by strangers across the world from Paris to Montreal: Mitra, 'student of medicine, protector of his family, ripped from his family, willing or unwilling convert to the Khmer Rouge' (GI,400). Imagining Mitra to be everywhere, although he cannot be seen anywhere, should perhaps convey the devastating effects on human lives of war and atrocity to those who are far removed from war or atrocity but the effect is arguably the very opposite:

Mitra bends over his medical text books in an attic in a Parisian suburb and late into the night he studies the names of the small bones and the large. Mitra lies in a field hospital of delicate bamboo, delirious, with a newly amputated leg. Mitra in a smart pastiche uniform of white and gold and green bows low at the gateway to the Shangri-La Hotel. Mitra in a tattered uniform of camouflage and UN cast-offs sits on the earth with a group of children instructing them in the art of throwing the grenades which they have not got.... Mitra strolls the green level lawns of Versailles and inhales the pungent aristocratic odour of box as he watches the crystalline play of the fountains. Mitra crouches on his haunches and shreds chicken in the back yard of the Restaurant Phnom Penh in Montreal. Mitra works as interpreter and resettlement officer in a refugee hostel in the Yorkshire Dales. Mitra is dead and has been dead for ten years.... Maybe Mitra does not wish to hear from his mother. Maybe he has deliberately concealed his tracks. (GI,159-60, 161)

The novel suggests that the more society is exposed to unverifiable information, to 'fake news', to images that can be appropriated for any purpose in any context, the more misunderstanding will spread and the more tenuous the understanding of true and false becomes. Indeed the novel intimates the dangers of society becoming saturated with simulacra, i.e. 'copies' which depict items which had no original in the first instance or which may once have had an original which no longer exists, so that eventually all meaning becomes infinitely mutable. Drabble is also struggling with the fiction-writer's dilemma about what is 'truth', what is 'falsehood' in a world where everything is made up.

Stephen announces that what he seeks is 'simplicity,' is 'a land where water flows uphill' (GI,105). However, Miss Porntip advises him that it is useless to seek a simple life story: 'Is no simplicity. Is only way onwards. Is no way back to village. No way back to childhood. Is finished, all finished. All over world, village is finished. English



village, Thai village, African village. Is burned, is chopped, is washed away. Is no way backwards. Water find level. Is no way back' (GI,105). Miss Porntip lists the benefits of consumerism:

No, is not so. Is better now. Is better life expectancy, more electrics, more saloon cars, more soap, more rice, more nice clothing and suiting, more ice-cream, more maple syrup, more Coca-Cola, more cocktails, more Ovaltine, more champagne, more cassette players, more faxes, more aeroplanes, more Rolex watches, more perfumes, more satellites, more TV, more microwave, more word processor, more shower fittings, more motorbicycles, more ice boxes, more chips, more tampons, more tweezers, more fridges, more air conditionings, more cabinets, more musical, more confections, more bracelets, more prawns, more fruit varieties, more choice, more liberty, more democracy. (GI,106)

Miss Porntip tells Stephen that 'Liberty,' 'Growth' and 'Dollars' will take the place of the certainty that Stephen seeks, and she furthermore assures him that 'It never roll back now. Is finished. Socialism finished, simplicity finished, poverty finished, USSR and China and Vietnam finished' (GI,106). At the end, she survives to enjoy the riches of capitalism. Similarly, Alix and Brian Bowen who are socialists 'may not approve of the new property-owning democracy, and they may not think capitalism the dream system to end all systems, but they cannot help profiting' (GI,450). Akira, 'the only remaining apologist for the Khmer Rouge' (GI,228) is killed by the Khmer Rouge. Konstantin Vassiliou, the son of Rose in *The Needle's Eye*, who was captured with Stephen and Akira, survives.

Alix Bowen finds a note among Stephen's things, dated 28 June 1951, penned by a seventeen-year-old Stephen and inserted in a Palgrave edition of *The Golden Treasury* (GI,421). The note states the human tendency to search for 'simplicity' reveals 'superimposed blindness, an exclusion of truth,' because although it is 'tempting' 'to claim that we once possessed innocence... we cannot do it' (GI,421). And 'if innocence never existed, we cannot reach a state of grace by returning to it, and in the vain attempt we lose courage on what is inevitably the path of corruption and complexity, error and gracelessness' (GI,421). Alix cannot decide if Stephen wrote these words or copied them, but they mysteriously serve as his first and last message (GI,421-422).

## CHAPTER 4

### **Margaret Drabble, Romanticism and Realism: The Influence of Wordsworth, Austen, Eliot, Woolf and Lessing**

This chapter is concerned with Drabble as a realist writer and with some of the key influences upon her work including the critic F. R. Leavis (1895-1978), the poet William Wordsworth (1770-1850) and four novelists; Jane Austen (1775-1817), George Eliot (1819-1880), Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), and Doris Lessing (1919-2013). Before I address the relationship of each of the above to Drabble's writing, I wish to discuss what is understood by the term Realism and to show that Drabble's relationship to what can loosely be termed the 'realist tradition' in English letters is more complicated and subtle than is sometimes recognised.

The realist novel's overriding principle, Steven Earnshaw argues, is to produce 'a faithful copy of reality' and the contemporary 'here and now' (Earnshaw, 2010, p.38). Realism as a literary movement came into being as a reaction to and a rejection of Romanticism. Romantic literature as we recognise it today, through its best-known poets, Shelley, Wordsworth, Keats and Byron, is lyrical, emotional, and concerned with rural subject matter, rather than with urban. Writers in the Romantic vein strove to communicate and to reflect the *zeitgeist*, the spirit of their times. However, they were not overly concerned with industrialisation or the economic and social changes in Britain depicted by Victorian novelists such as Charles Dickens and George Eliot who perceived a need for fiction to reflect the lives of ordinary people living in the great towns and cities produced by the industrial revolution. Drabble speaks of her affinity with the Victorian writers, 'the people I must have been influenced by, people I read when I was younger and indeed do still read and reread' (Greene, 1991, p.5). She states that the

writers she most admires are 'the people who strive to retain their links with the community' (Cooper-Clark,1980,p.73).

Literary realism is characterised by the tendency in writing to depict life as the author thinks it actually is, rather than how the author would wish it to be. In western European literature, this movement began in France with the writing of Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) and Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850). English realist writers attempted to make literature resemble life as closely as they could by taking their subject matter from the world around them, for example by depicting ordinary people encountering situations such as illness in the family in their everyday lives and creating unexceptional rather than mythical or fantastical figures or extraordinary characters elevated above the rest. Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell and Arnold Bennett are just a few narrative realists whose work has had a strong influence on Drabble's writing.

The concept of Realism is associated with claims about reality and with scientific, philosophical, and political debates about the nature of 'the real': 'To investigate realism in arts is immediately to enter into philosophical territory,' Lovell writes, 'of what exists in the world, and how that world can be known' (Lovell,1980,p.6). It is also to enter into political territory because of questions raised at a particular time shaping the relationships of intellectuals with the past and future, and in consequence making intellectuals feel that is their duty 'to interpret the world or to change it too' (Beaumont,2010,p.3).

Catherine Belsey's argument in *Critical Practice* (first published 1980) is that the dominant mode of literature since the Renaissance has been 'expressive realism,' which is a combination of mimesis and Romanticism. Belsey explains that 'the Aristotelian concept of art as mimesis, the imitation of reality, was widely current throughout the Renaissance' (Belsey,1991,pp.7-8) and when this merged with the feelings and sensitivity of the writer, it has produced 'expressive realism'. Belsey identifies expressive realism as a product of industrial capitalism, and as such representing a political ideology and a 'common sense view'. However, 'common sense' is not what it seems

and 'should certainly not to be taken to mean that it does, in fact, represents the way things are' (Earnshaw,2010,p.225). Indeed, "'common sense" is in reality bourgeois ideology, which is made to seem as if it is the natural order of things' (ibid.).

Literary Realism was first challenged by literary Modernism. Early twentieth-century authors such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf argued that Realism could not provide an objective view of the 'real' and that realist literature could not adequately represent reality. Modernism was challenged by postmodernism which emerged out of the Second World War and after the death of the towering modernist figures W. B. Yeats and Virginia Woolf. Postmodernism can be understood as 'the contemporary movement of thought which rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human existence and the possibility of objective knowledge' (Eagleton,2003,p.13).

When Drabble began publishing in the 1960s, postmodernism had yet to be fully critiqued or theorized although experimental novels by writers such Samuel Beckett and William Burroughs were read and admired. However, Drabble quickly acquired a reputation as an author deeply resistant to innovation and as late as 1977 when she had already published novels which, as I have shown, used innovative narrative techniques, the critic Elaine Showalter described her as 'the most ardent traditionalist' of all the contemporary English women novelists (Showalter,1977,p.304). The undeserved reputation as a 'died-hard' traditionalist which has stuck to Drabble until this day, owes much to her well-known statement initially made in a BBC recording in 1967, and then reproduced in Bergonzi's *The Situation of the Novel*, 'I don't want to write an experimental novel to be read by people in fifty years, who will say, ah, well, yes, she foresaw what was coming. I'm just not interested' (Bergonzi,1972,p.65). This has encouraged reviewers to identify her writing as uncompromisingly 'anti-experimental' although her writing and her literary tastes have changed radically over the years. In 2010, Drabble clarified the original statement and put it in context: 'I said it once in passing many years ago to Bernard Bergonzi and it has stuck to me like glue- it's very

annoying. I dislike labels. I have come to admire some of the novels which, in the 1960s and 70s, I disliked' (Turner,2010,p.9).

As a young writer Drabble came under the influence of the critic F. R. Leavis and his study, *The Great Tradition* (1948) when she read English Literature with Leavis in her time as a student at Cambridge University. In 1974 she stated categorically that 'The Great Tradition is what I believe in as a novelist' (Firchow,1974,p.105). The influence that Leavis exerted upon a whole generation of university students of English Literature was second to none. In *The Radiant Way* (1987), Alix who is offered places at Oxford and Cambridge, chooses the latter 'because of Dr. Leavis' (RW,220). Drabble has explained the importance of Leavis's writings to her own development and also why she subsequently reacted against his patriarchal authority and felt the need to distance herself from his teachings.

*The Great Tradition* that he taught had a great influence on me. But there was also something in me that rebelled against his control of the canon. He was a very controlling teacher and I feel sure that one of the reasons why my period at Cambridge was not very creative was because of Leavis's presence. He was extremely powerful. And I think what happened in my case was that when I left Cambridge and Leavis, everything that he'd taught remained very important to me, but I'd escaped from the desire to please the father figure (Cardwell, et al., 2000,p.2).

Leavis begins *The Great Tradition* with the assertion that the 'great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad' (Leavis,1973,p.1). He sees Jane Austen as the initiator of the 'Great Tradition' and contends that 'moral seriousness' and 'moral insight' are the key to inclusion in the Pantheon of English letters (Leavis,1973,p.15). All four of the novelists that Leavis picks out write in the realist mode and two, Jane Austen and George Eliot, have had a particularly strong impact on Drabble's early fiction which I discuss in this chapter. Despite the break with Leavis, Drabble has always retained a preoccupation with moral questions and with 'moral seriousness' while insisting that her novels are not didactic: 'If I am a moral writer it is not because I want to teach anybody anything. I want to think about it, to write seriously about life' (Poland,1975,p.264).

Drabble's novels are characterised by what Carl Rollyson has helpfully termed 'a distinctively modern woman's narrative voice and an unusual blend of Victorian and modern structure and concerns' (Rollyson,2012,p.40). Over the course of time, her fiction has become increasingly self-conscious, self-questioning, and ironic, as I have shown in my discussion in *The Gates of Ivory* (1991). I return to these aspects of her work in relation to *The Peppered Moth* (2000) and *The Pure Gold Baby* (2013) in chapter five. However, Drabble still remains committed to building upon the 'Great Tradition' and the Enlightenment legacy which values reason, progress and the democratic rights of all human beings. She also adheres to what Steven Earnshaw identifies as the basic tenets of Realism 'accessible (transparent) language; belief in a common phenomenal world; belief in an existing empirical world which can both be described and known; belief in a pre-existing human nature; autonomous individuals; a broadly liberal humanist worldview' (Earnshaw,2010,p.224). John Hannay has pointed out the major difference between Drabble and many other postmodernist writers. Drabble insists that 'writing isn't about writing; it's about the other thing, which is called life' (Hannay,1987,p.130).

Drabble's subject matter is contemporary and has consistently reflected the complexity of life in contemporary Britain since the 1960s. In 1987 she stated that her fiction is 'about the way we live now' (Drabble,1987,p.12) and this is as true of work written in the twenty first-century as it is true of her writing in the twentieth. Her fiction is also sociological in that she is interested in how society works. When she was writing *The Needle's Eye* (1972), she said that she was interested in 'playing the role of chronicler and sociologist' (Drabble,1990,pp.11,12) and some of her work is still 'closer to sociology than to so-called "creative fiction"' (Drabble,1990,p.12). Drabble has always been politically committed and has remained a socialist, albeit a socialist with no home in any of today's political parties. For Drabble as for Raymond Williams, Realism is not conservative and 'may certainly be deployed for revolutionary ends' (Turner,2010,p.12).

Drabble is broadly in agreement with Raymond Williams' definition of realism 'as being the type of fiction where there is an equal interest in character and

environment, with the former being influenced by the latter' (Turner,2010,p.9). She has employed 'a variety of innovative narrative techniques and complicated intertextual dialogue with the literary past' (Bromberg,1990,p.5). Her receptiveness to stylistic innovation is clearly represented by the narrative modifications that can be observed in the novels since *The Middle Ground* (1980) in which she starts using self-reflexive elements in response to the difficulties of 'finding a form to represent the simultaneity of things goings on' and 'trying to portray contemporary Britain... through a variety of viewpoints' (Hannay,1987,p.133). Drabble's way around these difficulties, as Pamela Bromberg observes, involves 'the exchange of dramatized time and the causality of nineteenth-century plots for exemplary episodes from a brief timespan (New Year's Eve to late spring)' (Bromberg,1990,p.16). Furthermore, in *The Radiant Way* (1987) she juxtaposes the experiences of six characters: Liz, Esther, Shirley, Cliff Harper, Alix, and Charles taking lunch at the same time to provide the reader with more conventional representations of dramatic stories. Bromberg explains further that:

With an anthropological perspective on the food and settings for each lunch Drabble conveys a spectrum of social role and identity in non-linear form. Synchrony and the spatialization of narrative, as opposed to linear temporal sequencing, are techniques used repeatedly in *The Radiant Way* to resist traditional causality as the main engine of narrative (Bromberg,1990,p.16).

Drabble's work is richly allusive. The word 'allusion' is derived from the Latin for 'to play with'. Her fiction plays with source material, often classical, mythological, or historical with which the literate reader is expected to be familiar. Allusions to literary characters or incidents are frequent in Drabble's fiction. For example, there is an allusion to Dorothea and Casaubon's Roman honeymoon from *Middlemarch* (1871-2) in *A Summer Bird-cage* (1963). This literary allusion in *A Summer Bird-cage* is used for a new purpose; to add emotional resonance or literary significance by drawing upon the reader's knowledge of the original. The author's expectation is that the reader will recognise the allusion and grasp its modern implications. T. S. Eliot argues that 'the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past' (Eliot,

T. 1972,pp.49-50). Throughout the history of literary criticism, a writer's work has been evaluated by comparison and contrast with other writers and the search for influence has been important. As Eliot puts it in '*Tradition and the Individual Talent*,' 'No poet, no artist of any art, has his meaning alone' (Eliot, T. 1972,p.49). Quite the opposite, meaning only arises from the relationships and interactions among writers whether they belong to the same generation or not and from their interactions with their community.

I have already discussed Drabble as a 'condition-of-England' novelist who drew upon the work of Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens and the Victorian 'condition-of-England' novelists and was also influenced by Arnold Bennett's writing about the provinces and the pottery towns. In the rest of this chapter I shall discuss Drabble's writing in relation to Jane Austen, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and Doris Lessing, all of whom have had a considerable influence upon her work. Austen died in 1817 and George Eliot was born two years later. Eliot died in 1880 and Woolf was born two years after that. Drabble was born two years before Woolf's death in 1940 so that the chain of that tradition of the English novel in which these women were towering figures remains unbroken. Before I turn to Austen, Eliot, Woolf and Lessing, I want to look at an earlier writer who had an important influence on her attitudes to the natural world and to the psyche; the Romantic poet, William Wordsworth.

### **William Wordsworth**

Drabble states that 'knowingly or unknowingly, we have all been influenced by the writers who went before us' (WB,8). I have already discussed the significance of her 1974 critical biography of Arnold Bennett. Her 1966 monograph *Wordsworth* was published half way between her first novel *A Summer Bird-cage* in 1963 and *The Waterfall* in 1969. In the introduction of *The Millstone*, published in 1965, Drabble explains that she was writing both *Wordsworth* and *The Millstone* while she was expecting the birth of her third child (M,x). The critic Nora Foster Stovel uses Drabble's



critical work on Wordsworth and Bennett to show how Drabble's 'creative writing has been powerfully influenced by her critical work' (Stovel,1988,p.130). She argues that Drabble's fiction has developed from an early focus on subjective, personal experiences and the individual's interaction with the natural world to a focus on emancipation in an acknowledgement of the individual's responsibility to the wider community. Stovel has divided Drabble's fiction into two distinct stages: the psychological novels of the sixties reflecting her interest in Wordsworth as she mainly concentrated on 'the subjective self escaping from oppressive society into communion with nature, and in the use of nature imagery to symbolize the intense inner life of the psyche' and the social novels of the seventies which were influenced by Bennett and which demonstrate Drabble's development in the skilful use of symbols and her mature themes (Stovel,1988,p.131).

In *A Writer's Britain: Landscape in Literature*, first published in 1977, Drabble has devoted a chapter to the Romantics, in which she notes Wordsworth's 'remarkable analysis of place and emotion, of past and present, of reality and imagination' (WB,152). Her own interest in the sublime, she explains, 'has combined with Wordsworth's' and 'inevitably, I have stressed the sublime rather than the homely in his nature and his work' (WB,163).

Drabble's childhood and youth, like Wordsworth's, were shaped by Quaker values. In her book, *The Pattern in the Carpet: A Personal History with Jigsaws* (2009), Drabble writes about the Mount School in York she attended; 'There was a principle involved here, of plain living and high thinking' (PC,163). This is a reference to Wordsworth's poem, 'Written in London, September, 1802' in which he laments that 'Plain living and high thinking are no more:/The homely beauty of the good old cause Is gone;/ our peace, our fearful innocence,/ And pure religion breathing household laws' (Wordsworth,1815,p.211). Drabble quotes these lines in her book, *A Writer's Britain: Landscape in Literature*; 'Wordsworth needed to live what he believed.... His own life style, of 'plain living and high thinking' has become an image in itself' (WB,147). Drabble links ethical principle to a simple life and her own personal commitment to simplicity and

to ethical principles is due to both the influence of the Quaker values and the impact of Wordsworth's poetry. References to Wordsworth abound in her fiction: In *The Middle Ground*, conversation topics over dinner revolve around 'farm and subsidies,' 'the simple life,' and 'Wordsworth and the Romantics' (MG,207). In *The Witch of Exmoor* (1996) she described a controversial judge as having a face 'flushed with rich living and low thinking' (WE,60). Like Wordsworth, Drabble believes that the individual imagination alone can add meaning to life. Like him, Drabble has a sense of nostalgia for the past and both authors recapitulate images of beauty that surprise the person who see them with joy because they occur unexpectedly in ugly or inauspicious landscapes, in *The Realms of Gold* (1975), for instance. Frances is 'overcome with joy' as she lies awake in bed with Karel Schmidt thinking of 'the gold baroque of Prague, and Kafka the mad Jew, and of those perilous gravestones, gravestones, her profession, her trade' (RG,350).

Drabble has placed Wordsworth in dialogue with Milton in the epigraphs in *The Ice Age* (1977), which is about Britain in the run-up to the Thatcher years. Milton's epigraph shows his impassioned apostrophe to his native land: 'Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant Nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks' (IA, epigraph). Milton predicts 'a year of sects and schisms,' setting the stage for the novel's confused and disorientating political backcloth (IA, epigraph). However, she uses Wordsworth's poetic summons of Milton back to England to intimate the need for order to be re-established out of chaos: 'Milton! Thou shouldst be living at this hour:/ England hath need of thee.../ We are selfish men;/ Oh! Raise us up, return to us again;/ And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power' (IA, epigraph).

Many features of Wordsworth's writing; his realism, his landscapes, his way of transforming the everyday into something more beautiful and elevated, his strong belief in the imagination, have found their ways into Drabble's own writing and in *The Middle Ground*, she explicitly states her debt and admiration to 'the grand old man' (MG,210).

Wordsworth's *The Prelude or, Growth of a Poet's Mind; An Autobiographical Poem* (1805) is a long autobiographical poem showing the spiritual growth of the poet, how he comes to terms with who he is, and his place in nature and the world. It is a poem about Wordsworth's boyhood and his early life with contrasting views of man, nature and society. Drabble believes that it is 'more like a modern psychological novel than a poem' (WLP,63). Similarly, Drabble's early novels reflect the limits of her own personal experience and her efforts to learn to develop within her own limitation. She insists that 'books reflect one's life' (Poland,1975,p.262) and *A Summer Bird-cage* (1963), *The Garrick Year* (1964), *The Millstone* (1965), *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967), and *The Waterfall* (1969) all show Drabble's interest in Wordsworth. The focus in all these novels is on the subjective self-escaping from repressive society into intimacy with nature and she uses nature imagery, for example, the waterfall in the eponymous novel, in order to symbolize the intense inner life of her characters.

Drabble particularly admires 'Wordsworth the nature poet' (WLP,108) and celebrates his use of 'natural imagery of flora and fauna, earth and water to symbolize the impressions of the external world on the subjective self' (Stovel,1988,p.133). She notices in *The Lyrical Ballads* 'a whole new set of images and references, dealing with flowers, birds, stars, and the smaller, prettier details of nature' (WLP,64). Drabble observes that her novels are also full of 'imagery of nature, the natural world of species, the flora and fauna' (Stovel,1988,p.133). Emma Evans's salvation in *The Garrick Year* is through her daughter Flora who is named after the goddess of flowers. At the end of *The Waterfall*, the lovers discover 'Heart's Ease,' which is a floral symbol of their individual salvation through love.

Fauna is also important in Drabble's fiction and she believes that 'The spirit of a person is like a bird trapped in his body' (Hardin,1973,p.287). In her first novel, *A Summer Bird-cage*, Drabble uses the central symbol of the bird cage as a metaphor for marriage. In *The Garrick Year*, Emma Evans imagines herself as a baby bird about to take wing, symbolizing her emergence from the repressive marriage into fully adult

identity: 'I walked quicker and quicker as myself stretched and put out damp, bony wings.... This was me, this was myself, this hungry bird who was ready from some unexplained famine to eat straw and twigs and paper' (GY,90-91). Drabble also seems to present the human spirit as a feathered thing or as a bird: 'He was caught. And his spirit would hunch its feathered bony shoulders, and grip its branch, and fold itself up and shrink within itself, until it could no longer brush against the net...' (NE,126).

Drabble believes that 'water is symbolic' (Hardin,1973,p.291). Drabble's fiction shares this feature with Wordsworth's poetry. Drabble observes 'imagery drawn from rivers, lakes, inland waters, seas, brooks, and rills' (WLP,85) throughout Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. In *The Garrick Year*, water symbolizes the reality of human passions and it is threatening. Emma's true identity as a mother who puts her children above all else is revealed when she leaps into the flood to rescue her daughter, Flora. In this novel the characters talk about drowning themselves and Drabble gives a matter-of-fact explanation for the emphasis on water and drowning:

*The Garrick Year* was about a year we spent in Stratford-on-Avon with the Royal Shakespeare Company. The River Avon is very dangerous; while we were there at least two people were drowned. Adam was a baby and the best park to go for children was just by the water. Children used to crawl in all the time. I was in a perpetual state of nervous apprehension. And that's why that book is all about drowning. I wrote it in the dressing room when I was in the Company. (Hardin,1973,p.291)

Wordsworth's poem *Tintern Abbey* (1798) is set on the River Wye in Monmouthshire which he revisited after a long absence and the beauty of the landscape influences him to perform acts 'of kindness and love.' Emma, in *The Garrick Year*, stands by the River Wye which runs at the bottom of a garden and she begins to 'feel cold, and then to feel frightened,' and the narrator explains: 'What impresses Emma is not the great house and the values it once stood for but the scenery, in response to which she feels something akin to the awe of the Wordsworthian sublime. However, when Wyndham asks if she does not "like it better" than London, she says, "Not really. I think I like London better. I feel out of place here"' (GY,115).

*The Waterfall*, Nora Foster Stovel has pointed out, is 'positively saturated with images of water symbolizing love, as the heroine, frozen into paralysis by a frigid marriage, melts in a romantic passion symbolized by the two waterfalls that inspired the title of the novel' (Stovel,1988,p.134). When Jane and James visit the waterfall, Jane says: 'it is real, unlike James and me, it exists. It is an example of the sublime' (W,251). Drabble gives a personal explanation: 'Goredale Scar does exist and I went to it. It is an example of the sublime. The passions of Jane and James were meant to be an example of sublime, romantic passion. I'm aware that this is a novel and that many novels contain romantic passions which are not real and when Jane says that, what she is saying is a kind of double bluff' (Hardin,1973,p.292).

Drabble writes of Wordsworth that 'For him, the landscape is the message, and he himself is the landscape' (WB,148). There is a scene in *The Waterfall* in which Jane Gray is just like a leafless twig, having survived and managed to renew its growth, and return among all odds. It is a 'leafless withered unwatered twig growing in a plantpot on the windowsill, a plant that Jane had for months neglected to throw into the bin because it still possessed, despite its barren decay, small faint green horseshoe scars on its brown stem that proved some hidden life' (W,43). Agreeing to her mother's comment, Jane thinks it is lovely and she 'suddenly overjoyed by the grotesque nature of the lie, by the stony obduracy of their denial of the true state of that house, that room, that marriage, that woman, that leafless twig. She wondered, as she laughed, whether she had kept the plant through inertia, or through hope' (W,43).

The use of romantic literature and the romantic landscape is continued in '*Stepping Westward: a Topographical Tale*'. The story was commissioned by the Wordsworth Society in 1994 and published in Drabble's collection of short stories, *A Day in the Life of a Smiling Woman* (2011) and takes its title from Wordsworth's poem *Stepping Westward* (1803). In Drabble's story Mary Mogg, a school teacher on holiday in the Lake District who is on the verge of retirement meets a naturalist Anne Elliott of about the same age but with none of Mary's forebodings about ageing, deteriorating

health, loneliness and death. Instead Anne relishes the present and the excitement of her contact with lichen, trees and other natural things. Mary returns home taking the enchantment of their encounter in the countryside with her and fortified to face life anew.

### **Jane Austen**

Drabble recognises Jane Austen as a brilliant, innovative writer who 'created the domestic novel as we know it' (Auerbach,2004,p.200). She admits to her familiarity with Austen's fiction and to thinking about her continually when considering the plots, moral dilemmas and scope of her own work; 'my novels are in a perpetual dialogue with Jane Austen' (Auerbach,2004,p.198). Jane Grey in *The Waterfall*, Emma Evans in *The Garrick Year* and the Bennett sisters in *A Summer Bird-cage* are named after Austen or her characters. Drabble's most striking thematic similarity to Austen is her concern with how women fare in relation to marriage and her anger at women's economic dependency on men. Drabble compares Austen to Woolf, who chose, on the whole, to describe women 'less gifted, intellectually less audacious, more conventional than herself' (Drabble,1989b,p.xiii). Drabble, like Austen, fills her novels with people and places from the social milieux with which she was personally familiar. Both authors acknowledge that women's lives, even the lives of women from a socially privileged upper middle-class background, were circumscribed. Marriage signified women's social standing in society and permitted them to leave the parental home and was thus sought after by young women as their only means of establishing their own household and starting their family.

Drabble also shares Austen (and Eliot's) belief in the necessity of a good education for girls to prepare them to hold their own with men. In *Persuasion* (1818-1819) Anne Elliott will not allow Captain Harville to cite books in their discussion about the nature of women and claims that 'Men have had every advantage of us in telling

their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything' (Austen, J. 1989,p.230). A short story, 'The Dower House at Kellynch: A Somerset Romance' which features in Drabble's collection of her short stories, *A Day in the Life of a Smiling Woman* (2011) is a modern rendition of *Persuasion* with an heir to a family fortune named Burgo Bridgewater Elliot and an accident which resembles the accident in *Persuasion* when Louisa Musgrave falls and suffers concussion on a visit to look at the fossils in Lyme Regis. In contrast to Drabble, who has travelled extensively teaching, researching and lecturing in Germany, the United States, Japan, India and New Zealand, and whose work is informed by her knowledge of different people, countries and cultures, Austen never left England, and the southern home counties where her novels are set.

*A Summer Bird-cage* explores the marital prospects of two sisters, Sarah and Louise, whereas *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is concerned with the marriageability of all five: Jane, Elizabeth, Mary, Lydia and Kitty. As Joanne Creighton comments: 'The options for these modern Bennetts are so much more extensive: it is not merely a matter of marrying well, but of charting one's own identity in a changing social world, though this new freedom comes a moral ambiguity and gender uncertainty quite unknown to Austen's sisters' (Creighton, 1985,p.41). In *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* Drabble notes that Austen never married, 'although she had several suitors, one of whom she accepted one evening, only to withdraw her acceptance the following morning' (OCEL,51). In her astute introduction to the Virago edition of *Pride and Prejudice* Drabble also points out that Austen 'never attempts a portrait of a professional woman, although women had been making money as writers for at least a century, nor does she ever explore the dark world of female labour (as milliner, shopkeeper, opera singer, paid companion)', let alone the hidden world of the domestic servant (Drabble, 1989b,p.xiii). Instead Austen depicted a society in which women cannot support themselves independently because they are not permitted to enter professional employment, and in which an intelligent woman like Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and*

*Prejudice*, must opt for a husband unworthy of her because she recognises that marriage is her only guarantee of obtaining security and a home of her own. As Gregg Hecimovich suggests, the anger that Austen had against female dependency on men in her day 'was turned to irony and a comic and playful wit that is everywhere on display in Austen and which fuels the success of her novels still' (Hecimovich,2008,p.4). In her introduction to *Pride and Prejudice*, Drabble points out that: 'Some readers really deeply dislike the society in which Austen's works are so firmly grounded: much ado about nothing indeed is the accusation, and what about the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars? Have soldiers nothing better to do than to flirt with young women, play whist and lottery, and seduce the daughters of tradesmen?' (Drabble,1989b,p.ix).

Drabble invites contrasts between her own writing and Austen's by making Austen's fiction a topic of conversation between her characters. In *The Radiant Way* Stephen Cox, Brian Bowen, Alix Bowen and Liz Headleand 'talk, inevitably, of Jane Austen and the Country Village of knowledge through width, or depth' (RW,165). The narrator brings to the readers' mind the dissimilarity between Austen and herself: 'A few families in a Country Village. A few families in a small, densely populated, parochial, insecure country. Mothers, fathers, aunts, stepchildren, cousins' (RW,171). Austen sets her novels among the landed gentry and her own parents, George and Cassandra (née Leigh) Austen, were members of well-connected English families. Drabble, in contrast, is not concerned with the top echelons of society. She explains that 'Narratives, in the past, related the adventures of the famous and the wealthy.... In Jane Austen... the protagonists are not, it is true, titled, but they are privileged. By youth, by wit, by beauty, and sometimes by wealth. The Princesses of their Country Villages' (RW,88). Her characters are wider ranging in their social backgrounds than Austen's and do not usually possess exceptional beauty or wealth: 'Liz, Alix and Esther were not princesses. They were not beautiful, they were not rich' (RW,88).

In *The Waterfall* Drabble has her sophisticated heroine pillory Austen's Emma for her outmoded attitudes only to direct the reader's attention to the similarities between



the two and to the continuities in women's lives. Jane Grey's professed dislike of Jane Austen is arresting in its dismissal of Austen's prized literary qualities (her 'desperate wit'), in her unashamed preference for the garishness that Austen deplored, and in her rejection of conventional sexual morality ('she would have done better to steal Frank Churchill') (W,57). Above all, Jane is provocative and modern in outlook in refusing to maintain a silence about what was unmentionable in Austen's writing, and that is sex: 'What can it have been like, in bed with Mr Knightley?'

How I dislike Jane Austen. How deeply I deplore her desperate wit. Her moral tone dismays me: my heart goes out to the vulgarity of those little card parties that Mrs Philips gave at Meryton,... to Lydia at fifteen gaily flashing her wedding ring through the carriage window, to Frank Churchill, above all to Frank Churchill, lying and deceiving and proffering embarrassing extravagant gifts. got what she deserved, in marrying Mr Knightley. What can it have been like, in bed with Mr Knightley? Sorrow awaited that woman: she would have done better to steal Frank Churchill, if she could. (W,57-58).

In this modern reworking of *Emma*, the protagonist does break the rules and 'steal' Frank Churchill (reconfigured in *The Waterfall* as her cousin's husband, James). In her introduction to *Emma*, Drabble writes that Austen's artistic and narrative expertise 'turns circle upon itself, as Emma discovers that the great unknown lover is the old friend and mentor of her childhood, and that the great adventure of sex and marriage will take place within her old childhood home. Is it not this playing it *too* safe? This is an enclosed, endogamous conclusion' (Drabble,1989a,p.xvii). In *The Waterfall* Jane Austen is evoked in connection with the antiquated values of her upbringing against which Jane Grey rebels. She refers to Austen when talking about her family background: 'Both my father and my mother came from such genteel middle class descent that Jane Austen herself could have described their affiliations with ease' (W,54). It is Jane's mother who can take pride in her two brothers, a barrister and a clergyman, on Jane's father's side, some slight disaster had happened and 'the three sons had been brought up in aura of slight— though naturally genteel— poverty' (W,54). Jane refers to Austen explicitly when she talks about her mother's judgement on Mrs Otford, James's mother, and questions

the moral basis on which the first could judge the latter's 'gay social whirl': 'Morals and manners: I leave it to Jane Austen to draw those fine distinctions' (W,58).

The nuances of hierarchy and social standing in the countryside are of great importance to Jane's parents as they were for Austen's characters: 'With them, awareness of rank is a disease: it seems to be the core of their existence, it has displaced any of the significant centres of life, it eats them up, it devours them,' Jane states (W,59). Disapproving of their values, Jane comes to regard her own parents as hypocrites, 'their social attitudes were dishonest,... the solid virtues to which they paid lip-service were as nothing to them compared with the vain honours and titles and glories which, at every speech day, they solemnly denounced' (W,55). Thinking of how she has managed to accommodate the moral failings of her parents-in-law and has embraced these willingly, Jane tells herself that 'they were not real offences, not moral flaws, or defects of anything other than manner and custom— trying, in a sense, in [her] own way, to deny the distinctions [she] had been reared in, the Jane Austen distinctions of refinement and vulgarity, of good and bad taste' (W,93).

In her article, 'Still Lost in Austen', Drabble notes that on rereading Jane Austen, 'we always find new shades of meaning, new pleasures and, most importantly, new questions' and explains the reasons why we reread her is that 'we are comforted, men and women alike, by a world of limited choice. A distant, static world of being rather than doing, where careers hardly feature; where professional success is a side issue; where competition is so regulated by convention that it cannot dominate behaviour; where ambition is curtailed and failure managed. Yet this small world rouses strong passions' (Drabble, 2010b).

### **George Eliot**

In 1983 Drabble was hailed as a George Eliot of contemporary Britain (Moran,1983,p.3). Both writers have a strong social conscience and far-reaching intellectual interests in

literature, religion, philosophy, history and the sciences. Drabble has referred to Eliot as 'my ideal novelist' (Rozencwajg, 1979, p. 336) and has praised her ability to combine the depiction of individual passion with her depiction of social situations. What she admired and sought to emulate in her own writing was Eliot's breadth of intellectual interests as well as her social panoramas: 'I admire George Eliot so much because she's so inclusive. She does tackle a very large range of subject matter. And Jane Austen doesn't. She didn't care what was going on round the edges of the society that she lived in' (Cooper-Clark, 1980, p. 71). Drabble believes that Jane Austen 'ought to have had a slightly greater awareness of what was going on in the rest of England. It's nothing to do with range, it has to do with social conscience, which George Eliot had and which gave the books a greater breadth' (Cooper-Clark, 1980, p. 72). In her interview with Nancy Poland, Drabble remarks that Eliot 'wrote well of passion but at the same time she was very good on politics and morals, on social details: she was a good all-around novelist, and that is what I would like to be' (Poland, 1975, p. 263).

Drabble is fascinated by the technical problems associated with writing a modern *Middlemarch*: 'There must be some answer to the omniscient narrator and the interconnected articulation of society today which is different and which she [George Eliot] does so well' (Creighton, 1985, p. 109). Drabble retains the omniscient narrator which connects her to George Eliot and her predecessors. She states of her first novel *A Summer Bird-cage*, 'A lot of the plot was based on *Middlemarch*' (Bergonzi, 1972, p. 22). However, the resemblance between the two novels can only go so far. As Drabble admits; 'women today are finding themselves in situations, physical and emotional situations for which there are no literary guidelines' (Cooper-Clark, 1980, p. 71). Drabble also points out that George Eliot 'did not permit Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* to do what George Eliot did in real life: translate, publish articles, edit a periodical, refuse to marry until she was middle-aged, live an independent existence as a spinster, and finally live openly with a man whom she could not marry' (Austen, Z. 1976, p. 549).

Drabble notes that 'the importance of marital loyalty is ... widely illustrated' in *Middlemarch* (OCEL,642). However, marital loyalty could not be taken for granted in the twentieth-century world nor in her novels, in which, as we have seen, marital loyalty is notable for its absence. Indeed, Eliot uses the notion of marriage as imprisonment very similarly to Drabble. When Dorothea returns from her honeymoon she feels imprisoned at Lowick Manor: 'Her blooming full-pulsed youth stood there in a moral imprisonment which made itself one with the chill, colourless, narrowed landscape, with the shrunken furniture, the never-read books' (Eliot, G. 2000,p.227). Eliot uses the metaphor of marriage as a bird-cage as Drabble was to do herself. When Rosamond is shown to be imprisoned in her married life with Lydgate we are told that 'instead of the threatened cage in Bride Street,' her husband 'provided one all flowers and gilding, fit for the bird of paradise that she resembled' (Eliot, G. 2000,p.686).

Both *A Summer Bird-cage* and *Middlemarch* depict sibling relationships. Sarah's relationship with her sister, Louise in *A Summer Bird-cage* is reminiscent of the relationship between Dorothea and her sister, Celia. While Dorothea struggles with her sense of vocation her sister Celia, like Drabble's Louise, is the more conventional of the two, and just wants a rich husband. During a pleasant evening at home, Sarah is struck 'by the charming convention of the scene-sisters idling away an odd evening in happy companionship. It was like something out of *Middlemarch*' (SB,171). This evening is a turning point in their relationship as each comes to embrace the other despite their failings and they even share their secrets.

The debt to *Middlemarch* is most pronounced in the depiction of Louise's honeymoon in Rome. Louise, 'half-heartedly inspecting the half-vanished frescoes, and alone' is 'posed expensively against an artistic background' (SB,68). She was dressed 'in black and white and grey, and there was something stoic and stony in her face that suited the masonry' where she is seen by an old friend, Simone (SB,68). This scene echoes Dorothea's wedding journey to Italy with her new husband Casaubon. Indeed Drabble has annotated her own copy of *A Summer Bird-cage* with the words 'This scene

is an echo and parody of *Middlemarch*, Dorothea's Roman honeymoon' (Drabble,2013a).

Casaubon warns Dorothea that she might find the journey lonely and encourages Celia to accompany them. Dorothea, like Louise, is simply dressed in grey and is 'sobbing bitterly' (Eliot, G. 2000,p.160). When she is seen by Will Ladislaw and his artist friend, Naumann, in the Vatican among the famous classical statues, Dorothea is frozen in thought when the men first see her – she looks like one of the statues. At this moment she comes to the same revelation as Drabble's disillusioned married women. She realises precisely how she is being deprived of the emotional fulfilment which she had hoped that her marriage would provide: 'he would have held her hands between his and listened with the delight and tenderness and understanding to all the little histories which made up her experience, and would have given her the same sort of intimacy in return, so that the past life of each could be included in their mutual knowledge and affection' (Eliot, G. 2000,p.165).

The education of Drabble's heroines, like the education of Eliot's, leaves them ill prepared for later life. Mr and Mrs Vincy hoping that Fred will enter the Church send him to college while Rosamond is sent to a finishing school: 'where the teaching included all that was demanded in the accomplished female - even to extras, such as the getting in and out of a carriage' (Eliot, G. 2000,p.79). Those accomplishments do not, however, help her in making a realistic assessment of how she would live nor whom she should marry. Like Sarah in *A Summer Bird-cage* and Emma in *The Garrick Year* 'Rosamond had been educated to a ridiculous pitch, for what was the use of accomplishments which would be all laid aside as soon as she was married?' (Eliot, G. 2000,p.139). Her father asks, 'what have you had such an education for, if you are to go and marry a poor man? It's a cruel thing for a father to see' (Eliot, G. 2000,p.291). Rosamond lives an unfulfilling married life with a harassed and overworked Lydgate whom she berates for his chosen profession 'I often wish you had not been a medical man' (Eliot, G. 2000,p.377) in much the same that Drabble's unhappy married women berate their husbands.

Eliot writes that 'All Dorothea's passion was transfused through a mind struggling towards an ideal life' (Eliot, G. 2000,p.36). Like Rose in *The Needle's Eye* who gives away her possessions to the poor, Dorothea is an idealist with a strong desire to contribute to society and the public good and has a deep sympathy for those less fortunate than herself. At the beginning of the novel she has started an infant school and has plans to improve the lives of the poor cottagers living on her uncle's. Dorothea seeks a vocation and thus a role and purpose in life. Her ideal is to learn Latin and Greek, which are the 'provinces of masculine knowledge' that seems to her 'a standing-ground from which all truth could be seen more truly' (Eliot, G. 2000,p.52). However, Casaubon conveys clearly in his letter to her that he wants a wife who can 'supply aid in graver labours' and 'cast a charm over vacant hours' (Eliot, G. 2000,p.35). In this, his culminating age, he seeks the solace of 'female tendance for his declining years' (Eliot, G. 2000,p.51). Like Drabble's husbands who expect their intelligent wives to attend to their every need, Casaubon can find nothing blame-worthy in his own selfish behaviour. The omniscient narrator writes: 'Society never made the preposterous demand that a man should think as much about his own qualifications for making a charming girl happy as he thinks of hers for making himself happy' (Eliot, G. 2000,p.231).

The question 'What could she do, what ought she to do?' (Eliot, G. 2000,p.23) resonates through Dorothea's minds as it does through the mind of Sarah Bennett in *A Summer Bird-cage* and indeed for so many of Drabble's protagonists. At the end of *Middlemarch*, the answer is the same. She marries and has children because society offers her no credible alternative. 'Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother. But no one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done' (Eliot, G. 2000,p.686).

## Virginia Woolf

Drabble's initial low estimation of Virginia Woolf was broadly in line with the views of F. R. and Queenie Leavis who considered Woolf and the Bloomsbury circle as little more than literary dilettantes; an insignificant coterie committed to the notion of art for art's sake and lacking in all moral seriousness and significance. Initially dismissing Woolf as a snobbish writer, 'an elitist,' writing 'for a minority about a minority,' 'a dull dilettante,' 'out of date,' and 'out of touch' (Southworth, 2004, p. 139), Drabble claimed that she had read none of Woolf's work until 1972 because she was very out of fashion in Britain during the 1950s and 1960s (Rozencajg, 1979, p. 336). However, there are clear echoes of *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) in the mildly experimental techniques of *The Waterfall* (1969) in which Drabble changes from the traditional third-person narration used in her first four novels to an experimental writing technique of 'first-person and third-person narrative shifting'. This shows how her own writing has been stylistically affected by her exposure to the techniques of Woolf, whether or not this was at a conscious level. Drabble explains: 'I wrote the first chunk in the third person and found it impossible to continue with, because it did not seem to me to tell anything like the whole story. And so I evolved. I didn't intend when I started the book to have this shifting... it wasn't my aim at all to write it experimentally' (Firchow, 1974, p. 117).

Just as *The Needle's Eye* marks a new departure for Drabble in its use of a male narrator, so *The Waterfall* marks an advance in Drabble's understanding of form and in her use of a mode of 'stream of consciousness' adapted for her purposes in her first-person narratives. As Valerie Grosvenor Myer explains, the 'fertilizing effect of reading Woolf freed Drabble, in *The Waterfall*, to reconcile the empiricist tradition of Bennett with the subjectivity, sensitivity and symbolism of Virginia Woolf. It is this decision that contributes to *The Waterfall's* split narrative, alternating between first and third-person (Myer, 1991, p. 60).

In 1972 Drabble revised her former position on Woolf attributing her change of heart to the influence of reading her feminist polemic *A Room of One's Own* (1929), and to discovering in Woolf -- as had so many others before her -- 'a good fighter, a brave speaker, and a loyal addresser of envelopes' (Southworth,2004,p.139). In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf questions patriarchal precedents and asks women to 'think back through our mothers' and establishes a tradition of women's writing in which Austen and Eliot are key figures; 'For the road was cut many years ago... by Jane Austen, by George Eliot- many famous women, and many more unknown and forgotten, have been before me, making the path smooth and regulating my steps' (Shattock,2001,p.246). As Jane Marcus puts it, Woolf here 'stakes out the territory for the practice of feminist criticism, includes the history of women writing before her, and prophesies the future' (Marcus,1987,p.89). After reading *A Room of One's Own*, Drabble wrote that 'I felt so in sympathy with everything she said about the tradition of women writing and where it's going. And I know that's what I'm part of' (Firchow,1974,p.114).

Drabble argues that Woolf was rejected 'by succeeding generations' for her depiction of 'a trivial domestic world', while this was one of the sources of her strength (McNees,1994,p.433) and she stresses the importance of Woolf's influence on many other authors: 'There has been hardly a writer who has not been affected by her. Her fluid sentence structure, her poetic prose, her perceptions of the slightest connections... all these things have gone into the novel and remained there' (Southworth,2004,p.140). In 1992 Drabble wrote her introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition of *To the Lighthouse*. Four years later, she had completed *The Witch of Exmoor* in which the literary meal at the centre of the novel echoes the symbolic importance of the meal in *To the Lighthouse*. As Phyllis Rose suggests; 'Structural and stylistic affinities between Margaret Drabble and Virginia Woolf should alert us to, rather than divert us from, their profounder kinship' (Rose, E. 1985,p.11). Judith Ruderman, writes Rose, 'finds dinner parties in a number of Drabble's novels and notes that, as in Woolf's novels, they serve as emblems of order and community in a world of ugly chaos' (Rose, E. 1985,p.10).



Kate's preparations for a party at the end of *The Middle Ground* has resonances of *Mrs Dalloway*: "'Go and arrange the flowers," said Ruth. "That's what people are supposed to do before parties". Ruth was doing *Mrs Dalloway* for A level' (MG,261). In an interview Drabble describes the closing party as 'a literary joke, a Mrs Dalloway-type party' (Cooper-Clark,1980,p.75). However, whereas Mrs Dalloway 'finds her identity in her marital status, Kate is content to be single' (Tapaswi,2004,p.69). Drabble confirms that *To the Lighthouse* was 'the model for Kate's gathering' (Wyatt,1990,p.246) and that whether Drabble has Mrs Dalloway or Mrs Ramsay in her mind, 'she evokes Woolf's celebration of communal gatherings that connect disparate persons' (Wyatt,1990,p.246). Like *Mrs Dalloway*, *The Middle Ground* in its own contemporary context is about 'human relationships at a particular time in a particular place (London), within the important frames of time and memory. At the same time, it is an exploration of what sustains the self after one reaches life's midpoint' (Rubenstein,1984,p.1). Kate considers the abortion she had as an act of murder: 'Maternity had been her passion, her primary passion in life, and she had been forced to deny it.... *Doing the right thing has destroyed me....* Or must I simply admit the violence done, the death of a soul?' (MG,230). This is an allusion to Peter Walsh's phrase in *Mrs Dalloway*; 'The death of the soul' (Woolf,2003,p.66). Clarissa was considered by Sally as 'a snob' (Woolf,2003,p.121) and the narrator notes that 'Kate, I fear, is a snob' (MG,181). Hugo Mainwaring and Peter Walsh see Kate and Mrs Dalloway as 'vain and shallow but also beautiful and true' (Tapaswi,2004,p.69).

### **Doris Lessing**

Another important influence on Drabble was the Rhodesian writer Doris Lessing (1919-2013) who became a good personal friend. In her article, 'Doris Lessing: My Hero', published in *The Guardian*, Drabble explains how their relationship started when she

first took the initiative, which she thought very uncharacteristic at the time, of writing to Lessing out of 'desperation' in the late 1960s and Lessing asked her to lunch in return (Drabble,2013b). Lessing, who loved cooking, often invited Drabble to her large parties and would invite herself to eat in Drabble's Hampstead home 'when the mood took her'. Drabble 'never dared to say no. Hers was a royal command. Even if I was frantic with children's activities or deadlines, Doris had to be accommodated' (Drabble,2013b).

Drabble describes Lessing as a writer who 'changes tense, tone, place, ... skips decades, moves from the past to the future, documents, speculates, describes, with relentless urgency' (Drabble,1972,p.52). She asserts that 'for a writer who consistently foresees and confronts the worst, [Lessing] is neither depressing nor apparently depressed' (Drabble,1972,p.50). Lessing is mentioned once by name in *The Middle Ground* (p.87). She is one of several dinner table topics discussed by Kate and her friends and she appears in several more buried allusions. For instance, Kate narrates a series of stories of adultery defining one as 'not a very nice story', which is the title of a short story by Lessing on the same topic. Drabble's protagonist of *The Waterfall* draws on *The Golden Notebook* which explores the meanings of being a woman writer. Jane Gray is a poet who uses 'the power of the pen' to repudiate 'the old novels' in which 'the price of love was death' (W,256,239). Anna Wulf, a novelist, is revealed as the author of the novel-within-a-novel in *The Golden Notebook* and in the course of the novel Jane Gray claims that she is the author of *The Waterfall* (W,275).

In *A Literature of One's Own* Elaine Showalter links Drabble to Lessing and to Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, A. S. Byatt and Beryl Bainbridge as innovative writers who brought new topics to English fiction at a time of self-awareness in the 1960s when they start using 'vocabularies previously reserved for male writers' and describing 'formerly taboo areas of female experience' (Showalter,1977,p.35). Drabble's novel commences with a scene of childbirth. The 'openness with which the subject of menstruation is treated in *The Golden Notebook* was highly unusual and excited much interest at the time' (Joannou,2000,p.23).

*The Golden Notebook* (1962) is centred on Anna Wulf, a young writer and single mother moving in Freudian and Marxist intellectual circles in London. Anna has a nervous breakdown whilst trying to cope with the crises taking place in her personal life and the world beyond. The book explores 'the crisis which was confronting the left in Britain in the 1950s' and 'the culture in which Communists worked and thought' (Joannou,2000,p.23). In *The Waterfall* Jane Gray suffers from 'the spectacle of life's basic unfairness and the overwhelming misery of the human lot' although in contrast to Anna, who believes in equality, she passively resigns herself to the notion that 'inequality is our lot' (W,59). The tension between truth and lie is the essence of the novel: 'Every representation of reality depends on the interpreter's assumptions about that reality, and thus "representation" is not colorless imitation, but a subjective and selective construction' (Schier,1993,pp.112-113).

In May 2018 I was given permission to work on the Doris Lessing/Margaret Drabble correspondence, 1978-2008. This consists of one box of letters and postcards donated by Margaret Drabble to the Doris Lessing Archive at the University of East Anglia in 2008 (primarily of letters from Lessing to Drabble). One undated letter in a formal style, presumably written early in their relationship, started with a reply to Drabble's suggestion that they should meet. Lessing admired an unnamed book of Drabble as well as her first-hand experience of parenting: 'I do rather feel a kinship with female writers who actually have children, or, if you haven't got them, know about having them, because there does seem rather a gulf between those who do and those who don't' (Figure 1).

12008/DRABBLE, M 006

60 Clarendon St.  
N. W.  
Sw

Dear Margaret Drabble,

Well, I liked your book, which I hadn't read. I do rather feel a kinship with female writers who actually have children, or, if you haven't got them, know about having them, because there does seem rather a gulf set between those who do and those who don't.

About the Golden Notebook - well, I'm always in trouble about this book because the reasons I wrote it are so remote from the reasons people read it.

Apart from that, I used to have all kinds of theories and beliefs about men and women, sex, politics, freedom and etc., but it all seems to have lost me.

I have a suggestion - why don't you ring me up the week after next, telephone Euston 8805, and come and have a cup of tea or something.

I'm not one for the literary life, actually. Some writers are and thrive on it. Not me. I mean parties and so on. But do come and let's talk.

Yours sincerely

Doris Lessing

Figure 1: Undated letter from Doris Lessing to Margaret Drabble

A letter from Lessing to Drabble on 12 June 2006 discussed the sufferings of mothers in pregnancy. The last part of the same letter reveals Lessing's anger at the Labour Party at an event which she attended with Drabble and her husband, Michael Holroyd (Figure 2).

DL/2008/ DRABBLE, M 056

24 Gondar Gardens  
London NW 6 1HG

12th June 2006

My dear Maggie

But consider us young women, all in our twenties, with Mothers, ~~MOTHERS~~, and what we could see was, they didn't have enough to do. A hundred years before, even fifty, and they would have had nine or ten children, miscarriages, and quite a few deaths. Someone once sent me a book remaindered and ending up on a street stall in San Francisco, and they were letters, written not by the first generation of women taking charge of the Mid West wilderness, but their daughters, and every letter (to each other) was about yet another birth, or the deaths of little Johnny and little Mary, because the farm cemeteries were full of tiny graves and "She lived but five years, Never To be Forgotten." And yes, "I am pregnant again, but luckily Cynthia says she knows a doctor who understands how births may be prevented." And on they go, these letters, all about being pregnant, and how not to be.

And it is a marvel, this was well before the Pill, but the women in Southern Rhodesia, had two children, or three at the moment. But your mother had four, so she was employed. But our Mothers were not at all occupied with births and deaths, miscarriages and other feminine pursuits, but with us, their hapless children.

They did not have enough to do. This we knew, though intelligent thoughts such as those in the last paragraph were beyond us.

My mother had these engines of energy, which she took out on us.

For God's sake don't take your energy for granted, dear Maggie. I once had so much, but now I just lie about and sleep.

I now think my mother did herself in because of that energy of hers.

And so all the Mothers were neurotic and complaining and knew that it was kiddies that did a woman in but should have been great actresses and singers and painters and writers.

What a thing, what a phenomenon and it was probably the first time in the history of the world that there ever had been women like them.

Well things are better, surely. At least there are not those tragic little graves in the graveyard "Gone But not Forgotten."

Did it occur to Michael and you that the occasion we were at was a love-in for the Labour Party. They didn't say it was going to be that when I was urged to attend.

I nearly stood up and listened to the admirable organisations the Labour Party had out funding for - but I didn't, because I am a coward, and that was why later I was ashamed and angry.

That was a shocking business you know, there we sat listening to lying speeches from the Labour people.

Love to you both

Doris

I am ready War, Peace - & the  
Bell - 1st June 1950

Figure 2: letter from Doris Lessing to Margaret Drabble on 12 June 2006

A letter from Lessing (dated 29 July 1992) to Drabble is enclosed with another letter, Lessing's reply (on 3 March 1992) to Quentin Bell, a nephew of Virginia Woolf (son of Vanessa Bell) and Woolf's biographer. Bell had been disturbed by Lessing's radio talk about Woolf which referred to her having been sexually abused by her half-brother, George Duckworth. This claim is made in Louise De Salvo's book, *Virginia*



*Woolf: The Impact of Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work* (1989). Lessing explained: 'I am far from believing that de Salvo's account of events is the true one. As I sat reading it I kept noting how she pressed the slightest of events into the service of her view. Besides, I do not admire the way some feminists find sexual abuse everywhere they look, as part of their case against men'. She commented on the culture of rural Afrikaans people in South Africa where she was growing up and where incest was so common that women there did not consider this to be sexual abuse (Figures 3 and 4). In his review of De Salvo's book, Bell reveals that both Woolf and her sister Vanessa had been the victims of their half-brother and that '[a]ttempts were made to persuade me that these ugly stories were untrue, that they were phantoms of Virginia Woolf's wild imagination, delusions conceived during periods of nervous breakdown. But the evidence was such that it was impossible to accept these comfortable suggestions' (Bell, 1990).

24 Gondar Gardens  
London N.W.6 1HG  
29th July 1992

My dear Maggie

I read the Angelica Garnett with total fascination, last night.

Thank you for it - that was kind.

I continue to be amazed and puzzled. Again we have "and" Laura mentioned once. Yet it is not possible these children were not affected by this "backward" and much bullied, or so de Salvo says, child. Anyway, I wrote ~~himself~~ Quentin Bell a letter when he wrote one to me, very upset - obviously - at my radio talk. I enclose a copy.

The other thing is, Mrs. Stephens. She might have been in some ways like Mrs. Ramsay - and in a passage here emerges as a beneficent life force, but did she depart from that house for long intervals to succour her childish parents or didn't she? Did she lie in black stretched out on her former husband's grave? Did she or did she not have those babies one, two, three, four, and have to depend on Stella?

I seem to have been drawn deeper into this than I meant. When I was asked to talk on a favourite book I chose *To the Lighthouse* because *The Devils* had just been done by someone else.

There is a very interesting bit in *Deceived* with Kindness about Vanessa's straight fingers probing the child's crevices - what can she mean?

Poor Vanessa. Why did she choose to live with two men who - what was she protecting herself from? All these questions ... a psychological who-dunnit if there ever was one. And why should one care? It is like the last few weeks of the Shelley household before he drowned, an intense seedbed of every modern emotion and neurosis so you think they are living just around the corner, like Ted Hughes et al, same atmosphere of intensity for its own sake.

Have just spoken to British Council Jonathan Barker. It seems the Chinese are slowly coming to the point but they are certainly taking their time about it.

Again - thanks.

Amending a cheque for the Kuats House fund. I don't have their address. Please give it to whoever should have it.

Love  
Doris

Figure 3: A letter from Doris Lessing to Margaret Drabble on 29 July 1992

24 Gondar Gardens  
London N.W.6 1HG  
3rd March 1992

Dear Quentin Bell I am sorry my talk distressed you.

There is a misunderstanding: I am far from believing that de Salvo's account of events is the true one. As I sat reading it I kept noting how she pressed the slightest of events into the service of her view. Besides, I do not admire the way some feminists find sexual abuse everywhere they look, as part of their case against men.

But. Reading her book did change my picture of that time, and answered questions. I have always puzzled about Virginia Woolf. Why was she so frail and fragile? Yes, some people are born like that. I know. But when Victoria S.W. said she could not make love with Virginia "properly", because she was too vulnerable (whatever that meant in that context) what could that mean? And why could she not make love with her husband? And then, I read that she herself had said, My life ended before it began. (Did she not say that or something like it?) Was it not true that the family doctor had to be ~~again~~ appealed to to stop the brother's or brothers' behaviour?

I believe there is no way now of being certain about what did or did not happen. One could make out a case for all of the "sexual abuse" amounting to the brother lifting her skirt and examining her genitals, hardly an unusual occurrence between siblings. What fatally affects one person may make no impression on another. I have heard it argued in this connection that this is all a fuss about nothing. There are cultures or sub-cultures where incest is usual. For instance, among rural Africans people in South Africa when I was growing up. I myself have talked with women who were slept with by their fathers and brothers. They did not think of it as "abuse" but rather as the way men behaved with female relatives. It didn't do them much good probably, but they weren't fatally damaged either. And I know of more than one brother-sister love that went on for years, from childhood on, no damage done except perhaps that nothing later could come up to it, and both were spoiled for ordinary loves. But Virginia W. was not a Dutch peasant woman with expectations for nothing much better.

I personally think that one or two of the brothers did have sexual relations with Virginia W. of one kind or another. Why do I? Not because of the literary "evidence" found so plentifully by De Salvo, though I wouldn't rule it out either. ~~M~~ There is a picture that seems to fit together made up of long-held doubts, suspicions, hints, even atmospheres.

It seems to me our disagreement may be highlighted by your saying that I thought "Vi's parents were hideously cruel people." I never thought

Figure 4: A letter from Doris Lessing to Quentin Bell on 3 March 1992 (1<sup>st</sup> page)

So. My grandfather, an upright Victorian/Edwardian papa was cold, strict, a disciplinarian, and did no ~~more~~ (as she herself said) harm. But according to the ideas of that time he was a good father. And he was, in a way, ambitious for his daughter, encouraging her to do well, proud of her cleverness. But now he would be thought a cruel man. According to our ideas.

I see everyone in that household as a victim, and if I do feel it must have been a nightmare, that wasn't anyone's fault.

First, the father. We know he was a sensitive and poetry-loving boy. The "sugar" had to be beaten out of him. As happened so easily and often in that kind of school, and for that matter happens even now. I regard him as a man spoiled for ordinary relations, brutalised, if you like. But that is a word that would be thought of as ~~ridiculous~~ ridiculous in that connection then. It is not exactly a secret that a lot of women feel that men who had been through that mill are for ever after unable to be ordinary and warm with their women. And then it was particularly bad.

We know that parents often treat their children as they themselves were treated, or in strong reaction to it; it is striking how often his treatment of Virginia mirrors his own treatment when a child.

The sad Laura. The end and Laura. I don't believe she was mad. Her mother had died. She came into the new household where her father was obviously much in love, or attracted or what you will to the new woman. She was adolescent. She must have been crossed with grief and feeling excluded. She was behaving like an adolescent who is trying to get attention (in the current language, jargon language if you like.) The father was trying to cope with a new family. And so she was judged abnormal. I personally know (and have read of many others) cases of girls who were incarcerated (with the complicity of stupid or weak doctors) in institutions, where they were treated so stupidly with electric shocks and drugs etc that they will never be normal. They were high-spirited, clever and "difficult" girls. The parents could not cope with them. This poor Laura was, I believe, driven mad by stupidity, but who is to blame for that? Everyone, I am sure, meant well. Believed as was right for that time.

If Laura was locked into an upstairs room of the house and then banished because of her madness, her "madness", then the effect on the other children must have been stupefying. I think it is significant that Virginia says little or nothing about her. And ~~max~~ it would be quite normal for her to be threatened with Laura as a bad example she must not follow, at that time, in that climate. A father who can forbid a daughter to study, is a bully.

And where was the mother in all this? She had been widowed, and we are told went on grieving mortally for a long time, whether she did or did not stretch herself out on the grave. (not improbable in those Victorian times when ~~such~~ death was so close.)

Figure 4a: A letter from Doris Lessing to Quentin Bell on 3 March 1992 (2<sup>nd</sup> page)

8-

ingredients, how that household can have been very different from how I see it.  
Yes of course I'd love to see the papers you mention.  
If you think that after this long (you must think wrong-headed)  
interpretation I deserve them....  
Again, I'm sorry.. but the truth doesn't "blacken" -  
it only makes us understand.

Yours sincerely

Doris Lessing

Figure 4b: A letter from Doris Lessing to Quentin Bell on 3 March 1992 (3<sup>rd</sup> page)

In her letter dated 20 March 2008, Lessing expressed her appreciation to Drabble for writing the preface to a new edition of her stories containing all but the African stories published in the Everyman's Contemporary Classics Series in 2008. In her lengthy article entitled *Ahead of Her Time* published in *The Guardian* on 6 December 2008, Drabble praised these short stories, which were published over several decades, for being among the most important written in the English language: 'They broke new ground, and the early ones are as fresh today as when they first appeared. Radical, questioning, liberating, immensely varied and sometimes deeply disturbing, they offer an unrivalled portrait not only of her adopted country, England, but also of southern Africa and postwar Europe' (Drabble, 2008a). In her letter to Drabble, dated 12 December 2008, Lessing expressed her thanks to Drabble and provided the context for some of the short stories that the latter had discussed (Figure 5 and 6).



DL/2008/DRABBLE, M 072

24 Gondar Gardens  
London NW6 1HS  
20th March 2008

Dear Maggie

I am so glad you are doing the preface for my stories. That is very nice.

And by now you will be enlivened by spring lambs and crocuses. Good.

I am supposed to be suffering from heart failure, but since I am rather chipper and (comparatively) mobile, how can that be?

I'd love to see you both. Theatre is out for the time being - though how I do miss it.

If you were kind enough to ask me to lunch, I'd crawl from the cab to the curb, and then back again, from curb to cab, but I dare say it would work.

Haven't been out at all except for having supper with poor Tom Maschler who isn't in a good way. We shouted at each other over the mikes, far too many of these, since Tom had not realised that our appetites have faded.

He has a bad back, is intermittently badly depressed and, ~~in~~ in all, not well.

And so we all go along.

Have a good Easter

much love

Doris

2

April 13

Figure 5: A letter from Doris Lessing to Margaret Drabble on 20 March 2008

011

Doris Lessing  
24 Gondar Gardens  
London, NW6

85 St Marks Road  
London  
W10

12th December 2008

Dear Maggie,

I've just read the Guardian and I'm overwhelmed by your article. That was a labour of love, and thank you. A lot of hard work went into all that and I'm very impressed.

Those short stories, which at one point were nothing, emerged out of the dark, and all have histories. Some are interesting, for instance *One off the Shortlist*. John Walsh, one of the men about town, told me that he had read that story and for the first time in his life it occurred to him to wonder what women thought of him. He said it was such a revelation because it had never crossed his mind to think that before.

There was one called *The Eye of God in Paradise*, which I wrote as a result of visiting Germany early in the Fifties. It was a profoundly depressing experience because I was with a man whose entire family had gone in the gas chambers. The story caused quite a lot of indignation among the Germans because what it suggests is that once a Nazi always a Nazi. I'm not sorry I wrote it, but it certainly has a history. It's a description of a man running a mental home in Germany who was a manic depressive and when he became depressed he locked himself up and painted the most unbelievably depressing pictures. When he got better he did these beautiful pictures, full of joy and light. There was one happy picture with an eye scrawled into it and he said that that was the eye of god in paradise.

*Through the Tunnel* has been infinitely mythologised in this and other countries. I'm fond of that story simply because it's always with us.

There is a story called *The Day Stalin Died*, which caused much annoyance in King Street, a name we used to refer to the Communist Party. King Street protested and said I had given a wrong impression of the Communist Party, which seemed to me a reasonable thing to say.

Figure 6: A letter from Doris Lessing to Drabble on 12 December 2008 (1<sup>st</sup> page)

*To Room Nineteen* has caused more problems than you can imagine, and I've never understood why. For example, I was in Germany having been invited by my publishers. Some professors, who invited me to talk there, were angry because I also accepted an invitation from students in Berlin, who they considered to be a lot of riff raff. Ignoring the professors I went to meet the students and found they were very anarchistic. My going to see them was considered a seditious activity. I liked those students very much. The reason why I'm remembering this is that they were complaining about *To Room Nineteen*. They said 'why didn't I send this couple to a marriage councillor?' I told them there would have been no story if I had done. Then I said in jest that you could complain about *The Illiad* and all those Gods and Goddesses determining what was happening and not giving a shit about it. 'We think you are very irresponsible,' they said. I think I apologised. I certainly remember sitting there in a gulf of incomprehension. That was the kind of reaction that story has had.

Last year my Norwegian publisher invited me to a celebration of some anniversary of Cervantes. He has always hated *The Golden Notebook* and thought *To Room Nineteen* was the last word in whatever. He had taken a stand on *The Golden Notebook* and sulked throughout the entire dinner. No one, he thought, had appreciated the wonderful perfection of *To Room Nineteen*, which was the profounder work.

The other day I was rung up by my US publisher who said someone had chosen this story as last word in something or other. I haven't yet been told why it has won a prize and why it is so good. I should be pleased to know. I put this down to Christmas.

*To Room Nineteen* has always had this quality of upsetting people. I've no idea why I wrote it. It's upsetting to me because it comes out of some region of me I don't recognise or approve of, just like those German students. What was I saying? All I know is it upsets people and I think quite rightly.

I would also like to say Maggie, that I had lovely lunch the other week and I'm sorry that I never wrote to thank you for it. My household was plunged in to gastric flu for several weeks.

Love

Doris.

Figure 6a: A letter from Doris Lessing to Drabble on 12 December 2008 (2<sup>nd</sup> page)

Several letters in the archive mention Peter, Lessing's third child, whom she cared for until he died of a heart attack at age 66, in October 2013. Lessing herself died four weeks later. There are many references to Peter having suffered prolonged ill-health. Lessing requests Drabble for a referral to Professor Bryan Sykes from Oxford Ancestors, who helped Drabble with the research for her novel *The Peppered Moth* (2000). Drabble duly writes to Sykes passing on Lessing's query on her ancestry and genes. In turn, Sykes replies sending Peter a gene sampling kit (Figure 7, 8 and 9).

Drabble's relationship with Lessing is fundamentally different from her relationship to Wordsworth, Austen, Eliot or Woolf in that theirs was a personal and literary friendship. Indeed, Lessing requested that Drabble's husband, Michael Holroyd act as her authorized biographer, a request to which Holroyd initially in 1993 consented, although he later withdrew from the assignment (Flood, 2015). Their correspondence in The Doris Lessing archive, limited as this is, shows the way in which the two authors

shared their interest in subjects such as child care, incest and birth control as well as the ways in which Drabble was able to be of support to the older woman in reviews of Lessing's shorter fiction and suggesting expert advice about the wellbeing of her son.

DL/2008/DRABBLE, M 018  
Woolson College

85 St Marks Rd  
London W10 6JS  
Tel 0208 964 1291  
[margaretdrabble@dial.pipex.com](mailto:margaretdrabble@dial.pipex.com)  
18 May 2008

Professor Bryan Sykes  
Oxford Ancestors

Dear Bryan,

I hope you remember me and the kind help you gave me for my novel *The Peppered Moth*. I now have a query for you from Doris Lessing, who, as you will know, won the Nobel Prize for Literature for 2007. Doris is interested in tracing her genetic ancestry, and that of her son Peter Lessing, so here is our opportunity to track down the NOBEL PRIZE-WINNING GENE!

Doris Lessing is now 88, and has published several volumes of autobiography, giving details of her family background. Peter's is more mysterious: he is her third child, by her second husband Gottfried Lessing, a German-born political activist whom she married in South Rhodesia. Their marriage effectively ended when she came to England in 1949 (with baby Peter.) Gottfried was killed in Kampala where he was serving I think as East German ambassador.

I hope this story will appeal to your imagination, and that you can suggest a line of approach to help her in her quest.

She doesn't do the internet, and neither does Peter, but her mind is as sharp as ever, and her latest novel, extremely well reviewed, came out last week.

Best wishes  
Margaret

Margaret Drabble

Figure 7: A letter from Margaret Drabble to Professor Bryan Sykes on 18 May 2008



DL/2008/DRABBLE, M 017

WOLFSON COLLEGE  
OXFORD OX2 6UD

16<sup>th</sup> June 2008

Margaret Drabble  
85 Marks Road,  
London W10 6JS

Dear Margaret,

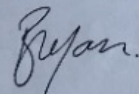
First of all congratulations on your elevation. Of course I remember you and our discussions about DNA and ancestry and how you wove them into *The Peppered Moth*.

You wrote about Doris Lessing. I should think it should be easy to find the Nobel gene in her cells, as it is bound to be written in Big Red Letters. However, to the more practical possibilities of tracing something of her son Peter's ancestry. His Y-chromosome will have come directly and unchanged from his father, Gottfried Lessing.

I would be delighted to analyse his DNA to see what can be gleaned from it. How helpful this would be depends on what questions might be asked and also what other genetic information is available from the geographical region from which the Lessing Y-chromosome derives.

We will need a DNA sample from Peter Lessing, so all I need is the best address to which to dispatch the sampling kit. This is really just a cotton swab to collect some cells from inside the mouth. Completely painless and just posted back to the lab. There'll be no charge.

With best wishes



Bryan Sykes

Figure 8: A letter from Professor Bryan Sykes to Margaret Drabble on 16 June 2008

DL/2008/DRABBLE, M 021

24 Gondar Gardens

London N W 6 1HG

12th May 2008

Dear Maggie

So very kind to look up all this on the internet. I haven't yet brought myself to do it, and Peter was apparently brilliant at it, but the second stroke put paid to that.

I'll write to Oxford Ancestors for Peter. If so many are descended from Ghengiz Khan, may we look forward to the descendants of Pol Pot, Joe Stalin, and even Robert Mugabe?

I would suggest hopefully that Brian Sykes would do me, but a mix of English, Scottish and Irish and inputs of Viking probably describes most of us and could not be of much interest to a researcher hoping for Neanderthal. ??

I have just finished one of the Independent books, and it is very good and witty. I don't know who won because I left too soon. *Measuring The World.*  
Daniel Kehlmann.

If a researcher found some Jewish for me I wouldn't be surprised. I have been much taught and influenced by the Jews. In Southern Rhodesia the refugees started orchestras, choirs, clubs and generally lit up the town with their particular talents.

If you can without much trouble suggest me to Brian, do, and even Peter perhaps who will be much more interesting.

Think of all the sailors that frolicked around our shores and of so many nationalities; our daddies & grandparents -

I have just been run by someone from Barcelona and they are happy because it is mining!

I have sent it my new book. I wonder what you'll make of it. I think after all the wasted unusual women -

Love

Figure 9: A letter from Doris Lessing to Margaret Drabble on 12 May 2008

## CHAPTER 5

### Margaret Drabble and The Art of Growing Old

Margaret Drabble's novels from the turn of the century onward are very different from her earlier ones and cannot without the grossest distortion be assimilated to a common grid. The factual research that underpins them is eclectic. Drabble retains her focus on the experience of female protagonists and her interest in moral questions, and in delving into the past to illuminate the present. She goes back to Greek and Roman mythology and to Virgil's *The Aeneid* in *The Seven Sisters* (2002) to find ancient parallels for the modern journey into the unknown. A strong interest in anthropology underpins *The Pure Gold Baby* (2013) which is concerned with the history of psychiatry, the anti-psychiatry movement in the 1960s, and the exploits of the nineteenth-century missionaries in Africa. She returns to Wordsworth's *The Idiot Boy* (1798) to illuminate modern attitudes to disability and mental health. *The Red Queen* (2004) is concerned with the eighteenth-century royal court in Korea and draws parallels between the expectations of women in the Korean Royal Court and the expectations of the British monarchy in modern times. *The Dark Flood Rises* (2016) engages with global crisis and the migration of peoples from poorer parts of the world to Europe. *The Red Queen* is Drabble's most stylistically innovative novel to date and I shall return to this, and to other examples of her increasingly sophisticated methods of narration, which can also be seen in *The Seven Sisters* (2002) and *The Sea Lady* (2006), at a later point.

What old age bestows upon Frieda in *The Witch of Exmoor* (1996), as it does for Candida in *The Seven Sisters*, is freedom -- the freedom that has been traditionally enjoyed by witches and other eccentric women living on the margins of society -- to ignore what others think of them and to do exactly as they wish; to be beholden to

nobody but themselves. *The Sea Lady*, *The Seven Sisters*, *The Pure Gold Baby*, *The Dark Flood Rises*, *The Witch of Exmoor* and *The Red Queen* are all, in their various ways, concerned with the subject of ageing and dying as seen from the perspective of a woman in the third age of life, and with the psychological, personal and geographical journeys that ageing women undertake; journeys which like Candida's retracing of the poet Virgil's footsteps in *The Seven Sisters* can reflect a strong zest for life and can be very different from anything that the protagonists have ever known or experienced before.

In this chapter I wish to analyse how Drabble's fiction addresses notions of ageing, dying and death. Following the critic J. Brooks Bouson, I argue for Drabble's importance as an author who has been able 'to reframe the cultural assumptions that surround the aging process' and to 'challenge the dominant decline discourse which has long served to shame old women and strip them of their identities, thus silencing them and rendering them socially invisible' (Bouson,2016,p.151).

Interviewed by Lynn Barber, Margaret Drabble has described her 'favourite subjects' as 'old age and dying' (Barber, 2016) and she has written extensively about the processes of ageing in both fictional and discursive modes. In an article in *The Guardian* Drabble states: 'Most of us knew that when we were dead, we were gone. We went nowhere. We ceased to be. That's what we didn't like about death— not fear of hell, but fear of nothingness' (Drabble,2016).

One of the problems with death in our time is that it becomes increasingly avoidable, or at least postponable. We are materialists, and we don't believe in the soul. There is no ghost in the machine. We find medical solutions to medical problems, we dutifully take our statins, and our financial advisers and their actuaries declare that our life expectancy is increasing day by day, hour by hour. This is meant to be a good thing, like the ever-rising price of property, but on one level we all know it is not. When more good news about longevity is proclaimed on radio bulletins, there is usually a curiously sombre note of foreboding in the announcer's voice. For it is not a sustainable trajectory. (Drabble,2016)

In an important essay published in *Prospect* magazine in February 2014, Drabble refers to the cultural significance of Simone De Beauvoir's pioneering study of women in old age, *La Vieillesse*, published in 1970 when De Beauvoir was herself in her sixties, and in which she ventured into the unfashionable territory of women's sick and ailing bodies that nobody else had seemed willing to contemplate at that historical moment. Drabble sees *La Vieillesse* as an essential point of reference for subsequent studies, noting that the 'steady flow of studies of ageing has now swelled into a torrent: into what has, disobligingly, been described as a "silver tsunami"' (Drabble, 2014).

The novels with which I am concerned in this chapter frequently address the question of 'gendered apprehensions' and issues of vanity and personal appearance that beset women as they age. Drabble articulates some of the common fears and regrets that many older women experience in relation to their bodies, and which they are often too proud to admit. In *Shame and the Aging Woman: Confronting and Resisting Ageism in Contemporary Women's Writings*, J. Brooks Bouson analyses what she calls 'embodied shame' and describes older women's unhappiness about the visible signs of ageing, their declining health, and the physical deterioration of their bodies as they undergo the normal processes of bodily ageing.

In 'The Missing Piece', published in *The Guardian*, Margaret Drabble describes the stratagems that writers including herself have adopted to alleviate depression: the usefulness of walking, conversations, jigsaw puzzles, and, above all, writing. These 'gloomy reflections', she muses, are 'fitting for one in her seventieth year, an age at which we are obliged to work out survival strategies' (Drabble, 2009). Although resilient and strong-minded, the protagonists of the novels under consideration are also preoccupied, sometimes morbidly, with death and with dying, having reached an age when thoughts of mortality are virtually inescapable. Fran, the seventy-year old protagonist in *The Dark Flood Rises* (2016), is constantly reminded of her own mortality by her job as an inspector of residential homes for the elderly.



Drabble is acutely aware of how ageism in society devalues and damages the identities of women who are psychologically healthy in other respects. Candida in *The Seven Sisters*, although still adventurous, prepared to travel, to learn, to embrace change, and to take risks, is painfully aware of her decrepit body: 'My skin is weathered, and wrinkles and crowsfeet don't look as good on a woman as they do on a man.... I droop and I sag' (SS,15). 'I haven't aged well', she muses. 'People say women don't. That's not always true, but it has been true in my case... Now I look faded and washed out' (SS,15).

In 'The Art of Growing Old', Drabble explains her reaction to Anthony Trollope's novel, *The Fixed Term*, published in 1882, the last year of Trollope's life: Trollope's novel is set in the future, in 1980, on an imaginary antipodean island, the Republic of Britannula. A law has been passed by the youthful Britannula Assembly making euthanasia compulsory for everybody between the age of 67 and 68. When the book came out Trollope himself had reached the age of 67, the exact age at which all Britannulans are obliged by law to retire from their worldly affairs and begin a year of preparation for death. Drabble notes that 'Britannula has abolished capital punishment but introduced something even worse: the obligation of each citizen not to choose, but to know, the time of his or her death' (Drabble,2014). She monitors her own responses and candidly reveals a life-long obsession with death which consistently informs her final work: 'I felt quite bad while reading this book. I do think about death often, probably several times a day, but then I always have done, from an early age, and I forget about it as quickly as I envisage it, distracted by a multitude of smaller worries, hopes and projects' (Drabble,2014).

The novels which established Drabble's reputation in the 1960s, *A Summer Bird-cage*, *The Garrick Year*, *Jerusalem the Golden*, and *The Millstone*, were focused upon the lives of stylish intelligent, educated young women like the author herself, whom Perović described as 'the embodiment of cool' (Perović,2014) who were fighting for their personal freedom. The sophisticated, adventurous, middle-class women of the twenty-

first century novels are still preoccupied with personal liberty and are thus recognisably older versions of her questing, spirited younger characters and able to look back on and reflect upon 'these latter days, in these survival days, after biology has done its best and worst' (SS,160).

The formative experiences of Drabble's later protagonists were often in the 1960s and they are living with the decisions that they took then and facing the losses, bereavement and loneliness of their declining years. But even in the midst of loss, bereavement and physical decline, they seek new possibilities for meaning and personal growth and Drabble seeks ways to 'restory' the lives of ageing and old women and to revision attitudes to old age in an ageist culture. As one example, Jess in *The Pure Gold Baby* has been part of a close-knit community of friends for many years and her friend, Eleanor the narrator, uses the collective pronoun 'we' which incorporates herself, Jess and the other women who had lived in the same neighbourhood and had brought up their children together: 'We worried for her, we, her friends, her generation, her fellow-mothers' (PGB,6).

### **The Witch of Exmoor (1996)**

Margaret Drabble dedicated her novel, *The Witch of Exmoor* to her older son, Adam Swift, who, as she explains, had given her a volume comprising two critical essays he wrote on *A Theory of Justice*, a philosophical treatise by John Rawls, a noted Harvard Professor (WE,11). Much of Drabble's fiction from *The Needle's Eye* (1972) onwards has been concerned with ideas about redistributive justice and inequality. In January 2015 Drabble published an article 'Play Egalitarian Roulette - With a Blindfold' in *Prospect* magazine in which she enthusiastically endorsed the ideal of global equality and puts forward John Rawl's notion of 'The Veil of Ignorance' as a possible means of obtaining popular consent to ways of closing the gap between the rich and the poor. The

game of egalitarian roulette becomes a topic of animated discussion between the characters in *The Witch of Exmoor*. However, vested interest and deep-seated attitudes of entitlement ensure that this fails to secure understanding and support. As questions of inequality of income and social justice occur insistently throughout Drabble's novels, her views about redistribution are worth quoting at some length:

'If I ruled the world, I would go for global equality. I've been going on about this, to absolutely no avail, for many decades, but this would be my chance to make it work. I'd like to put all the world's assets and cash into a big pot and shake them up and redistribute them like confetti, but I can see that's not very practical. So I'd compromise and put into play John Rawls's notion of the "veil of ignorance." In my interpretation (though not perhaps in his) this would involve asking each and every one of us to choose, blindfolded, into what kind of society we would wish to be born, if we didn't have any prior knowledge of who we would be or where in that society we would find ourselves—the top, the middle or the bottom of the heap. This would lead to a lot of hard thought about social justice, and some massive redesigning of the status quo in every land on Earth. Out would go grotesque and increasing inequality of income between and within the developed and undeveloped world; out would go deviously greedy, incompetent and mendacious bankers; out would go tax avoidance by clever corporations and the favourable tax status of English private schools. In would come clean water, healthcare, toilets for everyone and assisted dying for those who really want it. The notion of every single person on this planet being given a chance to play this game of egalitarian roulette fills me with a dizzy delight. (Drabble,2015)

*The Witch of Exmoor* uses a literary form that she has not used previously. It is a modern version of a Jacobean revenge tragedy. Drabble uses the story of one family's strained relationships – the eccentric Frieda Palmer's end-of-life battle with her children, Daniel, Grace, and Rosemary, who are all materialistically preoccupied with their inheritance -- to comment on the unequal state of British society. *The Witch of Exmoor* is a post-Thatcherite critique of her legacy of irresponsible capitalism and irreconcilable inequalities. The novel depicted 'a country Americanised by superstores, by "ring roads and beef burgers," fast food and mass travel' (Wood,1997). The characters are concerned about the health service and because services for the old are in a state of chronic decline and disrepair; 'but these days, with pensions so unreliable, the working

life so short, the afterlife so long, the private care so expensive, the health service demolished – who could tell what costly interminable terminal care she or they or their grandchildren's grandchildren might need?' (WE,28). As James Wood puts it, '[n]o aspect of contemporary Britain escapes the swivel eye of Drabble's promiscuous revulsion' (Wood,1997).

*The Witch of Exmoor* is concerned with much more than mother-child relationships. As Drabble claims, it 'is in a way a more multi-cultural novel than any of [her] others, which partly reflects the way England is.... England has now become a naturally multi-cultural society; the whole of society has become much more mixed' (Cardwell, Kingsley, & Underwood,2000,p.2). The extended Palmer family represents contemporary English society which has become more diverse and inclusive through the marriage of the younger generation with successful 'outsiders'. Nathan, Frieda's son-in-law, is Jewish and her second son-in-law, David, comes from Guyana. 'So there you have them,' the narrator informs the reader tongue-in-cheek; 'The middle classes of England' (WE,22).

In fact, Drabble's purpose in the novel is to bring together characters who do not come from a traditionally English background and to set them alongside others whose lineage is conventionally English. Each is asked the same question: What kind of society do you wish to live in? a fair society or an unfair one? The intrusive narrator who has very low expectations explains the conundrum: 'Is there any hope whatsoever, or any fear, that anything will change? Would any of them wish for change? Given a choice between anything more serious than decaffeinated coffee or herbal tea, would they dare to choose?' (WE,23).

The Palmers are introduced to the reader in a peaceful scene as Frieda Haxby's children and their spouses, in-laws, and children enjoy a dinner party at her son Daniel's old farmhouse in the Hampshire countryside: 'Begin on a midsummer evening. Let them have everything that is pleasant,' writes the omniscient narrator indulgently (WE,1). But

the wary reader takes warning from the sign at the Palmers' Old Farm: 'beware of vipers breeding' (WE,9).

It is David who invites the family to play the game 'the Veil of Ignorance'. Each person is asked to consider the principles on which a just society could be built and to say whether or not they would be willing to accept these if they did not already know what place they would occupy, high or low, in that society. It is only David who comes anywhere nearer to accepting the necessity for radical change to benefit the many. And Drabble remains deeply pessimistic about any prospect of fairness being brought about by consent because personal self-interest invariably prevents individuals from voting for the common good.

The Palmers are obsessed with money and worry incessantly about Frieda's fortune: 'Was she intent on squandering her money?' they ask and 'What, they wondered, of their rightful inheritance?' (WE,28). 'Had she the *right* to go mad?' (WE,28). They have convened to address the problems caused by the family matriarch taking herself off into a self-imposed exile to write a memoir: her version of the family history that invokes the skeletons of the past.

She sits here, and addresses herself to her final questioning, her last revenge. This must be clear, she believes, even to her own dim-witted family. She is here to summon her mother, her father, her sister, her husband from their graves and from their hiding places. As the Witch of Endor raised Samuel to terrify Saul, so she, the Witch of Exmoor, will raise Gladys Haxby, Ernest Haxby, Hilda Haxby, Andrew Palmer. Her nice clean ambitious well-educated off-spring will be appalled by their hideous ancestry. (WE,66)

The Witch of Endor in the first book of Samuel in the Hebrew Bible was a medium summoned by a disguised King Saul, who had previously driven out all necromancers from Israel, in order to communicate with the dead prophet who is able to predict Saul's terrible fate in the battle against the Philistines the next day. In the novel, Frieda's children are aghast at their mother's decision to assume a life of recluse but Frieda enters a fairy-tale realm when she retreats to Exmoor. Her large house is a

'castle by the sea' (WE,66). She enjoys walking through the 'ancient woodland' nearby, which 'spoke to her of decay, her own decay' (WE,65). Like a fairy-tale heroine, she takes in animal companions resembling human beings in their behaviour. She sings tunelessly to her dog, Bounce, 'I care for nobody, no, not I, if nobody cares for me' (WE,67). This suggests that happiness lies in ignoring some standards of behaviour imposed by the family and what other people expect individuals to do. On another occasion, she asks her pigeon, "What do you think, bird?"... It rattles its saucepan lid in response, and cocks its head at her with a look of 'pure questioning intelligence' (WE,74). We even have the pathetic fallacy. When it rains, Frieda thinks, 'The sky weeps for her' (WE,66).

Frieda's children are deeply resentful of the trouble that her behaviour causes them. They think of her as 'the witch of Exmoor,' a 'wicked godmother' and a 'bad fairy' (WE,50,185), all terms which are taken from fairy tale and folklore. Historically, the word 'witch' was used to describe a woman who had magical and medicinal powers and the power of casting a spell over others. In fact, witches were often wise women who lived alone without the protection of men and were demonised because of their knowledge of herbal remedies which presented a threat to the authority of church and to the professionalization of medicine under patriarchal control. Frieda's family ask: 'is she in her right mind?' because it is Frieda who 'has forced them into the role of Bad Children, and wilfully, playfully, cast herself as a Neglected Mother' (WE,40,86).

As is the convention in a seventeenth-century revenge tragedy, the characters in *The Witch of Exmoor* seek redress for real or imagined wrongs and meet their nemesis one-by-one: 'We are nearing the end. Soon we can go for the kill, indeed, for the overkill', explains the narrator. 'Frieda has killed Hilda, and we have killed Frieda, and Benjamin has tried to kill himself. There will be one or two more deaths, but not many. Some will survive' (WE,250-251). Frieda dies mysteriously, falling off a cliff into the sea, from which she is dragged, identifiable only by her dentures. The cause of her death - accident, suicide, or murder, remains unexplained. 'Sorrow has come upon the

Palmers, the Herzes and the D'Angers. They had seemed to be doing so well. It is hard to say which suffers most' (WE,26). By the end of the novel 'the pond silts up, the lawn is not mown, bindweed embraces the sundial, and ground elder ramps around the roots of the wisteria ... The Palmers think they will move east, perhaps to Suffolk, to a smaller house, somewhere without memories, without history' (WE,1, 266).

### **The Peppered Moth (2000)**

*The Peppered Moth* is concerned with questions of heredity, family history and inter-generational relationships between women and in this novel Drabble returns to the mother-daughter relationship. The title alludes to a moth that exists in two varieties: one pale with black speckles, the other solid black. It is thought that the black forms of the species were once rare, but that following the industrial revolution, they gradually increased in numbers. This was because the lighter coloured moths evolved darker colours and gradually turned black in order to appear inconspicuous in the dark and to blend in against the soot-covered trees in order avoid their predators. This happened in industrial towns and cities which were polluted by smoke, coal and dirt and the number of lightly coloured forms of the species decreased. Hence, the phenomenon of industrial melanism or the genetic darkening of moths in response to pollutants.

*The Peppered Moth* (2000) starts with the scene of a scientific investigation in the hall of a Wesleyan Methodist chapel in South Yorkshire where sixty people have assembled to hear the microbiologist, Dr Robert Hawthorn, address a meeting on the subject of 'mitochondrial DNA and matrilineal descent' (PM,2). This scientific meeting is related to the discovery of a skeleton accidentally found in a cave in Cotterhall and involves local residents whose ancestors have lived there for many years include the Bawtry family and the Barron family. Among the attendees there are two women; the ageing Dora Bawtry and her great-niece, Faro Gaulden, who hope that Dr Hawthorn can track back their ancestors and ascertain whether or not any of the locals carry the same

DNA as the skeleton. The specific type of DNA used by Dr Hawthorn to trace family ancestries is mitochondrial DNA, which is to be found exclusively in the female of the species. At this point Drabble, using first-person narration, gives a direct invitation to the reader: 'Can you tell from whom they may descend, can you discern, the form of their common ancestor? Will Dr Hawthorn be able to reveal their origins to them, and if he can, will they want to know?' (PM,2).

This direct address to the reader recalls George Eliot and raises the issue again of how much Drabble owes to her nineteenth century realist forebears. Michael F. Harper has noted that Drabble has been seen as 'a late twentieth-century novelist who writes what many reviewers have taken to be good, solid nineteenth-century novels' (Harper,1982,p.148). Harper does not criticise Drabble as being old-fashioned, instead he has maintained that Drabble's style 'is not the result of unthinking acceptance of Victorian conventions, or of nostalgia for "the riches of the past." It is rather a working back to a reconstituted realism, in which Drabble begins with modernism and subjects it to a critique that is profound and contemporary' (Harper,1982,p.168). He explains that Drabble's realistic world is 'something painfully and with difficulty constructed by the author and her characters, something not assumed but affirmed in an act of faith, achieved at the end of an odyssey of doubt and questioning of both the world and the self' (Harper,1982,p.150).

Drabble told Suzie Mackenzie about her experience of meeting a Professor Sykes of Oxford University, who conducted research on the last Neanderthal link and had taken a sample of Drabble's own DNA to be examined for any biological connection (Mackenzie,2000). In another interview, Drabble stated that she read many books on moths and mitochondria, interviewed geneticists, and 'talked with a history teacher whose own DNA can be traced directly back to a nine-thousand-year-old skeleton preserved since the end of the last ice age in the limestone caves of the Cheddar Gorge' (Peyre,2011,pp.129-130).



The focus of *The Peppered Moth* (2000) is on heredity and the ability of women to survive by adaptation to their surroundings like the peppered moths which some entomologists have claimed to be the only visible proof of evolution in action. Drabble uses their survival as a metaphor for the survival of three generations of women in a small England coal mining town in the north of England and relates the natural history of the peppered moths to the lives of her women characters, Bessie, Chrissie, and Faro, each from a different generation of the same family from Breaseborough in South Yorkshire. She uses the idea of moths trying unsuccessfully to adapt to their industrial, polluted environment, but dying off as they become the victims of predators when they try to move away. Only the darker moths survive by adaptation to a changing environment and ensure the survival of the species by passing on the dark colour genes to future generations. Had the peppered moth not been able to adapt it would have become extinct.

The novel takes mitochondrial DNA, a woman-specific genetic substance, which 'stands for the transmission of female behavioural patterns from one generation to the next' (Mackenzie,2000). Although Drabble dismisses the scientific terminology as 'only a metaphor' in her book (Mackenzie,2000) her emphasis in the novel is on the matrilineal. Drabble explores the lives of these women with reference to mitochondrial DNA, genetic mutation and evolution.

*The Peppered Moth* is dedicated to Drabble's mother: 'this is a novel about my mother, Kathleen Marie Bloor' (PM,390). At the suggestion of her friends, Drabble decided to write about her mother shortly after the latter's death: 'Use your mother's blood for ink,' they urge her (PM,390). Drabble wrote *The Peppered Moth* in the hope of understanding her own emotions and her conflicted feelings on her bereavement. In an interview with Suzie Mackenzie she confided that 'I don't know if I loved my mother' (Mackenzie,2000). She writes that Kathleen Bloor 'was a highly intelligent, angry, deeply disappointed and manipulative woman' (PM,390). Writing a fictionalised version of her mother's life in *The Peppered Moth* raised a number of problems for Drabble and the

'worst was the question of tone': 'I find myself being harsh, dismissive, censorious. As she was. She taught me language' (PM,390).

Drabble's purpose behind writing this book is to understand her mother better: 'I went down into the underworld to look for my mother, but I couldn't find her. She wasn't there' (PM,392). The act of writing however was far from cathartic. Drabble had 'hoped that writing about her would make me feel better about her,' but it does not, it makes her 'feel worse' (PC,xv). There is an allusion to a myth in which a woman entered hell disguised as one of the dead in order to seek her loved one. Drabble found the experience extremely unsavoury: 'I feel, in writing this, that I have made myself smell of dead rat' (PM,392).

Drabble's fiction, in the main, does not give much importance to the relationships between father and daughter. She explains that 'on the whole, people have more direct personal relationships with their mother: the father in British society, tended to be a rather disappearing figure ... I mean the father isn't there most of the time and that's the sort of image of our society' (Peyre,2011,p.117).

The unhappy relationship between mother and daughter in the book confounds the romanticised views of some of her readers at the time. Drabble quotes one reviewer's opinion that 'women should be nice to one another' and 'In these days of feminism when mothers and daughters are very close, it's just ignoring the fact, it's like saying "We ought to be", not what is, and what is, is the fact that mother and daughter hate one another with good reason' (Peyre,2011,p.117). Drabble has repeatedly examined antagonistic mother-daughter relationship in her novels. (I have already discussed this issue at some length in Chapter 1). The formative mother-daughter relationship is often troubled and as an adult the daughter struggles to free herself to overcome the power the mother figure still exercises over her in order to distinguish herself as a separate entity and to build an independent self. There are many examples in Drabble's fiction of the painful relationships between the mother and the daughter who has rejected her mothers' values and is struggling to become a person in her own right.

Rosamond Stacey in *The Millstone* (1965): 'I am their child ... But there are things in me that cannot take it, and when they have to assert themselves the result is violence, screaming, ugliness, and Lord knows what yet to come' (M,140). Jane Gray in *The Waterfall* (1969) disassociates herself from her parents: 'I repudiate them, with pain I do so, dangerously I do so' (W,62). Frances Wingate in *The Realms of Gold* (1975) finds consolation in the knowledge that 'at least she wouldn't be like her mother' (RG,72). Clara Maugham in *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967) has a troubled relationship with her mother who resents her academic achievements and refuses to allow her daughter any pleasure. When Mrs Maugham offers a concession, a visit to Paris, Clara feels that 'By letting me go, she is merely increasing her power, for she is out-martyring my martyrdom. I die from loss or I die from guilt, and either way I die' (JG,70). Clara escapes her family looking for another pattern of life and another mother figure.

Rose Vassiliou, in *The Needle's Eye*, believes that wealth has destroyed her mother by making her completely idle and thus bored. She therefore gets rid of her own money and makes herself busy by doing positive things. Working through her values which are opposed to those of her parents, Rose says: 'But I'm determined not to make the mistake of most revolutions, I won't revert to what it was that I was fighting not to be' (NE,96). In *The Witch of Exmoor* (1996), Grace and Rosemary have difficult relationships with their mother, Frieda. They have never been very fond of her, nor she of them. They believe that by taking herself away from them and into a self-imposed state of exile their mother 'has forced them into the role of Bad Children, and wilfully, playfully, cast herself as a Neglected Mother' (WE,86).

The first maternal relationship in *The Peppered Moth* is between the Ellen Bawtry and her daughter Bessie Barron. Bessie's memory of her mother is of a woman who dislikes children and has no understanding of how to interact with them (PM,11). As a teenager, Bessie dislikes her mother for what she sees as Ellen's failure to keep the house clean, not apprehending that Ellen 'had always been at war with dirt. She lost, but she fought on' (PM,12). Bessie does not respect her efforts 'because she was to

observe only the defeat, not the struggle. Therefore she was to despise her mother. That is the way it is with mothers and daughters' (PM,12).

Even as mature women, the mother and daughter cannot interact with each other without awkwardness. When Bessie visits Ellen on her deathbed, they can find nothing to say to one another: 'The silence was stiff and solid. Thousands of years of silence lay banked up behind them, lay coldly between them. There were no words. It was as though language had not been invented. Neither would cede, neither would give' (PM,201). Bessie and her sister Dora conclude that Ellen 'had not been very gentle with them' and 'had not been a motherly mother' (PM,202). A similar sense of resentment is continued into the relationship between Bessie and her own daughter, Chrissie. As Chrissie is on her way to a new life with her first husband, she feels a sense of victory for having escaped from her mother: 'Chrissie felt, during this wild heyday, that she had truly escaped Bessie at last. She had burned her boats. Goodbye Mother' (PM,255).

There is, however, a possibility of reconciliation between the generations in *The Peppered Moth* and this is related to the grandmother-granddaughter relationship. When the sophisticated Faro is cleaning her great-aunt Dora's house she collects plastic bags full of rubbish and worries about discarding something important.

Though how could any of this be of any importance? These are such little lives. Unimportant people, in an unimportant place. They had been young, they had endured, they had taken their wages and their punishment, and then they had grown old, and all for no obvious purpose. And now she is throwing them all into a plastic bag. (PM,385-386)

Later, Faro finds many items in Dora's bedroom, one of which is a silver sixpence dated 1951. This reminds Faro of a happy Christmas long ago.

Bessie, who had sliced the pudding, made sure that little Faro, who had noticed the manoeuvre, had nevertheless been pleased and excited to find the coin, hygienically wrapped in foil, half hidden in her rich brown fruity portion. Faro stands stock-still on the seventh step, for she can see Grandma's happy face, smiling as Faro cries out and unwraps the silver treasure. (PM,389)

The epigraph for the novel is a poem written by Drabble's daughter, the late Rebecca Swift (1964-2017). The poem, 'On Remembering Getting into Bed with

Grandparents' offers the very different perspective of the granddaughter: 'It's amazing we got that far, loveless/ As you were supposed to be, yet suddenly/ I have a longing for your tripeish thigh'. This affectionate recollection of physical closeness to a supposedly unfeeling grandmother provides the reader with a different image of Drabble's mother on whom the fictitious character of Bessie is based. 'The funny thing,' Drabble notes in an interview to *The Guardian*, 'is that my mother was very nice to my children. She used to let them get into bed with her in the morning, which is more than she ever did with us' (Mackenzie, 2000). Of all the representation of the mother-daughter relationships Faro alone suggests the possibility of reconciliation with the older generation.

In an essay entitled 'Generations,' Swift considers feminism within her own family. Her grandmother graduated from Cambridge University but had to give up that career when she made the decision to get married (Swift,2011). Swift describes how her grandmother suffered because she was unable to 'become somebody in her own right' explaining that 'somewhere between being a particularly beautiful and promising young woman and having children, Grandma had become a severe hypochondriac and depressive. She had married a local boy... and yet domestic life had not, to put it mildly, brought her the satisfaction it was supposed to have done' (Swift,2011). While her grandmother 'went into depressive flight,' her mother 'wrote herself into fame' (Swift,2011).

Swift, who directed a well-established literary consultancy firm before her untimely death, believes that understanding her grandmother's struggles and her mother's has helped to set her 'free': 'How many F words are there in Feminism? Failure. Flight. Fire. Fight. Fame. Finally, for my generation, thanks to our mothers and grandmothers: a kind of Freedom?' (Swift,2011). The cycle of depression and negativity in the Drabble lineage thus appears to be broken in the granddaughter's ability to experience life-transforming happiness and freedom. In the very last line of *The*

*Peppered Moth*, Drabble writes with some optimism 'I cannot sing, my mother could not sing, and her mother before her could not sing. But Faro can sing, and her clear voice floods the valley' (PM,392).

*The Peppered Moth* attempts to trace back the existence of a genetic link and genetic traits and behaviour passed from mother to daughter. However, this is not a simple matter of hereditary: the women are who they are due to changing family structures, cultural norms and the changing expectations of women. Drabble's research underpins the fictional account of Kathleen Bloor's life, from her scholarship to Cambridge, through to her marriage, her brief teaching career, her gradual transformation into an embittered woman, and her death. In an interview conducted in 2001, Drabble described *The Peppered Moth* as 'a sort of lament' (Kingston, 2001,p.35).

Other than her parents, none of the family members were based on Drabble's real family and 'the family structure in the novel is completely different from [her] own' (Kingston, 2001,p.35). The boundaries between the real world and the world of the text in it have collapsed in that real persons sit alongside fictional characters: the novel appears 'semi-autobiographical'. Commenting on the 'inclusion of some real characters and some fictional,' Drabble points out that 'in a sort of sense it's happening in a real setting but there's a slight blur between fact and fiction really. I think that the post-modernist device is: "Is this fiction? Why is it fiction? Why is it not something else?"' (Peyre, 2011,p.123).

Drabble is, of course, not only a novelist, but an accomplished biographer as well having published acclaimed biographies of Arnold Bennet and Colin Wilson. *The Peppered Moth* is a fusion of biography and fiction: She did contemplate writing a biography of her mother before deciding against this: 'Maybe I should have tried to write a factual memoir of her life, but I have written this instead' (PM,390). There are, however, constrictions on the biographer's role of which Drabble is well aware. As Virginia Woolf suggests, 'the art of biography is the most restricted of all the arts....The novelist is free;

the biographer is tied' (Woolf, 1992,p.116). As A. S. Byatt puts it, 'The writer of fiction is at liberty to invent – as the historian and the biographer are not' (Byatt, 2001,p.54).

One reason for her writing *The Peppered Moth* is 'to try to understand [her] mother better' (PM,392). In this instance, filial love might appear to be the motivating force behind a daughter's creative attempt to do justice to a dead mother. However, *The Peppered Moth* reveals Drabble's intensely conflicted feelings about her mother and their difficult mutually resentful personal relationship.

Here, as elsewhere, Drabble refuses to rely on an idealised maternal ideal and her fiction as a whole works against the ideal of the 'good mother'. Instead, with the notable exceptions of *The Millstone* and *The Pure Gold Baby*, Drabble tends to represent so-called 'bad mothers', that is, mothers who are negligent, repressive, or repressed: 'One thing I've never been very good at is creating "good" mothers. I'd written books and books before someone pointed out that I was perpetually producing these "bad" mothers' (Milton,1978).

There are similarities between the repressive Mrs Maugham and Bessie Bawtry in *The Peppered Moth*. Mrs Maugham 'had done well at school, she had shone and prospered, and the evidence of her distant triumphs still lay around the house in the form of inscribed Sunday school prizes. But whatever talents she had once had, she had now turned ferociously against them' (JG,27-28).

Bessie is gifted as a girl and studies hard. She is waiting for the day when she can sit the Cambridge entrance exam and escape the way of life her mother has lived; 'For her it is college or death' (PM,69). Her ambition leads her to Cambridge University in the 1920s, however her potential is not to be fulfilled: 'Bessie did not mutate. She seemed to thrive and prosper, according to her lights and her own plans. But, gradually, almost inevitably, something seemed to begin to go wrong' (PM,109). That 'something' is later connected to a depression that affects all her life and her relationship with her

husband and children. She is no longer the woman who strives to become a better person, but 'sank into depression with an almost voluptuous abandon' (PM,81).

Drabble admits to having suffered from hereditary depression (PC,171) declaring in an interview, that 'there's an ancestral ghost haunting the family. I hear myself saying things that my grandmother used to say' (Milton,1978). Both Bessie and Kathleen are depicted as being prone to depression. Indeed, Drabble's mother's depression was so severe that she used to threaten suicide. Drabble tried to prevent her doing so on one occasion: 'Don't do it. It's not fair' (Mackenzie,2000). Bessie's first year in Cambridge passes pleasantly enough, but in the middle of her second year she begins to show signs of distress. Bessie's life gradually starts being affected by her mood changes. There are 'retirings to bed, and missings of lectures, and unfinished essays, and visits to the sick bay and the college nurse' (PM,116).

Jane Gray in *The Waterfall*, another mother who is given to depressive episodes, describes the sensation that she feels when a poem is on the point of being composed; 'I could see the changes in the colour of the air, the faintly approaching presences of words' (W,232). Drabble explains that 'actually that phrase came from my mother. She could tell when she was getting depressed because the air went black—or so she said. I think the air has a slightly different look about it when words are coming. Elation and depression have a similar effect on one' (Milton,1978).

Drabble's sister, the novelist, A. S. Byatt, is acutely aware of the damage that may be caused when novelists use real people's lives as the raw material of their work: 'I have known, personally, human beings whose lives have been wrecked or mutilated by being made the object of other people's fictive attention. And if fiction does not eat up life, reality, truth, it rearranges it so that it is forever unrecognisable except in terms of the fixed form, the set arrangement' (Byatt,1991a,p.22).

Byatt has made her dislike of *The Peppered Moth* and her objections to Drabble's making public a private family history very clear; 'I would rather people didn't read



someone else's version of my mother', Byatt told *The Daily Telegraph*, adding that 'something got lost in the transmission of her love' (Walker,2009).

The literary and personal disagreements between Byatt and Drabble, some based on the ethics of the literary representation of their mother, are long-standing and have been exacerbated by the publication of *The Peppered Moth*. The two novels that the sisters published in the same year half a century ago, Byatt's *The Game* (1967) and Drabble's *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967) both dealt with the theme of sibling rivalry. In *Jerusalem the Golden*, Drabble tackled a troubled mother-daughter relationship, much to Byatt's disapproval: 'I think that no one has the necessary right to publish what they know - however good it might be for them to write it,' cautions Cassandra, a character in *The Game* (Byatt,1983,p.68). Byatt has also written about her mother and the family history. In a new introduction to *The Shadow of the Sun* (1964) written in 1991, twenty-seven years after the original date of publication, Byatt confesses that only at this late stage in her life was she 'beginning to dare to try to imagine' her own mother and that she made her first step in so doing with the character of Caroline, although she avoided confronting her mother's 'perpetual rage, depression, and frustration' (Byatt,1991b,p.ix). In *The Game*, she 'places the ethical implications of turning real people into fictional characters at the climax of the story of Julia and Cassandra Corbett, novelist and scholar, respectively' (Boccardi,2013,p.32).

In this novel the scholar, Cassandra kills herself after she realises that her sister Julia, the novelist, has used her life as a source of inspiration for her novel. The novel's ethical ambivalence, as Mariadele Boccardi has pointed out, 'stems from the fact that while Julia is responsible for the artistic decision to use her sister as a subject, knowing how tenuously Cassandra holds on to sanity, the latter's suicide is the consequence of failing to perceive the difference between reality and representation' (Boccardi, 2013,p.32).

Byatt identifies some of the ethical and aesthetic issues associated with the slippage between fiction and biography, how to trust a biographer who reveals the truth of someone's life by intruding on their privacy, and how far the writing of biography is compromised by the biographer's motives which vary from author to author. *The Biographer's Tale* (2001) is about the writing of a biography about a biographer. However, Byatt has also written about her own parents in her autobiographical short story 'Sugar' (1987) contrasting the two as 'father truth' and 'mother lie': 'My mother had a respect for truth, but she was not a truthful woman' complaining 'monotonous, malevolent, unstructured complaints, full of increasingly fabricated evidence of non-existent wickedness' (Byatt, 1995, pp. 215-216).

As Susan Leonardi suggests in *Dangerous by Degrees*, education is a dangerous thing for women in a patriarchal society because it 'will either make them dissatisfied with their limited role or unfit them for that role altogether' (Leonardi, 1989, p. 2). Drabble excels in portraying ambitious, highly educated women like her own mother whose lives are restrained by the narrowness of the environment they grew up in and by the marriage bar. Drabble witnessed, at first-hand, the disappointment and frustration of her mother who fought her way to Cambridge but gave up her dreams of a professional career when she got married.

In *The Pattern in the Carpet* (2009), Drabble states that 'my mother's angry depression seemed to me to be clearly related to her inertia and frustration, which afflicted so many educated and half-educated women of her generation' (PC, 171). Despite her academic achievement at a young age, her mother ended up with 'a traditional gender role, which placed her in a dependent and therefore socially inferior position to her husband' (Bokat, 1998, p. 102). Kathleen Bloor always considered herself to be a victim of gender inequality and regretted sacrificing her career for a family life and her frustration developed to depression.

As Maroula Joannou has pointed out, the clever Bessie, like the black moth, 'appears to merge in inconspicuously with the drab surroundings of the grim provincial town to which she returns as a teacher after the failed promise of metamorphosis at university. But she becomes increasingly bitter, frustrated and disgruntled with her dull marriage and wasted academic potential' (Joannou,2015,p.104). Drabble believes that things might have been different if her mother had 'been more active, if she'd gone out for walks' (PC,172). In the novel, Bessie hates going out; she is 'an agoraphobic as well as a hypochondriac' (PM,172).

Bessie's husband, Joe Barron, notices her frustration: 'She had indeed had a hard war, on the domestic front. A single mother, alone, in a strange town' (PM,171). But no matter how hard Joe tries, Bessie becomes more and more unsatisfied with her life; 'poor chap, he tried. And the harder he tried, the angrier she became' (PM,171). Bessie ends up sitting at home with her despair, dissatisfaction and withdrawal. She feels out of place 'amongst the lower and lower middle classes from which she had risen, and frightened by the middle classes into which she had moved, and appalled by the working classes with whom she had sympathized, and whose cause she had espoused. So she had nowhere to go' (PM,173).

### **The Seven Sisters (2002)**

In *Sibylline Sisters: Virgil's Presence in Contemporary Women's Writing*, Fiona Cox analyses the importance of Virgilian imagery in *The Seven Sisters* (2002) pointing out the similarities between Drabble's uses of the Roman poet Virgil and T. S. Eliot's in *The Wasteland*. Like Eliot Drabble depicts the desolate urban spaces of twentieth-century London inhabited by isolated figures who cannot speak to or properly understand one another. Yet Drabble's exiles in *The Seven Sisters* are ageing women and their quest to

find the embers of a dying classical civilization they honour is inseparable from the quest to find their own identity in the consciousness that death is on the near horizon.

*The Seven Sisters* opens with Candida Wilton alone in her third year in a third floor flat in a run-down part of West London with a sense of 'disbelieving amazement' (SS,55). Candida has surprised her family and friends by leaving rural Suffolk after a painful divorce. Installing herself in a small flat in a dirty, dark, and potentially unsafe area and knowing nobody in London, Candida describes herself as an 'Alice in Wonderland' (SS,55) and approaches her new circumstances with 'adventurous despair' (SS,44). 'In this trap is my freedom. Here I shall remake my body and my soul' (SS,19). Like Alix in *A Natural Curiosity* Candida befriends a serial murderer and morbidly wonders by the canal in which he has thrown the dead body.

As Şebnem Toplu puts it, 'the third age revealed by Candida oscillates between depression and a will to hold on to life' (Toplu,2009,p.179). To give some structure and purpose to her life, she joins an evening class on Virgil because 'its very existence seemed so anachronistic and so improbable' in contemporary London (SS,10). But when the class is shut down she feels as if she has been cast into exile: 'We Virgilians hadn't got to know each other well enough to stay in touch naturally.... We were made homeless, and turned out to wander our ways' (SS,12). However, the closure offers Candida a means of entry into the unknown world of the Health Club, fitness machine and gymnasium. An ear plug device would screen her from the unwanted conversations of those around her in the gymnasium but she has been left behind by technology: 'I quite want one, but I don't know where to buy one. And I'm in some way ashamed to ask' (SS,5). Virgil becomes her passport to her future: 'It was a new world in there, an amazing new world. I would never have dared to enter it had I not had the passport from the old world of Virgil. I would not have felt that I had the right. I am not very bold' (SS,14): 'I grow ever more cowardly with age. Shame is a word that haunts me,' (SS,5) Candida has admitted early on and yet she prepares to move towards the future, towards old age and death with new found courage. She feels no need of a male partner to enable her

to survive and no need to wear Andrew's engagement ring or to declare her marital status. 'As a nun enters a convent in search of her god, so I entered my solitude. I felt fear, and I felt hope' (SS,54). Transformed by the sense of freedom, she believes that something exciting will happen to her: 'How can it, at my age?... I should feel powerless, but I do not' (SS,62). Indeed, she feels more powerful than she did when she was a new bride and when she became three times a mother (SS,62).

*The Seven Sisters* draws more heavily on ancient myths than any of Drabble's writings and is full of classical references and analogies, and in particular to Book vi of *The Aeneid* in which Aeneas crosses the river Acheron to visit the country of the dead, where he sees his wronged lover, Dido, who refuses to respond to him. Through the window of her flat Candida is able to see the constellation of stars, the Pleiades, the seven sisters who were the daughters of Atlas. Candida visits Ida Jerrold from the defunct Virgil reading group, a melancholy poet whose titles include 'Dido in the Underworld' and 'The Birds That Perched upon the Golden Bough' (SS,104). Candida concludes that Ida 'really does look at times as though she can see across to the further shore. Perhaps, if one spends much time with the long dead, one can see them clearly' (SS,110).

Ida Jerrold in turn imagines 'the pale sad Candida' walking 'forlornly by the dark canal. She sees her walk past the cemetery, with its broken wall and its cracked graves and its tilted funerary monuments. She sees her floating in the dank water, like Ophelia' (SS,176). On her walks by the plastic-littered waterway, across the trees Candida sees clumps of mistletoe hanging and imagines them, 'suspended, like the Sibyl in her wicker basket' (SS,125). The mistletoe, a pagan plant, has magical properties '.... it protects against witchcraft and the evil eye.... When its sap dries, its dry leaves turn bright gold in death. The doves of Venus perched upon the mistletoe' (SS,125). We are told that it 'is the Golden Bough that leads us safely to the Underworld. These strange plants ... are life and they are death' (SS,125).

The second part of the novel, the 'Italian Journey', is focused on a trip in the footsteps of Aeneas and is narrated in the third person. Its title, the Italian Journey is an allusion to Goethe's famous travel book *The Italian Journey*. The words *Vedi Napoli e poi muori!* translated as 'See Naples and Die!' are sometimes attributed to Goethe. For Candida this visit marks what Virginia Tiger delineates as a kind of spiritual journey 'from estrangement to engagement' (Tiger,2007,p.28). Candida, who has always loved the Sixth Book of *The Aeneid* (SS,83), recollects how she and an old school friend had studied the sublime passage where the Cumae Sibyl tells Aeneas he must pluck the Golden Bough if he wishes to return from his visit to the under-world, has always longed to visit Naples, the Phlegrean Fields, the birdless realms of Avernus, and the dark pit of Acheron before she dies (SS,83). Candida's desire to recreate Aeneas's journey is granted by an unexpected windfall from her pension fund. She organises her dream tour to include the five fellow Virgilians in her reading group and her teacher, Ida Jerrold, an elderly classical scholar. The seventh sister is their vivacious Italian tour guide.

The women follow the path of the mythical hero after the Trojan War arriving in Carthage in Tunisia, and from there to the temple of Hercules at Cumae, near Naples, the legendary home of the oracular prophetess, the Sibyl, the place at which Goethe declared that he had managed to be symbolically reborn. However, accounts differ as to the manner in which Goethe met his death. Ida Jerrold reflects that 'the legend that he cried out "More light!" has been queried.... His doctor... claimed he died in great pain, visible fear and mortal agitation' (SS,213). The question then becomes: 'So what avails a lifetime of searching after wholeness and greatness and transcendence?' (SS,213).

In Part 2 Candida actively composes and 'restories' her life. When she joyfully plans the trip, she feels 'aware that she has turned into another person, a multiple, polyphonic person, who need not pretend to be stupid, who can use long words or make classical allusions if she wishes, without fear of being called a pedant' (SS,172). These women, the narrator notes, 'keep faith with the past, they keep faith with myth and

history' (SS,171). The absence of men makes them free to enjoy their lives, to talk about the issues concerning them, and to share their feelings.

Julia, a somewhat jaded novelist, finds the journey 'a bit spinsterly and grandmotherly and third ageist' (SS,208). Haunted by the sight of sea urchins-- creatures walking away after their bodies and brains have been eaten-- Julia compares their plight and that of the seven sisters: 'Don't you think we're a bit like those poor creatures? Scuttling around after we're dead?' She says to Candida (SS,205). 'We can't pretend that we are young, anymore,' to which Candida replies that 'youth is not everything' (SS,206).

As Elisabeth Jay points out, Drabble's fiction is 'spiced with the intellectual respectability open to readers whose education also bestowed -- the ability to think in quotation' (Jay,1993,p.571). First envisioning her trip in Part 1, Candida chants '*Nach Cuma, nach Cuma*', a reference to Goethe's poem 'The Wanderer'. In this dramatic poem a man is on a pilgrimage to find answers from the Sibyl. He walks along the road and meets a young woman who takes him to a hut by the lake. The man asks the woman where the road he was travelling leads and she replies '*Nach Cuma*' -- and he decides to continue with his journey along the road. Beginning her own pilgrimage on the airplane Candida feels that 'the rest of her life lies before her on a clear and shining track as she leaves earthly attachments behind 'Onwards and upwards, *nach Cuma, nach Cuma*' (SS,178-179).

Ida Jerrold, the oldest of the travellers, ruminates upon the death of her husband Eugene in a car crash some twenty years ago and her own approaching death: 'She hopes she will comport herself properly and not be a nuisance to others when the moment comes' (SS,213). 'Perhaps Eugene had the better part, cut off suddenly in his prime?' (SS,213). On the aeroplane Ida has opened *The Death of Virgil*, but she is not reading this book. Instead she uses it to escape to thoughts of poets inspired by Virgil who made their own pilgrimage to Italy: Goethe and the 'young Wordsworth crossing of

the Alps on foot, and of his mild astonishment when he reached the far side' (SS,176). In *The Emergence of the Poetic "Wanderer" In the Age Of Goethe*, Julian Scutts explains that Wordsworth had been introduced to Goethe's dramatic poem 'The Wanderer' by Coleridge and that Wanderer thus becomes one of the principal speakers in Wordsworth's poem, 'The Excursion' (Scutts,2017,p.103).

Candida, who has felt herself 'dying into life,' finds herself 'sick with delight' when she sees Naples for the first time (SS,188,222). Overjoyed, she exclaims, 'fate had long intended that I go to Naples, Cumae and the Phlegrean Fields' (SS,145). 'My journey, like that of Aeneas before me, was foreordained,' lured by 'the bright horizons of the future' (SS,143), Candida is no longer the 'passive victim' of her 'fate', but like a 'magician' bringing together her fellow travellers (SS,149-150). 'We all of us seemed to be remarkably free and had various dates to choose from. I suppose that's not very surprising at our age. We are of the third age. Our dependants have died or matured. For good and ill, we are free' (SS,148).

From the very beginning Candida has believed that something or someone is waiting for her on the far shore (SS,3). It is 'through Virgil that she is offered the hope of an exit from a barren existence, as she embarks on a quest for identity, itself a Virgilian theme' (Cox,2011,p.121). 'The imagery of wandering at the mercy of the ocean prompts a comparison with Aeneas' lengthy travels at sea before reaching his goal as he journeyed from Troy via Carthage to Italy' (Cox,2011,p.121). In his exile Aeneas is suspended between his past and his future. He is driven out of Troy and the poem ends before he found Rome, so that the point of arrival, which makes sense of everything, is vague. In her physical and spiritual journey, Candida inhabits neither life nor death; 'I neither live nor die,' she claims (SS,125).

Sybil who appears in book six of *The Aeneid* is the oracles of ancient Greece over seven hundred years of age but subjected still to the merciless spoils of time. She was kept hidden in a cage suspended in the Temple of Apollo where she could be heard



to exclaim that she wished to die. Candida decides to consult Sibyl outside Naples and when she approaches the Sybil's cave and sees the flowers by the wayside, described by Virgil and Goethe, she 'feels both the lightness and the weight of her own body in the sunshine' (SS,246). The narrator explains Candida's joyful moment of bodily awareness and release: 'She is heavier than she was in her youth and in her young womanhood and in her middle age, and yet she is also lighter ... turning into a dry husk, a weightless vessel. She feels with a new pleasure the ageing of her flesh' (SS,246). The scene indicates Candida's acceptance of the inevitable approach of old age and her preparedness for death.

When Candida listens to Berlioz's opera 'The Trojans' in live performance on the radio, 'the music swells triumphantly around her, and her spirit expands in its vastness' (SS,301). She is transported by the overpowering joy of its glorious presentation of the fall of Troy: 'Can the chorus be singing so gloriously about impending death?' (SS,301): 'This is not my home. This is simply the place where I wait.... I am filled with expectation. What is that calling me?' she asks (SS,307).

Candida accepts the wizened Sibyl's whispered advice: 'I must learn to grow old before I die. That, I think, is what the Sibyl tried to say' (SS,281). In her spiritual journey, Candida is described as 'dying into life' (SS,188). She feels Sibyl whispering to her to cease resisting: 'Submit, whispers the wizened Sibyl.... Be still, whispers the dry and witless Sibyl.... Be still. Submit. You can climb no higher. This is the last height. Submit' (SS,246-247). However, she is not yet ready to cease striving as the Sybil advises; 'it is not the last height. And she cannot submit' (SS,247).

The novel's very last italicized line: '*Stretch forth your hand, I say, stretch forth your hand*' (SS,307) harks back to the conclusion of Book Six of *The Aeneid* where the dead huddle at the river Styx's edge stood pleading to be the first to make the voyage over and reaching out their hands in longing toward the farther shore: 'Such, and so thick, the shiv'ring army stands, And press for passage with extended hands'

(Virgil,2009,p.225). *The Seven Sisters* offers the reader some narrative experimentation at the end. From a version of events which her daughter, Ellen discovers on her mother's computer it would appear that Candida has drowned herself in the canal. However, all four sections of the novel, including the one section of third person-narration supposedly by her daughter, turn out to have been written by Candida herself who has not committed suicide and has been trying to relate Candida's life from Ellen's point-of-view to reveal different 'realities' about herself and her relationships.

### ***The Red Queen* (2004)**

In what is her most stylistically innovative novel to date, *The Red Queen* (2004) Drabble makes a significant move in a postmodernist direction. The novel takes known historical facts about an eighteenth-century Korean Crown Princess, intersperses them with commentary from an authorial point of view, and has the Princess return to haunt twenty-first century Britain where she is made to encounter imagined characters and fictional situations. 'Time past and time present, London and Seoul, seem to be flowing through one another. They have not merged, they remain distinct, but they coexist, in some dreamlike time of correspondences. They do not fuse or melt' (RQ,333-334).

The author's preface claims that Drabble is engaged in a quest for 'universal transcultural human characteristics' (RQ,ix). The novel was written at a historical moment when the author had become 'obsessed by multiculturalism ... very interested in the mobile life of intellectuals, and the question of whether there was any universal human nature, any essential qualities, in these global days' (Turner,2010,p.6). The subtitle, 'A Transcultural Tragicomedy', is transcribed from the epigraph from *The Russian Ark* (2003) by Alexander Sokurov: 'The dead weep with joy when their books are reprinted' and Drabble intimates that *The Red Queen* is concerned with the comparison of cultures, and the misunderstandings of cultures: 'I'm asking, is there one

story, or is everything misunderstanding? Is everything confusion? Do we see each other—do we ever see each other correctly?’ (Lee,2007,p.479). In the novel there are ‘moments when the crown princess comes to England and is bemused by what she sees, and there are moments when [Drabble's] English character is completely confused by what she finds in Korea’ (Lee,2007,p.479).

In *The Red Queen* Drabble rewrites the memoirs of a Korean Crown Princess, also known as Lady Hong or Hyegyong. In 1774 at the age of ten Hyegyong is selected as the bride of the Crown Prince Sado, son of the Korean King who is the same age; the marriage is consummated when the children reach the age of fifteen. She lives almost entirely inside the royal court, and endures its ‘speeches and ceremonies, hierarchies and protocol, discomfort and ritual, tradition and survival, robes and symbols, power and subjugation’ (RQ,186). The Crown Princess, as she gets married, enters a world of intricate etiquette, where the court's precise dress codes announce faction and status: ‘Fabrics held destinies, and colours spoke of faction and fate’ (RQ,14). Never leaving the palace grounds, the Princess becomes the mother of their son, the new Grand Heir and later King and she survives her husband by fifty years.

Drabble has researched the historical facts evoked in the novel which is based on memoirs written by the Crown Princess between 1795 and 1805. Manja Kürschner suggests that Drabble has defamiliarized the process of writing history without completely undermining it since she ‘asks serious questions about the writing and the nature of history’ (Kürschner,2017,p.157). Moreover, *The Red Queen* reflects upon the methods of historical research in that it comments explicitly on the origins and the genesis of the memoir: ‘It points out that historical knowledge about the Crown Princess is treated as a fact on an intrafictional as well as on an extrafictional level, which is quite uncommon for a postmodernist historical novel’ (Kürschner,2017,p.153). As Perez Zagorin points out, the novel imitates historiography in that it makes use of many of the elements required by the historian to construct a factual historical narratives; an

'afterword', acknowledgments, a note on sources and a bibliography at the end: 'a history, unlike a novel in the realist genre, consists not only of specimens of narrative but of arguments, footnotes of documentation and justification, acknowledgments of what isn't known, discussions and evaluations of sources and evidence, and critiques of the views of other scholars' (Zagorin,1999,p.12). The critic Mary Whipple has praised the diary of the Crown Princess as 'especially interesting for the light it casts on a way of life almost unknown to contemporary westerners, and for this the novel is both important and fascinating' (Whipple,2004).

Drabble has subverted the traditional generic expectations of the novel by deliberately bringing historical facts and fiction together in order to explore the relationship between literature, tradition and reality. The first section is biographical while the other two are fictional. *The Red Queen* is divided into the sections 'Ancient Times' and 'Modern Times,' with the latter ending in 'Postmodern Times'. Drabble insists that *The Red Queen* is not a historical novel describing Korean culture or reconstructing life in the Korean court, but a modern novel which explores issues of selfhood, questions the 'doubts about universalism and essentialism' in our 'postmodern age of cultural relativism,' and asks questions 'about the nature of survival, and about the possibility of the existence of universal transcultural human characteristics' (RQ,ix).

Drabble explains: 'I have supplied some invention, and added some interpretations, most of which are overtly displayed as interpretations, rather than facts. There are (and have been) many possible interpretations of the story, and mine is only one of them' (RQ,viii). 'I have turned her story into a novel, of a kind. This is because I am a novelist, and, for better and for worse, writing novels is what I do' (RQ,vii).

In the first half of *The Red Queen* Drabble uses a first-person narrative voice which is that of the Crown Princess. In the second half she turns to third-person narration with the ghost of the Red Queen speaking to the twenty-first-century reader; re-telling her life-story and comparing time past with time present. This format is 'very much a

departure' for Drabble; she has never tried to do anything like that before and never really tried to write either narrative set in another country or set so far back in time (Abbe,2006,p.22). Her purpose is 'to show how the stories reflected off each other' and 'how much some things have changed and how little other things have changed' (Abbe,2006,p.22).

The self-reflexivity of *The Red Queen* is mainly represented by the device of the ghost/narrator. Her voice appears to be strangely selfless and nameless. The names Lady Hong or Princess Hong given to her in the West, she explains, are not her true names: 'I have no name, and I have many names. I am a nameless woman. My true name is unknown to history. I am famous, but nameless. And I was never a queen in my lifetime, red or otherwise. I became a queen after my death. So much happens after death' (RQ,25). During her lifetime, the Crown Princess has written four distinct memoirs over a period of ten years, each time with a slightly different aim, each with its own revelations and evasions, each with its own agenda unsettling the reliability and accuracy of the narrative: The reader is warned not to attach credence to her words because the ghost/ narrator reveals her memory to be fallible and her testimony to be unreliable: 'I am trying to be truthful now, though I am not sure what agenda beyond truth a poor ghost might have. Perhaps even ghosts deceive themselves and others. However, it may be, I find my ghostly memory is faulty and at times confused' (RQ,77).

The ghost/narrator not only lost her title of Crown Princess with the death of her husband, but has her image removed from the records after his death: 'The silver throne is empty. I am not depicted. I am not there. I have no name, and I am not there. It was forbidden to depict me. No queen could ever sit for a male painter' (RQ,29-30). Ironically, Lady Hong, the Red Queen, never did become Queen, but only, ultimately, Queen Mother because her husband died before he could ascend the throne. Her husband used to call her his 'little Red Queen' because he liked her red silk skirt (RQ,24). In an interview with Elfrieda Abbe, Drabble describes the metaphoric importance of the colour

red which not only brings happiness into the Princess's life but also represents violence and bloodshed (Abbe,2006,p.22). Red was her favourite colour, and she begins her memoir by confiding that as a child she longed for a red silk skirt (RQ,34).

In contrast to the Crown Princess Dr Barbara Halliwell is a modern, independent, middle-aged English academic, who has freedom to act, freedom to move, and to make her own choices. However, as the novel progresses, the lives of the two women who have both suffered grievous personal loss intertwine: both have husbands suffering mental illness and both have sons who die in childhood. The narration is a dialogue between women about women's lives.

The second part of the novel focuses on Dr Barbara Halliwell who attends an international conference on globalization and medicine in Korea. Barbara, to whom a copy of the Memoirs is mysteriously given, on her flight to Seoul, reads the book and finds herself haunted by the story. Drabble herself attended a conference on multicultural literature in Seoul in 2000 which introduced her to Korea and its literature (RQ,359). In Seoul, Drabble visited some of the sites important to the Crown Princess. Dr Halliwell becomes the involuntary 'ghost-writer' whom the Crown Princess has chosen to keep her story alive. She shares certain experiences with the Princess: 'she, too, has been acquainted with sorrow, loss, fear, restriction, enclosure, premature death. She, too, has tried to live with madness. She, too, feels she has failed to save others from madness' (RQ,189).

The parallels between the life of Barbara Halliwell and that of the Princess are made clear: 'The Princess is taking her over bodily and mentally' and she has entered her, 'like an alien creature in a science-fiction movie, and she is gestating and growing within her' (RQ,184,185). As Barbara reads the memoirs she is enthralled by them. Like Barbara, Drabble herself appears to be possessed by the Crown Princess. This is 'doubly ironic because the scholarly underpinnings of her novel echo those found in A.

S. Byatt's 1990 masterpiece *Possession*, in which two present-day scholars research the correspondence between two Victorian poets' (Stovel,2007,p.192).

Babs Halliwell too loves red and lets her lover buy her red socks ornamented with little gold butterflies. In an afterword to the novel, Drabble acknowledges that she had a little red velvet dress as a child and that this dress led her to identify with the Crown Princess. Indeed, if the historical Princess had not mentioned her longing for a red silk skirt, Drabble does not think that she would have responded to her story as she did (RQ,353): 'This little domestic female detail that she included seemed so important to me. I thought it was a clue running through the centuries about women's vanity, their frailty and their toughness. They want a red dress, and they get it in the end, but it doesn't quite work out how they meant it to be. I just thought it was a little link' (Abbe,2006,p.22). Drabble confides that she is wearing a red dress while writing the note (RQ,353).

As we have seen, Drabble attempts to make connections across cultures and time by bringing together historical and contemporary narratives. Autobiographical and biographical writings have usually been classified as two separate and distinct genres of non-fiction although the fact that they share much in common with fiction is now widely recognised. The closeness of auto(biography) and fiction, Milada Franková explains, 'has come to stand out with the postmodern penchant for the mixing of genres as well as with all of the poststructuralist debate about authority, authorship and the authority of the narrative voice' (Franková,2011,p.80).

As Linda Hutcheon puts it, postmodern parody is a kind of 'contesting revision or rereading of the past that both confirms and subverts the power of the representations of history. This paradoxical conviction of the remoteness of the past and the need to deal with it in the present has been called the 'allegorical impulse' of postmodernism' (Hutcheon,2002,p.91). The parodic technique in *The Red Queen*

brings new possibilities to represent reality through the blurring of boundaries between reality and fiction. Hutcheon writes:

Postmodern fiction does not, however, disconnect itself from history or the world. It foregrounds and thus contests the conventionality and unacknowledged ideology of that assumption of seamlessness and asks its readers to question the processes by which we represent ourselves and our world to ourselves and to become aware of the means by which we make sense of and construct order out of experience in our particular culture. (Hutcheon,2002,p.51)

Brian Richardson terms the merging of narrative voices, which is a characteristic of postmodern writing, 'multiperson narration.' However, he recognises the difficulty that 'multiperson narration' might pose for the reader: 'Still more compelling for the readers and potentially problematic for theory are texts in which the same character's thoughts and actions are narrated in different persons, or when entirely disparate narrators converge' (Richardson,2006,p.61). Richardson explains that the 'transparent narrator' is a favourite technique of postmodern authors, who regularly use it 'to transgress the carefully maintained ontological boundaries observed by realist and modernist writers' (Richardson,2006,p.129).

The Princess's voice of the memoirs and the voice of the ghost/narrator are unstable, at times distinctive, at others appearing to merge or to be indistinguishable and while the voice of the ghost/narrator is coded as fantastical, it 'transgresses ontological boundaries' to provide a prescient commentary on the here and now. Through the medium of the ghost/narrator who has leaped out of her own period to comment on the present day the notion of societal progress is questioned: people still die very unpleasant deaths in modern times. A schizophrenic psychotic who goes violently mad, provoked by the humiliations inflicted on him by his father, the Crown Prince ('the coffin prince') suffered the most appalling death. The King's disappointment in, and incessant criticism of, his son in turn is responsible for the Crown Prince's violent and murderous paranoia. The son claims that it is the king's lack of loving care that has so disturbed him and made him kill people to relive his suppressed anger (RQ,92). Sado



is finally put to a slow death by his father who locks him into a *rice chest*, where he dies after eight days. The death penalty in the United States today is not always very well administered just as the death penalty was cruelly executed in Korea two hundred years ago: 'America today has its Death Row and its electric chair,' the ghost questioning of how we live now (RQ,107).

Transplanting the tragic situation of the royal couple in ancient Korea to modern times Drabble questions the British fascination in their Royal Family: 'We have a monarchy that is practically meaningless in terms of legislature. But it's fascinating for the press, to everybody. Even I am interested in it. Why? I don't know why. It's weird' (Lee,2007,p.493). The obsession with a male heir to the throne in contemporary Britain is compared to the obsession with a male heir in Korean society described in the memoirs of the eighteenth-century Princess: 'And Princess Diana. It's the same story. A completely false expectation is put on a woman to bear children' (Lee,2007,p.493).

Drabble gives the narrator, the Princess's ghost, an extra voice because her ghost is roaming around in the present and thus she is two hundred years in advance of time than the narrator in the original memoirs. Positioned in the early twenty-first century and examining the events of her own past life, the Crown Princess's ghost is enabled to see presciently through a contemporary perspective which takes account of special, historical and cultural differences the many 'shocking things,' which 'would now be forbidden by law in most nations on earth' (RQ,14). In the light of modern medicine, the ghost speculates upon the Crown Prince's untreated madness and its causes. Barbara wonders if her friend, Polly's ex-husband, Solomon Usher, a society analyst, could have found an interpretation for Sado's condition and cured him (RQ,327). She also reflects upon her mother's postnatal depression, which was a common, but not officially recognized or named condition in those days (RQ,12).

The Crown Princess has longed for red many years but as a widow has to wear white and this prompts the reflection: 'Had I been born in modern times, were I living

now, I might choose to explore the question of nakedness and dress. Of the body, and of clothing' (RQ,34). Here Drabble engages the Princess' voice with her own limited knowledge on earth with the knowledge acquired during two added centuries in order to secure the comparison with our own time in which her interest lies. However, it is the cross-cultural inquiry and the universalism which permeates *The Red Queen* which David Jay criticises as overly didactic seeing the novel as 'long on detail, but short on imagination,' likening the Princess with her 'diligent explication of culture and customs' to a 'self-appointed anthropologist' whose 'wintry reflection fashions her melodramatic experiences into a stilted seminar' (Jays, 2004).

As we have seen, Drabble attempts to make connections across cultures and time by bringing together historical and contemporary narratives. She extends the metafictionality in the 'Postmodern Times' section of the novel by writing herself into a final scene in which Dr Barbara Halliwell and her best friend, Polly Usher, find each other reading the same unnamed novel by Margaret Drabble. They have both met Drabble herself at a launch party for a book on medical ethics a few months earlier. They meet Drabble again sitting alone wearing her red skirt and now 'looking older than she did on her book jackets, but they recognized her through the disguise of age' (RQ,350).

At the end of the novel, Babs Halliwell becomes the second mother to an adopted Chinese girl, Chen Jianyi although the child's birth mother Viveca van has a prior claim on the child. But what will befall Chen Jianyi, a trans-cultural baby of the future? 'These years, at the beginning of the second millennium, are good years for transcultural exchanges, and for clever multilingual children of mixed heritage. It is as well to be clever, in this sharp and fast new world of accelerating fusion and diffusion, but she is clever' (RQ,343). The child represents Babs's adjustment and survival and becomes the means of moving her on slowly towards her future and leaving her past behind. The narrative concludes that the Princess 'can haunt and torment Margaret Drabble for a while, while Barbara Halliwell pursues her own life' (RQ,351).

The Crown Princess reveals her motivation in pleading with the ghost/narrator to tell her story: 'I hope to purchase a further lease of attention, and a new and different readership. I have selected a young and vigorous envoy, who will prolong my afterlife and collaborate with me in my undying search for the meaning of my suffering and survival' (RQ,6). Both the author and her ghost/narrator seem to claim firmly that 'this posthumous revision' is done in the 'belief that the universal exists' (RQ,8). The subsequent uncertainty of interpretation echoes the existential uncertainties our own time: 'I still cannot be certain. Death does not bring full light' (RQ,5).

### **The Sea Lady (2006)**

The title of the novel may be derived from a little-known work of fantasy by H. G. Wells (1866-1946) but in *The Sea Lady* (2006), the ageing Ailsa, who is dressed in silver sequinned scales and likened to a mermaid, is not a fantasy figure still appears outwardly bold and strong: 'She gleamed and rippled with smooth muscle, like a fish' (SL,138). Ailsa wears little flat shoes now, 'but like the Little Mermaid she remembers the pain of the knives. It has not been easy, this metamorphosis' (SL,138). Ailsa is very much a product of her time; the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s; 'boldly dressed, for a woman in her sixties, but she came of a bold generation' (SL,1). A social historian and second- wave feminist, Ailsa belongs to 'the confident baby-boom generation of the high-earning, high-spending, fearless, untiring immortals' (SL,271) and has risked imprisonment 'for what have now become known as Women's Reproduction Rights' (SL,244). Although she has become 'an Old Age Pensioner, a Senior Citizen' Ailsa 'tells herself bravely that she has never felt stronger in her life' (SL,137). The weight gains that distressed her in her forties and fifties no longer matter. She 'was getting old, and she might as well get fat too. Solidity was

admirable, weight was desirable. She hadn't coined the memorable phrase 'Fat is a feminist issue' but she had decided to endorse it' (SL,138).

Ailsa is depicted as a brave woman who has made 'efforts to deal with her past, with her pain. She moves in circles where such therapeutic attempts are acceptable, even fashionable. Women are better than men at these explorations and these confrontations, or so Ailsa believes' (SL,137). She still experiences moments of joy and triumph. However, the fragility of the triumph is terrible, the psychic cost enormous. 'Staying her eye on the glass, her elderly self looked back at her... She was ashen-grey, and at times she looked her age. The power was ebbing and seeping and leaking away, and at times she was afraid' (SL,202).

Some of Drabble's most penetrating reflections in the later novels are on the ills that befall ageing women who have their own reasons for living alone. However, unsettling insecurities and insights into their own mortality and the world beyond are not confined to the women in her more recent fiction. Humphrey Clarke in *The Sea Lady* has premonitions of his own death: 'Funerals, memorials, ceremonies. The tea-parties of the dead. He attended many of these now, even though he was only in his sixties. And he worried more, now, about his own life after death' (SL,33). What the older characters in these novels are able to offer is a 'long view' of history and an overview of the changing times and fashions they have experienced. In *The Sea Lady* Drabble judiciously chooses her adjectives to describe each decade through which Humphrey had lived; the 'austere' fifties, and the 'liberating' sixties, and the 'shifty' seventies, and the 'mercenary' eighties, and the 'power-driven, value-free' nineties. He had become 'worldly, and at home in the world' (SL,93). This retrospection is frequently tinged with nostalgia for the lost innocence of times past. Life in England as Humphrey remembers it after the Second World War consisted of 'simple days, simple times' (SL,39). The price of bread in postwar Ormemouth? 'Two pence halfpenny, in old money, in 1947, for a large white loaf' (SL,79). He compares the day-to-day realities of a family on the train with his own memories of rationing during the war and austerity afterwards. They looked

'lighter, less solemn, these children, than the children of his childhood.... This family had never known rationing, austerity, prohibition. They had lived all their lives in a world of baguettes and burgers, of chocolates and Coca-Cola. Not in a world of dripping and jam sandwiches and Cherryade and compulsory cod liver oil' (SL,96).

Humphrey is old enough to remember the great cultural battles and turning points in social history; the trial of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in 1960 and his first account of reading forbidden words 'that now appeared so freely for women, servants and children to read' (SL,92). The prosecution in the Chatterley trial had argued that women, servants and children must be protected from exposure to four letter words and obscene subject matter. He has lived long enough to chart the major intellectual shifts and fashions that have overtaken the arts and humanities: 'The resisted rise of sociobiology, the waning of belles-lettres and of literary criticism, the rise of deconstruction, the rise of literary theory, the decline of the Germanic languages, the spread of the Hispanic languages, the death of easel art' (SL,148).

Ailsa and Humphrey were childhood friends and later ill-matched lovers whose brief and devastating marriage ended in divorce and they meet again for the first time in thirty years. 'Lust is over', Drabble informs the reader 'and they are able to see clearly what it was they originally liked. I wanted to show that they have gone their separate ways but "*Je ne regrette rien*"' (Hastings,2006). She writes that 'alternately rash and cowardly though they be, over-reaching, over-extending, over-ambitious, over-weening and intermittently defeated though they be,' they may at the end 'find in themselves enough strength to push on towards their own resolution' (SL,219).

At the end of the novel Ailsa 'runs into the water. Only the mad swim in the North Sea, but the sea is in her blood, and her salt blood meets the salt water. She gasps, she splashes, she strikes out, she waves to shore, and she flounders' (SL,340). As Humphrey watches her, 'it comes to him that forgiveness need not be maintained in time. It may come in an instant, like grace. It need not endure. One may be redeemed in an instant. Repentance needs only an instant, a measurement too small to show on

the clock face. They have forgiven one another, for this instant, and that will suffice' (SL,340-341).

In *The Sea Lady* Drabble gesticulates in the direction of postmodernist experimentation by refusing closure and introducing a mysterious Public Orator who speculates on literary meaning and form. Their identity is eventually revealed; the Public Orator is partly a character and partly an authorial voice. The character is Sandy Clegg, with whom Humphrey spent his early childhood. However, his position is ambivalent and perplexing. He is 'omnipresent and omniscient' (SL,279) but 'not a puppet master, and on principle dislikes artificial arrangements, narrative devices, false dawns and false epiphanies' (SL,41). He is also not that kind of conversational omniscient narrator you might find in 19th-century novels nor 'a metafictional device designed to display, with a wink and a nod, the artificiality of all he conveys' (Gray,2007). Instead, the Orator 'is trying to work out yet another story, and is both frustrated and encouraged by the lack of an ending, and by what appears (can it be?) to be the free will of the protagonists' (SL,165). 'Does a story have to have a meaning?' (SL,302). 'Does a meaning have to have a story?' (SL,303). If 'stories have meanings ... meanings have stories ... there would be an ending... there would be completion' (SL,303).

### **The Pure Gold Baby (2013)**

Drabble seems in this late novel published in 2013 to be returning full circle to her 1960s material. In the early 1960s, Jessica Speight, a young anthropologist living in north London, near the Blackstock Road, becomes an unmarried mother. Her daughter, Anna is the 'pure gold baby' of the title. Like Rosamond in *The Millstone*, Jess is a serious scholar, a single mother and completely devoted to her daughter. Anna's birth is life-transforming for Jess for whom she becomes; a 'millstone, an everlasting burden, a pure gold baby, a precious cargo, to carry all the slow way through life to its distant and as yet unimaginable 'bourne on the shores of the shining lake' (PGB,19-20). While

Octavia's congenital heart defect in *The Millstone* is corrected by surgery Anna's condition means that she never learns to read and write or care for herself and so she is still living at home at forty and physically and emotionally dependant on her sixty-year-old mother: 'As our children and the other children we knew came to defy us and to tug at our apron strings and to yearn for separation, Anna remained intimate with her mother, shadowing her closely, responding to every movement of her body and mind, approving her every act' (PGB,27-28).

*The Pure Gold Baby* is narrated by Eleanor, who has worked for a charity concerned with International Development and is a good friend of Jess, the protagonist, an anthropologist who became pregnant in the 1960s and has for many years been part of a strong community of women friends in north London. The narrative problem for Drabble in *The Pure Gold Baby* lies with the fact that Anna, Jess's much-loved loved daughter, remains mentally at the age of an infant and never develops or changes but lives entirely in the present. Drabble surmounts this problem by using a narrator who has been Jess's confidante for many years and is conversant with Jess and Anna's past. Eleanor assures the reader that she has not 'invented much' and that although she is fallible and may have got things 'wrong,' she has 'tried to give a sense of what it was like, in our neighbourhood, in our time' (PGB,290).

As Ellen Prentiss Campbell puts it, 'This is a story of experience intertwined with innocence, of moving forward and circling back, of coming of age in a deeper sense—not just innocence encountering experience, but a gradual reckoning with aging and mortality' (Campbell, 2013). Meg Wolitzer suggests that Drabble's ability to consider the mother and daughter relationship in the later years as a subject of fiction is a direct consequence of Drabble's own experience of ageing. 'Drabble, who's now 74, has the confidence, experience and wisdom to move the story ahead into Jess' middle age and even, eventually, her old age' (Wolitzer,2013).

The narrator identifies Anna's defining characteristics as her purity and innocence: 'Anna didn't really know how to be bad. We were all, in our way, bad—motivated by ambition, or rivalry, or envy, or lust, or spite, or sloth, and observing the seeds of them in our beloved born-innocent children. But Anna didn't know these emotions' (PGB,84). The 'pure gold baby' is 'exceptional,' a source of wealth; uncontaminated by the cruelty or materialism of the world. Since Anna is an unusual child, in need of lifelong care, this sets constrictions on Jess's life, career, and ambitions which must be forfeited for her daughter's sake: 'Jess has worked so hard to protect and fortify Anna, but at times her courage fails her. Anna cannot be protected at all times' (PGB,179).

The narrator, Eleanor, speculates on the likelihood that advances in medical science would mean that children with conditions like Anna's would no longer exist. But would society be better off?

An innocence, with children such as Anna, would be gone from the world. A possibility of another way of being human would be lost, with all that signifies. They are God's children, *les enfants du bon Dieu*, we used to say, but now we no longer believe in God. Their lives are hidden with God, as Wordsworth wrote in defence of his Idiot Boy, but God himself is now hidden. God has absconded but he has left us his children. (PGB,44).

The novel explores changing societal attitudes to disability over time as Jess is continually looking for support, understanding and education for Anna. Drabble derived her inspiration of the unconditional love of a mother for her 'simple-minded' child from William Wordsworth's lyrical ballad 'The Idiot Boy'. Drabble wrote that 'Wordsworth changed forever the way we view the natural world and the inner world of feeling. He also connected the two indivisibly. We are his heirs, and we see and feel through him. His vision illumined our landscape' (Drabble,2010a).

We learn that Jess had once undertaken an anthropological field trip to Africa and had arrived at a memorial dedicated to the Reverend Felix Holden (1785-1830) who



was interested in the concept of the 'simple savage' and had corresponded with Wordsworth in the 1820s about the scriptures, the heathen, and the 'simple-minded'. Holden had been inspired to help the 'simple' people of the world by reading Wordsworth's poetry and had asked him for the correct translation of the words 'feeble-minded' and 'faint-hearted' (PGB,172). Looking to Wordsworth as a source of moral comfort and enlightenment, Holden had sought the poet's advice on whether to give up the comforts of Oxford and travel to Africa. Wordsworth had urged caution advising that there was much work to be done among the simple and the poor in England but Holden had nevertheless gone to Africa, where he was to meet his death, under the auspices of the London Missionary Society.

*The Pure Gold Baby* examines changing language, laws and politics related to disability. Drabble cites examples of writers' contradictory attitudes to disability in their own family. Arthur Miller, who ignored the existence of his Down's syndrome child (PGB,161), the Japanese novelist Kenzaburō Ōe made his reputation and won his Nobel Prize 'by writing painfully, brutally, repetitively, obsessively about his grossly abnormal son, his son whose brained oozed horribly out of a hole in his head' (PGB,161). Doris Lessing 'was locked for more than sixty years into a mother-son embrace of peculiar intensity, married to a son whose strangeness, whose incapacities, whose gifts, like those of Anna Speight, remained undiagnosed, indefinable' (PGB,161). Pearl S. Buck had 'longed, guiltily, rationally, for her mentally retarded daughter's death. I would have welcomed death for my child and would still welcome it, for then she would be finally safe' (PGB,163).

Because Jess is an anthropologist by training the practices of a cosmopolitan middle-class elite lend themselves to comparison with the customs and practices of a remote community in Africa. Asked to what extent she thought of herself as a 'North London anthropologist' which is what Jess terms herself (PGB,108), Drabble replied

I do know North London and its manners very well. Two of my children still live there. I think North London has changed in very interesting ways, and perhaps its self-awareness makes it even more interesting.

I've often been accused of writing "Hampstead novels," and it's true that I lived happily in Hampstead for many years, but in fact I haven't set much of my fiction there, and this novel is more a Highbury/Finsbury Park novel. As was *The Needle's Eye*. (Stokes, 2013)

The distinction between Highbury/Finsbury Park and Hampstead here is important. Hampstead has traditionally been a middle-class area whereas the Highbury and Finsbury Park districts have been working-class but have attracted a mobile and highly educated cosmopolitan population, including the types of sophisticated professionals and academics depicted in *The Pure Gold Baby*, in more recent years. Drabble suggests that 'many novelists are in part anthropologists' (Stokes, 2013). She adds: 'I have always been intrigued by social change, by the rise and fall of neighbourhoods, by the evolution of place as well as of people. I walk around observing, making notes, eavesdropping. I love public transport. You learn a great deal about social groupings and behaviour on the buses, tubes and trains. You can be anonymous, yet submerged in what is happening' (Stokes, 2013).

As Clifford Geertz suggests, anthropological writings are close to fiction because they are 'themselves interpretations' or 'fictions, in the sense that they are "something made", "something fashioned"' (Geertz, 1973, 15). Jess continues to find ways of employing her sociological and anthropological expertise (PGB, 41) and shares her professional knowledge of anthropology with other women. Eleanor 'learnt a lot of second-hand anthropology from Jess. She aired her ideas on me' (PGB, 30). Mark Risjord points out that by treating society or culture as a text to be read, 'interpretation collapses the difference between subject and object' (Risjord, 2014, p. 48).

The genesis of the novel was Drabble's visit to Zambia some 20 years earlier. There she saw a tribe of children with the congenital Split-Hand-Split-Foot syndrome. The children appeared to be entirely happy and indifferent to their deformity. Drabble not only begins and ends the novel with Africa but focuses on Africa's history and culture throughout. She is preoccupied with attitudes towards those whom European societies deem to be imperfect, returning frequently to the children in Africa, who are Jess's area

of special academic inquiry. These children have severe physical disabilities but, in a marked contrast to their counterparts in England, nonetheless appear to flourish and to be valued by those around them.

On her first field trip to Africa before she had given birth to Anna the sight of children with the condition 'popularly known as Lobster Claw syndrome' (PGB,2) awoke in Jess a 'tender spirit of response... The maternal spirit had brooded on the still and distant waters of that great and shining lake' and this spirit 'had entered into her when she was young and it had taken possession of her' (PGB,1). She feels for those children a 'proleptic tenderness', an 'inexplicable joy' that it later seems to her might have prefigured the birth of her daughter (PGB,1). Drabble reflected on her representation of the African children in *The Pure Gold Baby*: 'After seeing that tribe, I started reading and thinking how there are so many things considered to be gravely inhibiting in some societies and accepted in others' (Alley,2013).

As a discipline and a point of view anthropology arguably has 'its origins in European imperialism and colonialism' (Reed-Danahay,2005,p.157). Drabble challenges these Eurocentric anthropological attitudes and makes a critique of imperialism and colonialism central to this novel. Jess's anthropological interests centre on Africa colonial history. She is fascinated by the history of missionaries and exploration and in the legacy of David Livingstone, a Victorian medical missionary committed to British imperial expansion and remembered for his mission to discover the sources of the River Nile. Such missionaries 'represent the extremes of colonial attitudes towards the African' (Goring,2013) and Drabble describes him as an 'unpersuasive and unsuccessful missionary' (PGB,86) while Jess disapproves 'of Livingstone as a proto-imperial trader with a gun, as she had been taught to do at SOAS' (PGB,37) where she has been taught to distrust 'missionaries on principle' (PGB,37).

Eleanor makes the point that although missionary work has effectively come to an end, yet the 'missionary motive dies hard' (PGB,156) and has been taken over by NGOs, most of them secular' (PGB,149); perhaps 'a form of neo-colonialism'

(PGB,167). Their impact on the client populations is 'negligible' and maybe 'even malign'

(PGB,167). Eleanor criticises the aggressive techniques deployed by some fundraisers:

Jess and I agree that we have come to hate fund-raising professionals and fund-raising techniques. They are disgraceful and distasteful. The cold-calling, the faked handwriting on appeal letters, the celebrity endorsements, the celebrity auctions, the television bonanzas, the vanity of pop stars, the ridiculous little free gifts designed to induce guilt and misery. The bios, the free Christmas cards, the stick-on personalised address labels, the small unwanted devalued devaluing coins. (PGB,167)

Some of Eleanor's volunteers 'have come to bad ends and died on the job' (PGB,150,149) and she suggests that countries should be left to their own devices: 'When I hear rock stars and pop stars allegedly raising funds for Africa, I want to scream and tear my hair and weep' (PGB,149).

*The Pure Gold Baby* is infused with a sense of sadness about the approach of old age with its attendant humiliations and regrets. Jess is able to appreciate that she is getting old because 'She is beginning to have a sense of an ending' (PGB,210). This is almost certainly an allusion to Julian Barnes' novella, *A Sense of an Ending* (2011), which covers the same time span as *The Pure Gold Baby*, from the 1960s to the present. The narrator of *The Sense of an Ending*, Tony Webster recalls his past to re-examine his relationship with Veronica, his lover at university, who left him for his old school-friend who later committed suicide. He suggests that at 'the end of life.... You are allowed a long moment of pause, time enough to ask the question: what else have I done wrong?' (Barnes,2011,p.149). As Drabble reminds us, 'The narratives of progress and goals, of Kermode's tick-tock of time named in *The Sense of an Ending*, may not make sense in our later years, and our last illnesses and confusions and possibly cruel and undignified deaths do not necessarily invalidate what has gone before. Priam's death undid him, but we do not all have a Troy to lose' (Drabble,2014).

In *The Pure Gold Baby* Eleanor reflects upon the paradox of ageing: 'I don't know why life seems emptier when one is older, even when it is full. It thins out, like the hair of one's head' (PGB,246). The narrator intimates her own concern with endings:

'We are dying off, one by one' (PGB,290). She recognises the truth that the memories are untrustworthy: 'As we grow older, our tenses and our sense of chronology blur. We can no longer remember the correct sequence of events. The river is flowing, but we don't know on which bank we stand, or which way it flows. From birth, or from death.... The end is predicated, and yet we do not know what it will be' (PGB,63).

*The Pure Gold Baby* has an elegiac tone in that ageing brings with it nostalgia and a romanticized view of past innocence: 'We lived in an innocent world' (PGB,9). When her parents decide to sell the family home and buy a bungalow Eleanor comments: 'We call it downsizing now, but we didn't then. We hadn't yet coined that familiarising, patronising, dismissive, yet helpful term for decline and retrenchment, for the beginning of the flat, slow and then descending and accelerating march to death and the little, little room of the grave' (PGB,137). Eleanor remembers the unshakeable belief of the young of their own immortality: 'I was young, vigorous, immortal. I knew I and my children and my children's children would never grow old and we would never die' (PGB,137). She remembers her father saying: 'I've only one piece of advice for you, Nellie. Don't grow old' (PGB,137).

Eleanor also recollects a school trip to the Rodin Museum in Paris when she was seventeen. In the prime of youth, she had been revolted by Rodin's bronze of an eighty-year old woman; 'Celle qui fut la belle heaulmière', also known as 'The Old Woman', 'Winter' and 'The Old Courtesan' (PGB,141). Rodin's sculpture is of an old hag who 'drooped, sagged, imploded. She is a passive recipient of the battery, the assault of time, and of the contempt of men. Her breasts are dry and dangle, her ribs stand out, her skin hangs in folds from her withering frame, her back is bowed in submission' (PGB,141).

Returning to the same museum as an adult with the insights into human sexuality and human need afforded by maturity, Eleanor looks closely at a sculpture of 'The Mature Age' sometimes named 'Destiny, The Way' or 'Life or Fate', by Camille

Claudé, Rodin's lover whom he had refused to marry, choosing to safeguard his marriage and to remain with his wife instead. Camille Claudé 'went mad, or so her family said. She sank into a life of squalor, amidst broken furniture and peeling wallpaper, growing fatter and fatter' (PGB,249). Eleanor describes the allegorical sculpture in which Claudé depicts her own abandonment; a small figure on her knees beseeches her lover to stay while he turns away from her towards another woman: 'The ageing man in the centre of her massive three-figure sculpture of Maturity is Auguste Rodin, naked, grim, doomed and tragic, caught between his two mistresses, Youth and Age, torn from Youth's imploring grasp and impelled ever and forcefully onwards into the swirling, grasping, enfolding bronze arms of Age' (PGB,248). Claudé, like Rodin, had sculpted images of youth and beauty but the prospect of ageing alone and unloved obsessed her when she was herself yet young. 'Her work was prophetic. She foresaw her fate. Her older lover thrust it on her, and she fought back, fiercely and at times obscenely' (PGB,248). The power of this piece overwhelmed Eleanor in much the same way that the power of Belle Heaulmière had struck her when she was seventeen.

### **The Dark Flood Rises (2016)**

Drabble's latest novel, *The Dark Flood Rises* (2016) explores the physical and psychological realities of growing old and the impact the ageing process has on personality. The novel 'is drenched with death: with fear of death, with longing for death, with heroic deaths, with death as a prompt for metaphysical speculation and moral rumination – and with the effects on our natures of the relentless passing of time' (Adams,2016).

The 'dark flood' is D. H. Lawrence's metaphor for death and the title of the novel is taken from his poem, 'The Ship of Death'. There are two epigraphs: 'Piecemeal the body dies,' and 'the timid soul/has her footing washed away, as the dark flood rises' are taken from 'The Ship of Death'. The second is from W. B. Yeats's poem 'The Wheel', in

which dissatisfaction with today and unrestful longings for tomorrow are characterised as a symptom of our sublimated 'longing for the tomb':

Through winter-time  
we call on spring,  
And through the spring  
on summer call,  
And when abounding  
hedges ring  
Declare that winter's best of all;  
And after that there's  
nothing good  
Because the spring-time  
has not come -  
Nor know that what  
disturbs our blood  
Is but its longing for the  
tomb.

Francesca Stubbs tends to her ageing friends and former loved ones who are drifting towards their final moments. 'Women have a long afterlife, though not always a happy one' (SS,89), Candida observes. 'Nothing much happens to me now, nor ever will again. But that should not prevent me from trying to write about it' (SS,3), muses Candida who still aims to be heard.

There is little emphasis on plot in *The Dark Flood Rises*. Instead there is 'an acerbic, sharp, occasionally laborious meditation on what it means to lead a good life and how to ensure a good death' (Beckerman,2016). The novel focuses on one short chilly spring season in which Francesca is linked closely or distantly to family members and friends whom the author in turn links to the theme of ageing and demise. In the second paragraph we learn that 'Fran herself is already too old to die young, and too old to avoid bunions and arthritis, moles and blebs, weakening wrists... and encroaching weariness' (DFR,1). She is, however, ageing well, still curious and restless, determined not to become a burden to her two adult children with whom she maintains loving contact, generally in good health, and driving her own car. While attending conferences and visiting care homes, Fran helps her ex-husband Claude, to whom she takes chicken soup; and her friend Teresa, who is 'dying with such style and commitment that Fran is deeply impressed' (DFR,21).

The novel explores the inevitability of death and how different characters come to terms with it; 'what disturbs our blood/ Is but its longing for the tomb...' (DFR,51). While Fran is worried about almost everybody and almost everything (DFR,278), her old friend Josephine's greatest anxiety is her unresponsive DVD player and her difficulty in understanding her personal pension plan (DFR,85-86). Fran's daughter in her forties is preoccupied with climate change, sensitive to pollution and concerned with the death of the planet. Two of Fran's older friends die. Her childhood friend, Teresa falls and dies mounting the library steps to get a book (DFR,281). Another friend, Brigit dies in a hospital corridor in a wheelchair waiting for another dose of poisonous chemotherapy (DFR,2). Fran's newer acquaintance, Stella Hartleap dies of smoke inhalation as she sets her bedclothes on fire (DFR,2). Fran's partner, Hamish, dies of something 'less violent, more cruelly protracted' (DFR,3).

Drabble not only offers the reader a picture of English society and continues to return to 'the condition of England' in the novels that I have discussed in this chapter but her socio-political criticism extends across the troubled parts of the world and she adds the migrant crisis, the illegal movement of very large numbers of refugees from Africa and the middle East, to the global catastrophes with which the new millennium is faced. In *The Dark Food Rises* Francesca's son, Christopher, loses his partner, Sara Sidiqi, who is overtaken by a rare tumour of the nervous system while filming a documentary about illegal immigration from North Africa in the Canary Islands. Sara, although British born, is of emigre Egyptian descent and speaks Arabic. She has managed to film a brief interview with a woman from the Western Sahara on hunger strike in the Arrecife airport about her political goal (DFR,12). Ghalia Namarome is fighting a nationalist struggle for the independence of her homeland which is under brutal Moroccan domination. This largely unrecognised North African state called itself the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic. On her return from the United States, Ghalia refuses to tick the Morocco citizenship box as she identifies herself as Sahrawi and Western Saharan. Ghalia's story of how she found herself in Lanzarote airport is a complex one and she is deported from



her home town airport of Laayoune. Her story, the story of one individual woman, will never be widely known.

Drabble suggests that the Western Sahara will strike reporters as dull when compared to the situation in Libya, Syria, Iraq, Iran or Egypt, which are 'in the process of fomenting greater and greater cataclysms and atrocities and migrations.... These new waves of migration will obsess the media and ruin and rescue lives for years, perhaps decades, perhaps a century to come' (DFR,73). Immigrants' arrival by boats will remain a story, 'but the British are very wary of it. They will be more concerned with the siege of Calais, with the Syrian at the gate, with babies drowned on the shores of the isles of Greece' (DFR,74).

*The Dark Flood Rises* is a prophetic novel and is deeply pessimistic about the future: 'Over the coming years, fewer will risk the Atlantic passage from North Africa, but more and more will be crowding onto ill-equipped vessels in the Eastern Mediterranean, as violence in the Middle East and Libya drives them to further desperation' (DFR,276). These voyages are treacherous; 'thousands upon thousands will drown, as Europe fortifies itself, ceases to send rescue missions, leaves the boats to sink in the sight of shore' (DFR,276). 'Most of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century immigrants could not swim. They trusted themselves to the leaking vessels but had never learned to swim' (DFR,66). The dark flood of desperate immigrants from an increasingly war-torn Middle East will continue: 'The more people drown, hopes Europe, the more immigrants will be discouraged, and the fewer mouths to feed in Europe. But it won't work out like that. The tidal wave will not be stopped' (DFR,276).

Drabble's best-known novels in the 1960s, *A Summer Bird-cage*, *The Garrick Year*, *Jerusalem the Golden*, and *The Millstone*, were focused upon the lives of stylish intelligent, educated young women like Drabble herself who were fighting for their personal freedom. The sophisticated, adventurous, middle-class women of the twenty-first century novels are still preoccupied with personal liberty and are thus recognisably

older versions of her questing, spirited younger characters who are living in what is described in *The Seven Sisters* as 'these latter days, in these survival days, after biology has done its best and worst' (SS,160).

The formative experiences of these women characters were often in the 1960s and they are living with the decisions that they took then and facing the losses, bereavement and loneliness of their declining years but even in the midst of loss, bereavement and physical decline. They seek new possibilities for meaning and personal growth and Drabble looks for ways to 'restory' and the lives of ageing and old women and to revision attitudes to old age in an ageist culture.

The final novels also help us to question the notion of Drabble as a writer as a stolid realist who is uninterested in narrative experimentation. On the contrary, my discussion of *The Sea Lady*, *The Red Queen* and *The Seven Sisters* pinpoints the narrative innovation that is present in her final works. As Nora Foster Stovel puts it, Drabble as a 'lover of narrative interruptions, master of metafictionality, and past-mistress of plot reversals' (Stovel,2004,p.103). In her discursive writings as in her fiction Drabble has been candidly and personally discussed death and dying, ageing and loss, and demise of the humanitarian ideals to which in her prime she gave so much. While the resilience and curiosity of her ageing protagonists and their excitement in life often remains undimmed the author deplores the materialism, individualism and loss of social hope that set in after Margaret Thatcher. Margaret Drabble begins, this, the last phase of her writings, by exploring a dream of an egalitarian future in *The Witch of Exmoor* and ends it pessimistically with the prospect of global nightmare and mass migration in *The Dark Flood Rises*.

## CONCLUSION

This dissertation has shown how Margaret Drabble has gone through a long process of evolution and progress in composing her novels through several decades culminating in the present day. I have traced how Drabble began her literary career as a self-consciously 'woman writer' concerned largely with domestic issues and matters such as motherhood, marriage and women's intimate experiences, and how her early fiction was received enthusiastically by women who had believed that they had discovered a spokeswoman for their concerns, but was later able to establish herself as a novelist dealing with a variety of universal themes and philosophical issues. Drabble's fiction has retained her early concern in morality and has developed from an early focus on subjective, personal experiences to a focus on the individual's responsibility to the wider community.

I have argued that Drabble is essentially a 'condition-of England novelist' but with one important difference from her Victorian predecessors, which is her attention to the history of Britain's involvement overseas and the effects of this involvement on English society. Drabble has been an outspoken opponent of many aspects of British foreign policy over the last six decades including the Gulf War, the Iraq War, and interventions in Ireland and Lebanon. Her fiction has highlighted global issues, including the increasingly mass migration fleeing war-torn Middle East – The dark flood of desperate immigrants will not be stopped unless interventions would end.

I have shown how Drabble is a chronicler of modern consciousness and what Phyllis Rose once termed as a 'chronicler of contemporary Britain' (Rose, P., 1980) who offers a panoramic view of social life in a society which has undergone rapid and sometimes bewildering change. At the same time, she has retained her interest in the

provincial with the focus on her home city of Sheffield (Northam) and can usefully be discussed as a provincial writer who has learned much from her mentor, Arnold Bennett.

Finally, a study of Drabble's work in its totality allows us to see how this has become increasingly pessimistic as she appears to have gradually lost her faith in the inevitability of social progress and a dream of a world offering hope for a better future for all its people. The subject matter of her later novels is bleaker than her earlier work in its representations of inequality, misery and violence which appear at times to be virtually inescapable. When Drabble started writing during the 1960s, her women characters were as young as herself. However, in her later novels, she has produced older versions of her younger characters like herself and careful observation of the ageing process as her women tackle the loss of their faculties in their final years and the prospect of death which they understand is on the near horizon.

It is customary at an end of a doctoral thesis to suggest the direction that future research might take and the critical questions that remain to be addressed. What is striking, however, is the virtual absence of any area of academic research that might be termed 'Margaret Drabble Studies'. While Drabble has lost her enthusiastic early feminist audience and her publications have, in the main, ceased to be of much interest to contemporary feminist critics, she has not gained a sizeable new readership in their place. In fact, for all her stylistic innovation, engagement with topical themes, with the 'global village', modern predicaments and modern consciousness she remains unfashionable. With the exception of Nora Forster Stovel, very few critics have any sustained interest in her development, or have attempted to provide any rigorous overview of her work.

It may well be that Drabble's most recent novel *The Dark Flood Rises* (2016) is her last and that a full reassessment that does justice to her considerable achievements will take place after her death; a subject which has preoccupied Drabble herself in recent years, no less than it has some of the characters in her twenty-first century novels.

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