THE DARKENING VISION OF MARGARET DRABBLE: THE DECLINE OF OPTIMISM IN THE CONTEMPORARY BRITISH NOVEL

by

NANCY EILEEN SHEPHERD

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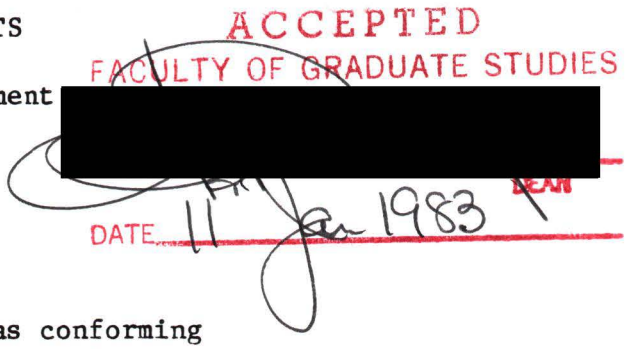

We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

[redacted]

Anthony W. Jenkins

[redacted]

Constance M. Rooke

[redacted]

Jennifer Waelti-Walters

[redacted]

C. Monahan

UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA

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Supervisor. Dr. Anthony W. Jenkins

ABSTRACT

Many of the contemporary British novels written during the Seventies reflect the dispiriting effects of that decade. In particular, Margaret Drabble's nine novels to date span a period which saw the optimistic anticipation of the early Sixties decline into the weary disillusion of the Seventies. Her early novels are circumscribed by her own experiences, but they do reflect the privileged social circle of her Oxbridge generation. Although her heroines are intelligent and literary, they experience an uneasy guilt over their craving for the glamour and excitement of the early and mid-Sixties. However, by her third novel, The Millstone (1965), Drabble has become more sensitive to the every day realities outside the world of brilliant self-fulfillment.

Her middle novels represent an important stage in her progress. Jerusalem the Golden (1967) is the summation and explosion of her youthful aspirations, it is an unambiguously satirical view of the glamorous life she portrays in the previous novels. The Waterfall (1969) is Drabble's most personal work in which she appears to explore her own marriage in relation to her ambitions as a writer. Her subsequent novels are directed outwards and present an increasingly complex view of contemporary British society. The Needle's Eye (1972) extends beyond the privileged social circle of the previous novels, as Drabble explores the contemporary scene through a variety of social

groups. This novel marks her growing awareness of Britain's economic and moral decline. In her three most recent novels, she widens her range still further, but continues to focus on the decaying state of her country and the apprehension which grips that society. However, Drabble is unique in that she moves beyond her increasingly dark portrayal of the contemporary scene to suggest the possibility of moral regeneration through pain and suffering. Throughout her oeuvre, her detailed, realist style achieves a universality, for she captures the changing climate of British society as well as the history of an entire generation.

Examiners [redacted]

Anthony W. Jenkins

Constance M. Rooke

Constance M. Rooke

Jennifer Waelti-Walters

Jennifer Waelti-Walters

Caroline Monahan

C. Monahan

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CHAPTER 1

"UP IN THE SKY AND SINGING"

In becoming a novelist, Margaret Drabble discovered a profession in which she could "preserve a balance between work and home."[1] Upon completion of a brilliant undergraduate career at Cambridge in 1960, where she received a double first in English, she was married almost immediately to the actor, Clive Swift. Her own theatrical aspirations were somewhat frustrated by her marriage,[2] so after she became pregnant with her first baby, she turned to writing. "I wrote my first three novels while expecting my three children, thereby disproving, to myself at least, the theory that one kind of creativity displaces another."[3] Born in 1939, in Sheffield, the daughter of a circuit judge, Drabble was educated at the Mount School, a well-known Quaker boarding school for girls in York. Describing her family as "very talented, liberal, middle-class,"[4] she notes that both at school and in her family, she encountered "moral pressure."[5]

The influences of Drabble's Cambridge career combined with her provincial upbringing and Quaker schooling are reflected in her early work. On the one hand, her heroines, including those who have not been to university, are intelligent and literary, conveying, at times, an air of smug assurance. They are either involved, or at least acquainted, with the bright young people of their privileged elite, particularly the cocktail set, the theatre crowd, or people from the B.B.C. or the publishing houses. But, on the other hand, they experience a certain guilt, both about the ease of their success within this exclusive circle and about living for pleasure. Thus a tension exists within these early

heroines who, like their author, come from the northern part of England and are attracted to what London offers their gifted minds.

In addition, they must cope, sooner or later, with marriage and children. As intelligent, talented women, they wonder why they allow themselves to be victimized and constrained by men who are concerned with their own pursuits, why they are limited by marriage from promising careers, and why, instead of being glittering, successful, and romantic, they are reduced by their children to the everyday unromantic. There is, at times, comedy in these early novels, but also considerable soul-searching.

Drabble's heroines seem like projections of her own upbringing and character. She herself admits that "Inevitably my first novels are circumscribed by my own experience and they are all written in the first person, from the woman's point of view, and are concerned with the female experience."[6] Yet the aspirations of these early characters are also representative of an entire Oxbridge generation; Drabble concerns herself with achievers who measure themselves, positively or negatively (by opting out), against the highest possibilities society has to offer. Therefore, her first three novels do not simply portray personal histories, but reflect a social scene. Essentially, they involve those opportunities offered during the early and mid-sixties to cultured, brilliant minds who do not want to become bogged down in the dull, provincial Englishness of their parents' generation.

For Drabble and her contemporaries, London was the very heart of

> the shining, youthful, vigorous New England which had thrust its way irresistibly up through the decaying, class-ridden atrophy of the old; an England whose destinies were in the hands of a young, vigorous, Kennedy-style Government, an England bathed in the dazzling release of unprecedented new talent and energy; the England of brilliant young playwrights, of irreverent film directors and television men, of a glittering new classless culture that was the cynosure of the world.[7]

In her first three novels, A Summer Bird-Cage (1963), The Garrick Year (1964), and The Millstone (1965), Drabble captures the flavour and excitement of this "swinging" world, for it is one to which she, as a recent graduate from Cambridge, would have been particularly receptive.

Her first heroine, Sarah, in A Summer Bird-Cage, rejects the idea of staying on at Oxford because she would much rather embrace the seductive charms of life in London. Throughout the novel, she expresses a longing to be like her glamorous sister, Louise, "way off, wealthy, up in the sky and singing,"[8] to be "in with the world" like her brother-in-law (SBC, 49), to know such "gorgeous people" (SBC, 23). "I should like to bear leaves and flowers and fruit," she says, with characteristic optimism; "I should like the whole world, I should like, I should like, oh I should indeed" (SBC, 70).

Emma, in The Garrick Year, on the other hand, is already a part of this world; married to an actor, she is surrounded by directors, theatre people, and "television men." She herself typifies the swinging London scene with her "cool professional aesthetic privileged photogenic eccentricity" that finds expression in her penchant for "wearing eccentric articles picked up in jumble sales."[9]

Similarly, in The Millstone, Rosamund works on her doctoral thesis in London, while associating exclusively with people in the fields of television, advertising, and writing. In addition, the father of her illegitimate child is an announcer at the B.B.C., which, during the Sixties, was "beginning to exercise a special glamour" and a "'dynamic' vitality" all its own.[10]

As first-person narratives, these early novels demonstrate the relatively limited range of their young author who, at the time she wrote them, had experienced little of life outside university and marriage. But, as a member of that privileged, educated society herself, Drabble conveys, through her first-person narratives, the exclusive nature of her heroines' London circle. Christopher Booker explains in The Neophiliacs that one of the key characteristics of the Swinging Sixties was an eagerness for excitement which drew young people "to the glamorous world of 'communications', of the theatre, journalism, television, films."[11] He goes on to say that, as 'for those smart young graduates from the older universities who might once have entered the Foreign Office or administered the Empire or drifted into teaching, it was now becoming more than ever fashionable to aim at the 'young' and

'classless' world of 'communications' -- at advertising, journalism, or, best of all, the glamorous world of television."[12]

This, then, is the world that Drabble explores in her first three novels, her characters are not only surrounded by "glamour," but are themselves employed in the field of communications. Sarah, who is undecided about her future, is hired by the B.B.C., and her sister works in advertising, "a socially acceptable occupation,"[13] until she marries the novelist, Stephen Halifax. Emma, of The Garrick Year, anticipating a glamorous job as a newsreader on television, relinquishes that opportunity in order to accompany her actor husband to a provincial theatre festival where, of course, she is still islanded by London glamour. Even The Millstone's Rosamund, ensconsed in the academic world, makes occasional excursions into the field of journalism where she does "from time to time a little reviewing and a good deal of reading of friends' plays and poems and correspondence."[14]

For each of these heroines, London is the centre of excitement and possibility; the provinces, on the other hand, are scorned for their drabness and gloomy prospects for self-fulfillment. As Donald Horne points out in his book, God is an Englishman,

> there would be a case for saying that Britain is the world's most provincial nation, that because of their location more of its people are condemned to a sense of dowdy second-rateness... than is usually characteristic of a people. To live in England anywhere north of somewhere around Warwickshire is to be provincial, and although a few escape its implications by social class or education, a

> majority of Englishmen are born into this second-rate condition with an overriding sense of being nothing much at all.[15]

This notion of provincial mediocrity is shared by these early heroines especially when they come into contact with provincial elements that clash with their London world. Emma, in particular, is horrified at the thought of living in Hereford because "London means everything to me, noise and human beauty" (GY,18), whereas "the provinces have never appealed to me, except as curiosities" (GY,13). In essence, however, Emma never really leaves the London scene because she is still a part of the theatre world. Perceiving a distinct division between Hereford and her husband's theatre company, she feels that, since she has been deprived of her own glamour and excitement, "I had nothing to do with anything, and yet I was there" (GY,47). Enticed by London's glamour, Emma admits that "My tastes are shallow; my life is shallow, and I like anonymity, change and fame. In Hereford I could have none of these things" (GY,69). Consequently, her boredom compels her into the arms of her husband's director, an affair which is essentially an attempt to recapture the excitement she misses: "With Wyndham," she explains, "I felt life was an entertainment" (GY,105).

In A Summer Bird-Cage, Sarah stands poised on London's threshhold, but because she is so exuberant both in her wide-eyed expectations and her utter disdain for anything provincial, she appears to be either extremely naive or the object of Drabble's attempt at satire. Although the focus of the novel is ambiguous because of a lack of narrative distance, it seems that Sarah's attitudes to London and Warwickshire are

meant to indicate her dubious sense of values. On the other hand, as this is Drabble's first novel, one can perhaps surmise that she is documenting her personal reactions to the London scene in relation to her own provincial background.

The primary target of Sarah's disdain is her cousin who is a caricature of provincial "dowdy second-rateness," a quality which Sarah emphasizes when she describes Daphne's clothes and general appearance.[16] Daphne's presence throughout the novel demonstrates the vast difference between the two social worlds; for example, Sarah is embarrassed to sit beside her cousin at Louise's wedding because Daphne "looked such a fright in her ultra-smart dress" (SBC, 31). Similarly, Louise is appalled when her mother suggests she invite Daphne to visit her because the idea of her cousin and her husband "under one roof" is inconceivable (SBC, 164). Although her presence within their exclusive circle results in a definite clash of types, Louise believes that both she and Sarah shine even more in contrast to their cousin's provincial dullness.[17] "London wouldn't be London if it weren't for the provinces," she claims (SBC, 166).

Yet Sarah is reminded not only of her provincial background each time she encounters Daphne, but of its limitations. She shudders at the thought of her cousin's lowly social position as a history teacher in a provincial town, and experiences a rare moment of exclusion from the privileged circle herself when, lunching with friends at the Tate, she feels "as though everyone else was leading a marvellous, progressive life except me" (SBC, 110). This feeling is intensified by her chance

meeting with Daphne later that afternoon. Afraid of implicating herself with provincial "second-rateness," Sarah is at first torn between acknowledging her cousin's presence and ignoring it. After one of her friends tells her that Daphne cannot help being so dull, Sarah observes a man and his girlfriend in a speedboat on the Thames, an image of "life, youth, movement and excitement."[18] In contrast, Sarah, still affected by Daphne's recent appearance, feels "stagnant and covered in oil and dead feathers" (SBC, 113-114). Reminded of the need to free herself from her own provincial roots, she feels that "Daphne is somehow a threat to my existence. Whenever I see her, I feel weighted down to earth. I feel the future narrowing before me like a tunnel, and everyone else is high up and laughing" (SBC, 114).

In both Emma and Sarah, Drabble demonstrates her own youthful preoccupation with the excitement and glamour of London, and the occasional irony, directed at such blinkered ambition, indicates (as we shall discover) her unease with a world she both craves for and finds suspect. The heroine of The Millstone, however, marks her growing awareness of the realities beyond this charmed circle. Rosamund does not come into contact with the provinces, instead, she is forced by her pregnancy into a world completely outside her own realm of scholarly endeavour. The London she encounters in doctors' waiting-rooms and the ante-natal clinic is in direct contrast to the "smart, expensive mixed lot" with whom she normally associates (M, 37). Her pregnancy compels her into contact with "a scheme of things totally different from the scheme which I inherited, totally removed from academic enthusiasms" (M, 67).

Rosamund describes her first visit to the doctor as "an initiation into reality" (M, 36), where she realizes that she can no longer exempt herself from the activities of every day life, nor can she totally dissociate herself from "the ills of age and worry and penury" of which, it seems, she becomes aware for the first time in her life while sitting in the doctor's waiting-room (M, 38). It is this increasing sympathy for more ordinary mortals which marks a turning-point in Drabble's own reaction to the outside world, a sympathy which accounts for the greater complexity of the novels that were to follow.

But as members of "the young bright set' (SBC, 159), these three early heroines share similar intellectual abilities,[19] and each exudes an aura of confidence concerning her place within a London where "everyone without exception was 'young' and 'talented', 'creative', 'original' and 'glowingly alive'."[20] Of the three, Sarah, in A Summer Bird-Cage, is the only one who is undecided about her future, yet throughout her narrative, we are reminded of her clever mind, her "lovely, shiny, useless new degree" (SBC, 7), and her attractive looks, "all glowing and hot with life and energy and hope" (SBC, 168). Emma, in A Garrick Year, equally confident about the television job she had given up, claims, "I was to have been a pioneer in this field, and I fully expected to succeed where others had failed" (GY, 10).

Similarly, Rosamund, in The Millstone, is certain that her illegitimate daughter will not hinder the progress of her academic career because she believes she will succeed "through the evident superiority of my mind" (M, 112). Nor does she feel she will be socially

ostracized, being so well-established within her London circle. Rosamund knows, furthermore, that she will never truly suffer; after all, she does have well-to-do parents. That the ambulance collects her from "a good address, and not from a bedsitter in Tottenham or from a basement in ever-weeping Paddington" (M, 111) confirms her belief that the illegitimacy of her child will be overlooked and that she herself will gain at least some respect. When her doctor, for example, learns that she is the daughter of Herbert Stacey whom he had known at Oxford, he immediately becomes more amiable towards her, while the less fortunate patients "doubtless piled up in the waiting rooms outside with weary resignation" (M, 123). As she contemplates the success of her academic pursuits at the end of the novel, Rosamund is certain she will encounter fewer problems simply because she will be known as "Dr. Rosamund Stacey," a form of address which will "go a long way towards obviating the anomaly of Octavia's existence" (M, 155).

Reflecting Drabble's own Quaker background, however, these characters all possess a conscience which works counter to the allure of London and success. Despite their intellectual confidence, they experience guilt for being so easily drawn into self-indulgent lifestyles. In A Summer Bird-Cage, for example, Sarah hesitates about grabbing what she wants, even though, intellectually, she knows she is capable of achieving almost anything. She confidently tells her sister, Louise, that, "Of course one can have everything...Have one's cake and eat it. I intend to" (SBC. 60), yet she is still tied by conscience to the provincial world of her parents.

Even though Sarah realizes that "there is no possibility in my home" and "the whole set-up seemed so fossilized and gloomy" (SBC, 19), she is torn, nevertheless, between responsibility to her parents and her desire "to get out as soon as possible" (SBC, 19). The suggestion of her friend, Gill, that they look for a flat together in London provides the impetus she needs to broach the sensitive subject with her mother. Although this scene is highly comic on the surface, it does pinpoint Sarah's painful awareness of her duty and responsibility. She introduces the topic, saying, "I think I might go to London at the end of the week," to which her mother replies in parental fashion by dropping practical obstacles in the path of those intentions: "I hear it's very difficult to find flats in London these days...What will you live on while you're there?" (SBC. 62). As Sarah sidesteps these concerns, her mother attempts to strengthen her maternal hold, first, by opposing outright her "going off all the way to London without a proper job and with nowhere to live" (SBC, 62), and second, by responding with rather hurtful sarcasm: "After all, you won't want to stay here all your life cooped up with your poor old mother, will you?" (SBC, 63). Sarah's conscience is finally pushed to its limits, as she gives in to her mother· "...of course I'll stay," she cried, "it doesn't matter to me at all..." (SBC, 64). This awareness of her responsibility, in addition to a persistent feeling of guilt, lies at the core of Sarah's hesitation to grasp the London world.[21] Although her mother eventually agrees to her leaving home, she scores the final point by inserting yet another hook into her daughter's conscience· "You go off to London, you'll be

better off there, it's your duty to get yourself a good job" (SBC, 64). Thus Sarah's departure is marred somewhat by the reminder of her mother's expectations.[22] However nonchalantly she tells Wilfred Smee later in the novel that 'I will be what I become, I suppose' (SBC, 137), her indifference conceals an anxiety about her obligation to her parents for sending her "off to Oxford' (SBC, 63).

Presenting an interesting contrast, Sarah's sister, Louise, does not appear to suffer from the pangs of conscience, nor does she "seem to hear any little whispers from the past ages of morality" (SBC, 142). Sarah perceives in her a "real old aristocratic predatory grandeur" (SBC, 9), and acknowledges, with some envy, that Louise can seize whatever she wants from the world. In creating a character such as Louise, Drabble is at least exploring the possibility of living a life totally free from moral pressure. Sarah, however, is influenced by the dictates of her conscience, and, therefore, she is shocked and upset when Wilfred Smee informs her of Louise's adultery. She concludes that, "Perhaps it's just a hangover from those days before I was ten. When everything she did affected me. Because I know I'd have to do it too, one day. When my family were a part of me" (SBC, 141). Shaken by Louise's behaviour, Sarah is, nevertheless, aware that she wants all that her sister has, but is prevented by her conscience from going out and getting it.

In striking contrast to this attitude, Louise informs Sarah that she married Stephen solely for his money:

> "I suddenly realized that if I married Stephen I need never think about need or want again. About wanting things I couldn't buy...I must have clothes. I'm only young once, as they say, and I'm already twenty-four, and if I don't have clothes now I'd feel I wasn't paying a debt to nature. And other things like food and theatres. I felt I must have them" (SBC, 196).

Sarah is both shocked and impressed by Louise's all-out attempt to grasp everything she has ever wanted. But interestingly, Drabble cannot allow Louise her unearned success; again, this is a reflection of her own Quaker conscience. Ironically, Louise is literally stripped of all her material gains after Stephen learns of her adulterous affair with the actor, John Connell. As a result of this hardship, however, Louise emerges as a more human, understanding character by the novel's end. By making Louise pay for her easy success, Drabble begins a pattern which becomes increasingly important in her later novels.

Like Louise, Emma, in The Garrick Year, suffers few qualms about her attraction to London,[23] until an old school friend, Mary Scott, unexpectedly arrives on her doorstep. Mary awakens in Emma a recognition of the frivolity of her inclination to live behind "a glittering dreamworld facade."[24] Questioning the value of such a lifestyle, she feels guilty because "she had gone off to Italy, and lived in London, and done nothing at all," whereas Mary had done "useful" things, like finishing university and teaching at "a good girls' boarding school in the north of England" (GY, 75). Forced to analyse her propensity for more obvious glamour, Emma confesses, "I did not dare to tell her about my

aspirations towards glossy photographs and television screens. I could see now, in the cool useful light of her eyes, how paltry, vain, and valueless all such desires truly were" (GY, 75-76). However, when Sophy Brent, that "walking symbol of an actress" (GY,78), drops in during Mary's visit, Emma sees before her the juxtaposition of two opposing ways of life, and, despite her nagging conscience, finds herself drawn more to Sophy's "technicolor-brightness" (GY, 60) than to Mary's practical intelligence.

Rosamund of The Millstone is forced by a more pressing circumstance, her daughter's illness, to question the importance of her lifestyle. Where previously she had resigned herself and her friends to her impending motherhood and proceeded confidently with her scholarly pursuits, she finds that, with this new worry, she cannot concentrate on her work. When Octavia first shows signs of illness, Rosamund hesitates to phone the doctor, but is eventually forced to the realization that "It was not a simple choice between comfort and duty" (M, 117). This awakening of responsibility towards her child surprises Rosamund, as she becomes gradually aware that she now has more to contend with than her work. Thus her concern for Octavia draws her out of her egocentric preoccupations, she recognizes that "now for the first time I felt dread on another's behalf, and I found it insupportable" (M, 120). When she tries to visit Octavia after her operation and is refused permission, Rosamund is in a position to see that "It was no longer a question of what I wanted this time there was someone else involved. Life would never be a question of self-denial again" (M, 132). She decides to

take a firm stand, and screams until she is allowed to see her baby. This is a major breakthrough for her, because rather than "breaking in two" (M, 134) as she had feared by so forcing herself, she not only endures the uproar she has caused, but is swept into a room which otherwise would have remained off limits. Thus Rosamund discovers the advantage of squarely facing an issue; when the nurse, Sister Watkins, refuses to speak to her, a fact which would have devastated her before, Rosamund now proudly exclaims, "the twinges of guilt that I felt whenever I encountered her were fainter than any I can recollect" (M, 136).

She learns, by the end of the novel, to assert herself and to endure "the pain of causing trouble" (M, 145). During a conversation with another woman with a sick child, Rosamund recognizes her own newly-acquired attitude. This woman used to play down her son's illness in order "to save other people's feelings" (M, 139), but now she has learned that "I only have enough time to worry about myself. If I didn't put myself and mine first, they wouldn't survive" (M, 140). Rosamund, then, learns compassion from those who must live to the dictates of the every day world and, like them, must learn to fight against these drab pressures in order to preserve a sense of personal identity. Such a conclusion marks a decisive stage in Drabble's own battle.

For, while trying to come to terms with duty and responsibility, each of the early heroines must take into account all the problems that men, marriage, and motherhood entail. A consistent theme throughout the three novels is the notion that domesticity jeopardizes one's chances of becoming a member of "the young bright set" (SBC, 59), that children

especially tend to draw one away from brilliant self-fulfillment. A Summer Bird-Cage is punctuated with recollections of the idyllic relationships within "the esoteric masonic paradise" of Oxford (SBC, 8). Louise, for example, remembers "how seriously we used to take all these things at Oxford, truth and honesty and being subtle with people and not trampling on feelings" (SBC, 201). But such relationships are not easily transplanted beyond the protected confines of university. The marriage of Gill and Tony, two college friends of both Sarah and Louise, is at first "just a sort of prolonged Oxford but with London instead" (SBC, 39); however, it swiftly declines into dismal reality. "You don't know," Gill tells Sarah, after she and Tony have separated, "what a difference it makes not to have meals provided. To know that if you don't start peeling potatoes there won't be any potatoes. You haven't been out long enough to know" (SBC, 40). Similarly, Louise recalls her friend, Stella, who, having married the man she loved at Oxford, is now entangled in motherhood. The image of Stella living in a slum, surrounded by wet nappies and plastic toys, compels Louise into declaring, "...never never never will I let that happen to me. Never will I marry without money...I want my life, I want it now, I don't want to give it to the next generation" (SBC, 205).

The exceptions to this pattern are Stephanie and Michael, "one of the steady couples in Oxford, with a predictable career mapped before them of three years' idyll followed by a July wedding immediately after finals: all of which had, of course, charmingly happened" (SBC, 84). The underlying tone of this picture of domestic bliss is ironic, since

Sarah, particularly, feels that the pair have settled for something less than they might have had;[25] Stephanie and Michael are "the sort of people one might very much like to be , if one didn't suspect that through this gaining nearly everything one might lose that tiny, exhilarating possibility of one day miraculously gaining the whole lot (SBC, 85). Sarah herself waits for the return of her fiance, Francis, from America to see if they can reestablish their former idyllic Oxford relationship. Ultimately, she must consider the reality of marriage, and try to come to terms with the fact that, as she is not really interested in a career, she is destined to be known as "a don's wife" (SBC, 137), despite her assertions to the contrary.[26] But it is not without significance that Francis does not appear directly, for it would appear that in her first novel, Drabble is unable to reconcile personal success with marriage. Sarah, for example, considers withholding any mention of Francis "on the grounds that it was irrelevant" (SBC, 73), however, she eventually realizes that, by insisting he accept a scholarship to America, she "may have been simply delaying the problem of marriage" (SBC, 74).

Drabble's second novel, The Garrick Year, is a fictional account of the year that she herself spent with her actor husband in Stratford with the Royal Shakespeare Company, where she admits that she "must have been quite depressed."[27] What her heroine must come to terms with is that her identity, the person that was Emma Lawrence, has become smothered by both marriage and motherhood. Deprived of a job that would have provided her with an identity quite apart from her husband and two small children, Emma is conscious that she is no longer regarded as being worthy

of attention because she appears to be just a wife and mother. Meeting the rest of the festival's cast on the train to Hereford, Emma notes that "Sophy was not bothering to watch me. I knew why: it was because I had a baby on my knee" (GY, 36). But when Sophy learns of Emma's former modelling career, she demonstrates a certain "respect and dislike," where, on the other hand, Emma remarks, "If I had pretensions to nothing, if I had no interest in the theatre, in entertainment, in modelling, in television, she would be quite happy to like me" (GY, 62-63).

However, Emma later questions her ability to reestablish herself as an individual identity, weighed down as she is with two children: "What chances were there now for the once-famous Emma, whose name had been in certain small circles the cause for so much discussion and prediction? They would not think much of me now" (GY, 108). Emma's depression seems to parallel Drabble's own state of mind during her year in Stratford, where she found herself "doing this really awful job in theatre," and, as "a kind of defiance,"[28] wrote The Garrick Year. But within this novel, Drabble demonstrates a new kind of maturity, as Emma herself evolves towards a reaffirmation of her domestic role after the near-drowning of her daughter. Although her children draw her away from the social scene she craves, she finds her new self in the reality of motherhood: "I have two children, and you will not find me at the bottom of the river. I have grown into the earth, I am terrestrial" (GY, 170). In The Millstone, on the other hand, although Rosamund endangers her social position by failing to have "an expensive abortion" (M, 59), she paves the way for future Drabble heroines who raise families or pursue successful careers without a husband.

Even though these novels are interior and limited, they do reflect the social scene of the early and mid-sixties. It is important to note, however, that there is a definite personal and moral progression among these early heroines. Both Sarah's and Emma's narcissistic, but conscience-ridden, preoccupations with London glamour find a resolution in Rosamund's deeper understanding of the mundane rhythms and predicaments of every day reality. Each of these novels demonstrates a conflict between personal success and marriage which culminates in Rosamund's discovery (first glimpsed by Emma) that children are not simply a pull on one's career. Where men tend to be constraining and competitive, children offer a way of caring and of opening oneself, thereby leading one out to a wider world. By her third novel, then, Drabble appears to recognize the value of that life which exists outside the privileged social circle of her elite. This recognition allows her to look more objectively upon "the young bright set" whose shallowness she is then able to expose unambiguously in her next novel, Jerusalem the Golden.

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[1] John Wakeman, ed. World Authors 1970-1975 (New York: H.W. Company, 1980), p. 217.

[2] Nancy S. Hardin, "An Interview with Margaret Drabble," Contemporary Literature, 14 (1973), p. 277.

[3] World Authors 1970-1975, p. 217.

[4] Ibid., p. 218.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., p. 217.

[7] Christopher Booker, The Neophiliacs: A Study of the Revolution in English Life in the Fifties and Sixties (London: Collins, 1969), p. 254.

[8] Margaret Drabble, A Summer Bird-Cage (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1980), p. 25. All subsequent references in the text will be to SBC and page number.

[9] Margaret Drabble, The Garrick Year (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1979), p. 26 and 27. All subsequent references in the text will be to GY and page number.

According to Booker, "In dress, rigid trends in fashion were already giving way to a tendency to wear an article of clothing, whether in 'space age' plastics or a tattered Victorian wedding dress, so long as it was sufficiently eye-catching and bizarre." The Neophiliacs, p. 231.

[10] Booker, The Neophiliacs, p. 154.

[11] Ibid., pp. 98-99.

[12] Ibid., p. 133.

[13] John Crosby, "London - The Most Exciting City," Daily Telegraph, 30 April 1965, quoted by Booker in The Neophiliacs, p. 21.

[14] Margaret Drabble, The Millstone (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1981), p. 12. All subsequent references will be to M and page number.

[15] Donald Horne, God is an Englishman (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1969), p. 38.

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[16] For example, Sarah says, "I don't know if Daphne cares about her looks at all. I fear she probably does, because her clothes, though hideous, are always elaborate, not careless, and she overcurls her hair and wears a very bright red lipstick which makes her skin look pale and dead. She wears it in an effort to appear gay." (SBC, 32). Later she sees Daphne at the Tate, looking like "a cross between a symbol and a cartoon": "She was wearing a maroon coat with a fitted waist, and brown middle-height high-heeled shoes with thick heels; her hat was dark green and felt, and her handbag was rather expensive crocodile skin. Under the coat I could see she was wearing her Sunday suit and a pale blue blouse.' (SBC, 111)

[17] Horne describes provincial dullness: "The buildings in a provincial city are grimy with the smoke of the factories that spawned them: to the sunlessness of winter there is added even in summer a haze of filth. The heart of the city is empty. There is nothing much to do in it at night: nowhere much to eat, nowhere much to go. Empty streets. Empty buildings. There is no pride of display in its architecture, no sense of distinctive belongingness." God is an Englishman, p. 38.

[18] Booker, The Neophiliacs, p. 65.

[19] Their similar intellectual interests are demonstrated in their choice of reading matter in the most unlikely places: Sarah takes a copy of Paradise Lost to a party; Emma attempts to relieve the boredom of Hereford by reading Italian novels, and later recuperating from illness, she reads Wordsworth and Hume; Rosamund leafs through Rosamund Tuve as she waits in the ante-natal clinic.

[20] Booker quotes Crosby's article, The Neophiliacs, p. 21.

[21] Her mother's influence is apparent when, after going to London, Sarah is appalled by the squalor in which Gill lives in Highgate. "...all the people in it were trying to be artists," she says, "I kept remembering my mother's comments about dirt." (SBC, 65-66) Describing "the phoneyness of the whole setup," she concludes, "I hated the way they all felt it their duty to be rude, frank and blunt..." (SBC, 66).

[22] Sarah envies Simone's "wholly willed" and "wholly undetermined life" (SBC, 71), but she knows she is prevented from behaving irresponsibly simply because of her conscience. Contrasting herself with Simone, she explains that "she can deal with people much more quickly than me. If they start anything she just spits. With real old aristocratic vehemence. There's class for you. I'm too bourgeois, I wouldn't know how to spit. Usually I daren't even protest" (SBC, 50).

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[23] This is evident during her encounter with Mr. and Mrs. Scott at the civic reception. In keeping with her eccentric nature, Emma had donned an old black hat she bought from a junk shop in London. She notes that "it was with a pang of sadness, as though realizing my age, that I noticed I did not much care what she thought of my hat. I would rather have burned with shame than have faced her from such a cool appraising distance, for I used to admire her, as I had admired her daughter..." (GY, 51).

[24] Booker, The Neophiliacs, p. 240.

[25] Gill confirms for Sarah the impossibility of ever wanting "to live like that" (SBC, 116).

[26] In her conversation with Wilfred Smee, Sarah insists that she will not be "a don's wife;" rather she is "going to marry a don" (SBC, 137).

[27] Hardin, "Interview," p. 291.

[28] Ibid.

CHAPTER 2

"A GARDEN OF IDLENESS"

Jerusalem the Golden (1967), The Waterfall (1969), and The Needle's Eye (1972) represent a crucial stage in Drabble's development. Her first three novels contain little objective judgement, as she explains, "I was writing things as they impinged on me then."[1] The Millstone, however, does point forward to the novels that followed: Rosamund's discovery of a London beyond the elitist circle not only demonstrates Drabble's broadening sensibility, but clears the way for her fourth novel in which she presents an unambiguously satirical view of the life that she had partly succumbed to earlier.

Jerusalem the Golden finally exposes the hollow glamour of London's cultivated young leaders. In her first attempt at third-person narration, Drabble stands on the outside of this world and so achieves a more objective viewpoint from which to poke fun at the trendy aspirations of her contemporaries. Her tone takes on a new precision, an Austenesque particularity of diction and word order which hones her satirical edge. Exaggerating the schema of A Summer Bird-Cage, the heroine who longs to leave her provincial home to establish a foothold within glamorous London, Drabble intensifies Clara's desire to leave Northern England: "Northam was to her the very image of unfertile ground...She hated her home town with such violence. She hated it, and she was afraid of it, because she doubted her power to escape..."[2] Because of her fear of dying "in so ugly a hole, and so unloved" (JG, 28), she has constant visions, reinforced by the hymn, "Jerusalem the Golden," which she transforms into a personal image of "not the pearly gates and crystal walls and golden towers of some heavenly city, but some truly terres-

trial paradise, where beautiful people in beautiful houses spoke of beautiful things" (JG, 32). Drabble maintains this inflated image of London throughout the novel, concluding in Clara's final vision of "a tender blurred world where Clelia and Gabriel and she herself in shifting and ideal conjunctions met and drifted and met once more like the constellations in the heavens: a bright and peopled world, thick with starry inhabitants, where there was no ending, no parting, but an eternal vast incessant rearrangement..." (JG, 205-206). Thus Drabble establishes a new, satirical view of her contemporaries' infatuation (as well as her own) with the London of the sixties, an infatuation which she has chronicled more ambiguously - half fascinated, half conscience-stricken - in her earlier work.

Throughout the course of the novel, Clara cannot help but compare the grimness of her provincial home town with the lure of London to which she proves to be naively susceptible. Even when the surface of this golden world is scratched to reveal a less than desirable interior, she remains faithful to her vision of "a bright and peopled world." Upon her first visit to the house of Gabriel Denham, the "sexy" television producer, Clara expects "something rather spectacularly gay, some prize and choice specimen of London housing" (JG, 131) only to have this image fade when she finally sees the house, which is almost provincial in its decayed condition: "tall and dark, the paintwork grim, and the stone lintels cracked and scooped by time, neglect and hard weather" (JG, 133). Shocked, at first, by this picture, Clara nevertheless convinces herself that "such a house was the most natural place in the

world for such a man as Gabriel to live in" (JG, 133). She is not only unwilling to accept the realities behind her untarnished image of London, she also demonstrates, at times, an inability to perceive them. After meeting Gabriel's wife, for example, she thought Phillipa "looked as though she came off the front page of Harpers...She looked au fait, she looked in touch, she looked knowledgeable; she did not look as though she would relinquish anything very easily" (JG, 118-119), but what Clara fails to see is that this glamorous appearance conceals a passive and neurotic character.

In essence, Jerusalem the Golden is both the summation and explosion of its author's youthful aspirations. But what Drabble satirizes is not so much her heroine's overwhelming passion for London (since she herself probably empathized with Clara's desire to leave Northern England), but what little of value she finds once she gets there.

The poetry reading which Clara attends at the beginning establishes the novel's satiric tone and underlines the ostentatious nature of the fashionable society she craves. She is naively impressed with Peter's "foothold in the poetic world" (JG, 12) and she has great respect for his opinions even though, clearly, they make little sense to her. "...when he had whispered to her that he thought Denham was superb and Harley awful, she noticed in herself a slight but unmistakable flutter of surprise; for was not Eric Harley so well-articulated, so clear, so strong, and Denham so monotonously even and undramatic?" (JG, 12). And yet, without question, she affects these seemingly illogical opinions herself; noting that one poet read with "great emotion," she

wholeheartedly agrees with Peter that Margerita Cassell "was not good...for how could anything so pleasant be good" (JG, 12). Later in the dressing room, listening to the idle chit-chat of the poets and their followers, Clara decides that "it was this sense of trivial, gossipy familiarity that most pleased her, for it convinced her that she was listening to real professionals' (JG, 14). Such naivete stresses the superficiality of this life as well as Clara's overriding desire to be a part of it.

In her portrayal of the heroine, Drabble has drawn upon the distinctive qualities of her previous characters, for Clara resembles Sarah in her anticipation of the exciting life, Louise in her ruthlessness to gain a foothold within the London world, Emma in her eccentricities, and Rosamund in her independence and unwillingness to become emotionally involved with a man. Clara's desire to succeed is indeed so intense that she becomes violently ill when she cannot assimilate her new experiences quickly enough: "She wanted to see, but the things that she saw were too much for her; her mind stretched and cracked in an effort to take them in' (JG, 107). She even admits that "It was hard work, the acquiring of opinions" (JG, 107). That voracious accumulation of attitudes and opinions is ironic because the sophisticated life Clara strives for has little real substance, as the poetry reading attests.

Nevertheless, like Sarah in A Summer Bird-Cage, Clara recognizes London as the centre of possibility, especially in contrast to the claustrophic atmosphere and grim surroundings of her home in Northam. Despite being transported "incredibly, mercifully, to London" (JG, 8) by a State Scholarship, she remains tied to her provincial roots. Thus

Clara's insatiable desire for the pleasures of this bright world is counterbalanced by the pull of Northam. For each step she takes up the social ladder, she experiences a pang of guilt for escaping from so dismal a background. However, these guilty feelings do not deter her. Aware that she has been attracted to the superficial all her life, Clara admits that she feels only "slightly uneasy" about this:

> ...she had sought the smartly intense, at the expense of the more solid and dowdy virtues; she had been attracted by surfaces, by clothes and manners and voices and trivial strange graces, and she had imitated what she had seen in others. She was drawn unquestionably to the appearance of things, though she was aware that she had as yet much ground to cover...She seemed to live by an instinct which drew her strongly and on the whole accurately towards such manifestations, such hints and echoes of a grander world, and which at the same time could not approve them (JG, 88-89).

Clara pushes aside these faint stirrings of her conscience in order to achieve her ultimate goal in gilded London. Her affair with Gabriel, which she plans even before she sets eyes on him, is simply a means of self-advancement. Characteristically, she finds herself "from time to time on the verge of wondering uneasily whether she did not find more pleasure in the situation than in the man" (JG, 161), and yet, this does not stop her from contemplating marriage to him. Such a marriage, she believes, will not limit her, but will guarantee a secure position in London society:

> She wished to set, through [Gabriel], a value on herself. The image of a honeymoon, with its close and

> passionate solitude, meant little to her...It was not one man that she needed, but through one man a view of other things, a sensation of other ways of being, she wished to feel herself attached to the world...it was not Gabriel himself after all that she wanted, but marriage to Gabriel...(JG, 169).

Clara does not change throughout the novel, but continues her relentless and naive pursuit of her ambitions. With the impending death of her mother, she is more determined than ever to sever her connections with the provinces. Because she is portrayed dispassionately, Clara is not a particularly sympathetic character. On the other hand, Louise, her counterpart in A Summer Bird-Cage, is portrayed with more compassion, even though she appears to be as ruthless in her bid for money and fame. But unlike Clara, Louise achieves a kind of salvation when she is forced to give up her material possessions. Through her first-person narration, Drabble expresses both envy for Louise's "predatory grandeur" and sympathy when she is finally stripped of everything she has gained. In Jerusalem the Golden, however, the author maintains a narrative objectivity, distancing herself from Clara's social aspirations and exposing the shallowness of the glamour she craves. The cutting satire of this novel is essential to Drabble's progress; by writing Jerusalem the Golden, she has purged herself of her starry-eyed preoccupation with the London of the mid-sixties.

In her next novel, The Waterfall, Drabble shifts direction, exploring the notions of success and creativity on a more personal, interior level. She does, however, continue to embrace the themes of her previous work. In particular, she extends to even bleaker proportions the

theme that marriage jeopardizes one's chances for an achieving life. Jane Gray follows the familiar route of early Drabble heroines, graduating from Oxford, moving to London, and taking "the first thing that offered itself on leaving college without bothering to lay more serious plans."[3] Living in a flat "full of girls, whose chat about sex and food and clothes and books" gives her "an illusion of life and company," Jane continues to write and publish her poetry. "Great hopes had once been held out for me," she explains later, "and I kept a secret faith with them" (W, 110). But after marrying a successful classical guitarist, she feels compelled to cut herself off from her social ties. "From the very beginning, from the first day, I could not imagine what I was meant to be doing," she says; "somehow the fact of being married took all life from me, it reduced me from the beginning to inactivity" (W, 99). Isolating herself from her former life, she explains,

> I had had friends, once: friends forced upon me by circumstance, by proximity, by institutional life - even a friend or two of my own choosing, people who resembled me, a girl who wrote poetry, a man who edited a literary magazine, a man who wanted to write plays - normal people, real people with roots and branches, fed by the outer world. But I dropped them, suspecting that Malcolm would not like them...I sank into solitude, as though it were my natural element (W, 107).

Jane's present existence is, in effect, a renunciation of her public role as a creative mind, she no longer publishes, "having lost all contacts and all desire to see my treacherous words in print" (W, 110). However, she continues to function on a private level, conveying her malaise in a series of poetic and romantic imaginings. When she becomes

afraid to venture out of her house, the London she sees from her window reflects her despair. Where Clara envisions London bathed in golden light, Jane can only respond to the city's bleak ugliness. Employing terms that in the previous novels had usually been reserved for grim provincial perspectives, she describes herself wandering "round the cold and empty house, watching the rain fall outside, seeing the windows silt up with London grime, watching the dust thicken on the furniture. She did nothing. She had often, as a girl, imagined such a life: empty, solitary, neglected, cold" (W, 8). Outside it snows, and her life, like the weather, seems "to be cooling into some ice age of inactivity":

> The snow lay thin but concealing...London was stony, but in the snow its ugliness was concealed...and all that melting could do would be to reveal the ugly heart, the brick-like depths. What she saw from her own window had no beauty, had never possessed beauty: a street of London houses, a perspective unalterable, not snow like brick, but brick itself (W,17).

This gloomy vision of London does not stem from any sense of social disillusion, but is the result of Jane's personal malaise.

Isolated by marriage and children, she feels that she has sacrificed a potentially promising career as a poet by binding herself to Malcolm and an "empty destiny" (W, 103). She despairs over the fact that she is an inadequate mother and fails to see the point in "living with a man and cooking his meals in return for housekeeping money" (W, 101). Although Jane claims that she had been enthusiastic about her husband's career, there is an underlying tone of resentment which

gradually rises to the surface. What emerges is her difficulty in reconciling Malcolm's success with her own "nebulous, shadowy, unidentifiable" existence (W,141). She is convinced that his nonchalant attitude towards his career is simply his way of concealing "his true, voracious nature" (W, 105), just as his anxiety over his responsibility to her and their child is "a mask for his violent personal condition" (W, 104). Malcolm's good fortune, mirrored in his purchase of flashy clothes, has a detrimental effect on his wife. When he takes to wearing "one of those navy blue caps popularized by certain pop singers" (W, 106), Jane despises him, since the cap symbolizes his rising status in the music world, and she retaliates by "dressing deliberately, provocatively badly" (W, 106).

Confined by the mundane realities of an unhappy marriage, Jane attempts to free herself through her cousin, James, whom she romanticizes to fit her ideal. Herein lies the key to her schizoid discourse. Composed of first and third-person narrations, The Waterfall not only reflects Drabble's growing confidence in her craft, but demonstrates, artistically, the division her heroine feels within herself. When she explains how from childhood she had been unable "to distinguish between falsehoods rendered true by passion, and truths made false by duplicity" (W, 55), Jane pinpoints the distinction the reader must make in order to sift through the perplexing blend of truths and lies that make up her two narratives; indeed, it can be debated whether James exists at all or is simply an ideal projection of Jane's creative mind. Her first-person

assurance that "he was real, I swear it", for example, is finally counterbalanced by her remark that the waterfall "is real, unlike James and me, it exists" (W, 236).

Jane's third-person narration, then, is the outgrowth of her repudiation of her husband's world. Malcolm is simply an extension of everything she had sought to escape in her family background: "loneliness, treachery, hardness of heart" (W, 100). James, on the other hand, "represented all that my family was not: so that he was at once an exorcism and an ideal" (W, 53). Thus the third-person narration is devoted to a portrait of an ideal love, with James as its focus, while the first-person narration is Jane's factual counter-commentary, filling in details that the other narrative omits. "Because I so wanted James," she explains, "because I wanted him so obsessively, I have omitted everything, almost everything except that sequence of discovery and recognition that I would call love, I have lied, but only by omission. Of the truth, I haven't told enough" (W, 46).

Jane feels compelled by her conscience, then, to try to justify her love affair with James, to find excuse for "that isolated world of pure corrupted love" (W, 130), especially in contrast to the unhappy marriage from which she has withdrawn. "And yet love has a reality, a quotidian reality," she tries to tell herself, "it must have, everything has, and it's merely my own inadequacy that can't face it, my own guilt that winces from knowing it" (W, 85). Hence the I-persona recounts the "sordid conditions" (W, 130) of her married life, while the third-person narrator manipulates and selects details to create a beautifully

artistic image of "the pure flower of love itself" (W, 84). Repressed though she was during her marriage to Malcolm, Jane had continued to write as therapy for her frustrations. "The more unhappy I was the more I wrote," she explains, "grief and words were to me inseparately connected" (W, 109). James, however, actually replaces her desire to write poetry because he is artistic in his approach to their love affair:

> ...she loved him for these carefully chosen encounters, for his delicate widening explorations of their islanded world, for the gradually increased speeds on the speedometer, for a mile more here, a word more there, all staggered, all arranged, all chosen, not wildly or blindly undertaken, but done with such care, such art, such dedicated frivolous love, each word sinking gently into its rightful place in her heart, each touch received so gently into her body (W, 71).

The car accident is the turning-point for both narratives because, after that event, the image of ideal love begins to evaporate. "From a fast car's windows," Jane says, "all landscapes, however strange, have a fluid solemn sameness, a dignified irrelevance, and from the dazed and drowsing pastoral contemplation of them I had been flung against the rough locality" (W, 189). The accident forces her to come face to face with reality, for she admits that it "had given shape and form to my guilt: I could no longer evade it" (W, 196). Within the third-person narration, the she-persona begins to abandon the ideal image of romantic love, sliding into a tone of self-accusation which anticipates her eventual disappearance from the novel:

> For what, after all, in God's name had they been playing at? Fast cars, card tricks, kisses, sighs, vows, the whole lot?...It had been some ridiculous imitation of a fictitious passion, some shoddy

> childish mock-up of what for others might have been reality...as non-existent an image they had pursued as God, as Santa Claus, as mermaids, as angels, as that non-existent image of eternity (W, 201-202).

The third-person narrator acknowledges that the love affair had not been such an ideal one, because James "had not wanted her in love any more than she had wanted him in so pure a cause. Desperation had thrown them together...what he had given her had been no miracle, no unique revelation, but a gift so commonplace that it hardly required acknowledgement" (W, 205-206).

Although this admission signifies Jane's confrontation with reality and her acknowledgement of the "sordid" facts of "adultery, guilt, the smashed car" (W, 206), her inability to relinquish the ideal image of pure love lies at the heart of the novel's prevailing ambivalence. In a curious reversal, the I-persona takes up the position of the third-person narrator by defending James's love, explaining that "he made the new earth grow, he made me blossom...He changed me forever and I am now what I am" (W, 229). In spite of this reassertion of the ideal, however, Jane cannot impose an ending on her narrative, nor can she fit it into a tidy framework where she and James will be united in sublime, romantic love. She notes in James's first letter after the accident, for example, that he too searches "for a phrase that would unite and condone us...as I search now for a conclusion, for an elegant vague figure that would wipe out all the conflict, all the bitterness, all the compromise that is yet to be endured" (W, 230). Throughout the final pages of the novel, Jane reiterates the romantic notion that "Had we

died, as all true fictional lovers die, had we both, then these things would have been evaded forever" (W, 196).

Jane bitterly regrets that actuality is seldom so uncomplicated or tragic,[4] and yet the end result of her romantic imaginings about James and her eventual acceptance of reality is her re-entry into the activities of every day life. She sets her house in order, acquiring an au pair girl to look after the children, and resumes publication. She and James continue their affair, but no longer with the poetic significance that Jane's creative mind had attached to it. Nevertheless, she insists that James entered her life at an opportune time; without him, she says, "where would I have been, where would have lived the woman that writes these words? He changed me, he saved me, he changed me...but for him, where would I now have been? Alone and mad perhaps: or reunited with Malcolm, more likely, dragging out his days in endless faint reproach and sick resentment " (W, 228). In James, then, Jane finds a stimulation, rather than a repression of her personal and creative self. Her love affair with him, which approaches the level of fantasy in her third-person narration, frees her from the constraints of an unsatisfactory marriage and allows her to pursue, once again, a career in the literary world.

In comparison to the rest of the oeuvre, The Waterfall stands alone in its peculiarity of form and extreme introversion. Where the other works reflect a social scene, this novel is so deeply personal that one is tempted to see its significance in terms of its author's private and interior development. Through Jane's predicament, Drabble appears to be

exploring her own marriage to an artist, the actor, Clive Swift, in relation to her personal ambition as a writer. But because of The Waterfall's perplexing form and ambivalence, this correspondence between Drabble's experience and that of her heroine is, at best, conjecture only. However, just as Jerusalem the Golden exorcises her youthful aspirations, the private intensity of The Waterfall seems to exorcise her difficulty in reconciling the conflicting demands of a successful career and marriage to an equally ambitious actor. Possibly then, the double narrator signifies this division within Drabble herself. In her heroine's relationship with James, she seems to contemplate the possibility of discovering a man with whom she could find peace. This seems to have been a personal worry pinpointed in her first novel by Sarah's reluctance to even discuss her fiance, Francis. Yet Jane's eventual acceptance of reality and the continuation of the affair on a more down-to-earth level show that, even with a perfect lover (who probably must remain a dream idea anyway), one's life will not be significantly altered. In demonstrating Jane's re-entry into the every day world and her determination to carry on, Drabble has resolved, or at least purged, the conflicts within herself, for she never again writes on such a purely personal level. Her next novels demonstrate a new maturity, as if The Waterfall frees her from any further consideration of herself. The Needle's Eye takes off into a wider canvas (a breadth that is characteristic of all her subsequent work), moving beyond the superficial attractions of London and exploring the contemporary scene through a far greater variety of social groups.

In this, her longest novel to date, Drabble demonstrates her broadening scope as well as her growing sensitivity to Britain's declining optimism. Her social observations now extend beyond the exclusive London milieu of her previous work, as she refers specifically to contemporary events that involve the country as a whole.[5] Landscape becomes increasingly important in The Needle's Eye, for it does not simply reflect the moods of its characters, as in The Waterfall, particularly, but becomes a subject in itself. Although the early novels capture the flavour of swinging London, The Needle's Eye offers objective portraits of the city and "all its smart contrasts."[6] With meticulous detail, Drabble describes London's varying districts, and uses those backgrounds to define the social classes of her characters. Simon and Julie, for example, live in a period house "in a pretty, elegant, fashionable terrace," in the "nice district of Hampstead" (NE, 75). Rose, because she comes from a well-to-do background, could also live in a "nice district," but chooses, for moral reasons, to reside in a run-down working-class neighbourhood noted for its "rows of identical houses, the endless curving streets, the ugly squat inelegantly-gabled terraces, the dark breath of urban uniformity, petty eccentricity and decay" (NE, 43). The interior scenes, especially, convey in their particularity both the "comfortable bourgeois texture" (NE, 12) of the affluent and the well-worn shabbiness of the lower classes. Where Rose's home is "small, low, overcrowded with furniture" (NE, 45), Simon and Julie's is "spotless, smart, and trendy, full of plants and attractive little knick-knacks" (NE, 75). Similarly, Nick and Diana's

"deeply-upholstered off-white settee" and "luxuriantly waving, almost grotesquely verdant, silky rug" contrast sharply with "the threadbare carpets ... the coconut matting, the ill-laid linoleum, the utility furniture, the curious upholstery" (NE, 13) of both Simon and Nick's childhood provincial working-class homes.

Drabble's accurate portrayal of London in all its contrasts culminates in a bleak panoramic view from Alexandra Palace of a city overrun by industrial growth and property development. "There it all lay, London, the roof tops, Hackney marshes, the railway lines, the fair delusive green spongy fields of sewage" (NE, 391). Punning on the word "affluence," one of the novel's major themes, Drabble describes the view, "where houses stretched, and tower blocks, and lakes of sewage gleaming to the sky, and gas works, and railway lines, effluence and influence, in every direction, all around, as far as the eye could see" (NE, 398). This cheerless scene is reinforced by Rose's friend, Emily, who comments that "the whole world is turning into dust. People are like rats. Look at them, rats. We'll start living in the sewers soon" (NE, 398).

Although centred around the affluent world of success, The Needle's Eye captures "the unmistakable and widespread sense of malaise"[7] that characterized the late Sixties. Where Drabble's early heroines experience the euphoria and excitement of the mid-sixties, the characters in this later novel must endure the aftermath. The "shining bubble"[8] in which they had lived in expectation of 'dynamic' government and a New

England had finally exploded, leaving behind disillusion and weariness. As Christopher Booker explains in The Seventies,

> The Sixties were certainly a time when it was still possible for most people to look forward in hope to an as yet unrealized future. But as that frenetic decade wore on, it became increasingly apparent that not all was well with the dream...The paradise we had all been moving towards so rapidly in the late Fifties and early Sixties seemed to be proving curiously elusive. And so, on a deep note of questioning did the Sixties come to an end.[9]

This malaise which affected all of Britain during the latter part of the decade is prevalent throughout The Needle's Eye: despite their success and material prosperity, the characters exhibit a certain lack of vitality and genuine interest in their fashionable society. Unlike their younger counterparts in the earlier novels, they no longer need to strive for success. This, however, seems to lie at the root of their malaise. Having made their mark, they appear to lapse into a kind of apathy which they try to disguise behind false gaiety. Drabble shows, in her perception of Britain's changing climate, that she has progressed considerably from Sarah's wide-eyed expectations in A Summer Bird-Cage to the "increasing boredom and detachment"[10] of the characters in The Needle's Eye.

Simon, the main exponent of this disenchantment, is Drabble's first successful male character in that he is not an idealized figure, like James in The Waterfall, but a long-suffering, though accomplished lawyer, who looks at the world through tired, embittered eyes. Belong-

ing to the generation that had once derived pleasure from the social and cultural events of the early and mid-sixties, Simon has since subsided into an"irretrievable boredom" (NE, 33). He is all too well aware that the "pop art, modern plays, television, owners of art galleries, interior decorators and modern furnishings" (NE, 33) which glutted the pages of the Sunday colour supplements only a few years before have all become tediously familiar. Simon himself no longer has anything to contribute at cultivated dinner parties, nor does he feel he knows anyone well enough with whom he can share his disillusion. Ironically, having striven to rise above the claustrophobic surroundings of his earlier middle-class background, Simon realizes that, in achieving success, he has thrust himself "into the thinner air of non-touching, into larger rooms and spaces" (NE, 54) where genuine intimacy and contact are inconceivable. The world he now inhabits, despite its deeply-upholstered furniture and plush carpets, is hollow and cold.

The result of Simon's malaise is a rather disparaging, sometimes caustic, examination of the sophisticated, affluent life that he and his friends now lead. With weary cynicism, he contemplates Nick's success in television, which had once seemed to offer the highest possibilities for achievement and personal fulfillment. Simon, however, now regards the television world as a veritable "garden of idleness," where

> bright young middle-aged people stood about on burgeoning, sprouting carpets and drank large drinks and watched their own reflections, discreetly, in mirrors and eyes, and laughed at themselves with great good nature as though their simple wit (their own marketable

> commodity, and what price it fetched) could buy them off from judgement. Amusing they were, amusing they knew themselves to be, but since when had a slight facility been a guarantee of an outcome such as his father and Nick's father had never dreamed of? (NE, 14-15).

By criticizing this self-important, image-obsessed world, Simon pinpoints the whole sense of unreality of his contemporaries' lifestyle. The novelty of the golden age of television had long since worn thin, but those employed in the field perpetuate the meagre talents that had initially thrust them into the limelight. Even outside their studios, they behave as though they are under the continually critical stare of the television camera. Simon is disturbed by the money and fame achieved in a profession which has so little real substance.

He is even more perturbed by the chic dinner parties that characterize this fashionable circle. Under his critical scrutiny, they appear to be tense, strained affairs where guests gulp down alcohol and display "their unlovely hypocrisies' (NE, 187), anxious to maintain an air of congeniality. Simon himself asks why "he should spend so much time like this with people he really disliked, talking about things that bored him rigid" (NE, 186). He can feel a similar discontent within his friends. It is almost as if they cannot accept the explosion of that bubble of vitality which had once motivated them all. Although his friends try to give the impression of enjoying themselves, Simon can sense "a cry of mute anguish and lonely fear" emanating from each one (NE, 186). Drabble, then, moves beyond Simon to show how others, besides himself, suffer from a general and prevailing disillusion.

Diana, the wife of Simon's friend, Nick, for example, captures the essence of this mood when, after her dinner guests leave, she thinks, "So pointless it was, such an evening, such a stupid life she had, such stupid frivolous aspirations...What was it for...what was it for, and why would she do it again the week after next?" (NE, 38).

Simon's wife, Julie, represents the most severe case of dissatisfaction in the novel. Despite having everything that money and success can buy, their "nice house," a large car, expensive clothes, and extravagant holidays, she is "profoundly, painfully, evidently unhappy" (NE, 69), and, consequently, a contributing factor to Simon's own dissatisfaction. Behind her gay social exterior lies a hostile, spiteful woman who cannot even derive pleasure, or purpose, from her children whom she looks upon simply as "useful adjuncts" (NE, 204).

Julie offers a striking contrast to Rose, both morally and socially. Where Julie expresses a rapacious craving for the world of colour-supplement success, Rose makes a conscious effort to separate herself from it. Where Julie is "profoundly" unhappy with her privileged lifestyle, Rose attempts to find happiness through self-imposed poverty. Painfully aware of "the wickedness of riches" (NE, 91), she is motivated by a desperate, and, at times, neurotic need "to appease God himself" (NE, 286). Thus she tries to mitigate her terrible guilt for having been born wealthy by donating her inheritance to the building of a school (which, ironically, is destroyed almost immediately during a civil war) in a small, obscure African nation. In this regard, Rose is quite possibly the expression of Drabble's guilt toward her own success

and achievement. In an interview, she admits that

> Something that worries me tremendously is that fate has really given me a wonderful deal, a magnificent hand of cards, it is tremendously unfair and it's leading to disaster...I can't understand why other people don't have the same luck I do. I don't think it's fair and I don't think it right. I wish to handicap myself.[11]

Through her heroine's self-imposed poverty, Drabble appears to be exploring her worry over what she fears has been too easy a success.

What Rose searches for are such simple pleasures as "cut prices and sunshine and babies in prams and talking in the shops" (NE, 111). Simon, in particular, is impressed with this unworldly, and uncomplicated, approach to life. In one episode, he accompanies her and Emily and their children on a walk through their working-class neighbourhood in order to view, of all things, some chickens and an armchair. Although the chickens are fenced within an ugly bombsite and the armchair itself is rotting and mouldy, Simon is, nevertheless, charmed both by the scene and by the genuine closeness he feels towards the two women. "So great and innocent a peace possessed him that it seemed like a new contract, like the rainbow after the flood. He could feel it, on his bare hands and face. It lay upon him. It was like happiness' (NE, 237).

Simon, however, is the only friend who understands Rose's need to live a life of her own choosing, free from the dictates of fashion.[12] Others cannot comprehend her strange desire to repudiate affluence and

success, nor her eccentric attempt to seek redemption. Interestingly, some of her friends react with hostility, as if Rose's repudiation of material prosperity were an indictment of their own self-indulgence: "You're being very selfish, they used to tell her, those hard realists with their central heating and their fitted carpets and their ambitions, and how could she persuade them that her life was as pleasant to her as a fitted carpet" (NE, 162). Rose, however, is driven by an overpowering belief in "the rich not getting into heaven" (NE, 91), and seeks only contentment and anonymity in her ramshackle house in its impoverished neighbourhood where she is "really very happy now, if only people would allow her to continue with her own admittedly curious way of living" (NE, 91).

The central conflict of The Needle's Eye, then, is between Rose's puritan conscience and this sophisticated London world of success. But despite her efforts, she remains very much a part of fashionable society, since her attempts to seek anonymity are consistently undermined. The fact that she gives away most of her money, for example, does not allow her to retreat into the quiet, unassuming life she had hoped for, but accentuates her status as a celebrity. Nick and Diana invite her for dinner because her presence is a reflection on themselves; she "was the honoured guest, the star, the sanction for the evening's gathering" (NE, 20). Rose herself, impelled as always by her conscience, cannot cut herself off completely from her former existence. Essentially, she finds herself in a no-win situation. "I can't resist any of the claims that people make on me," she explains to Simon, "and one can't lose the

life that one had friends in, because they are friends, and so I see them, and I do things for them, even in public from time to time" (NE, 112).

Furthermore, Rose cannot totally dismiss success and wealth because they pursue her relentlessly. To Simon, she admits, "I'd always at the bottom of my heart believed that one couldn't get rid of money, that it would stick like a leech or a parasite, and breed and breed even if one tried to cut it out" (NE, 105). Calling her working-class life a "mockery," she adds that "...I pay my way and live as modestly as I can, but there are always people to ask me out, and newspapers to pay me or at least feed me and give me drinks when I want them..." (NE, 106). Similarly, she cannot completely denounce her father's world. This is particularly evident when she returns to her parents' Norfolk home in search of her children who have been abducted by her ex-husband, Christopher. Demonstrating an affinity for her long-forgotten background, she recounts the history of the estate to Simon, and proudly displays its beautiful landscapes. And when she overhears two women admiring the tea put on by her parents, she "could hardly prevent herself from taking some kind of credit" (NE, 324). Although she, like Drabble, wants to "handicap" herself, Rose cannot totally denounce her former privileged lifestyle.

Ironically, Christopher, the very reason her father had disinherited her, is "now working for him in apparently successful and energetic high-powered financial harmony" (NE, 128). But what attracted Rose to her husband in the first place was that, in his slovenly appearance and

crude, aggressive behaviour, he diverged so drastically from her own rather refined, affluent upbringing. She had looked upon him in the same way she had looked upon the small African country to which she donated her inheritance. He was "one of the dispossessed - doubly so, financially and racially" (NE, 90-91). But what Rose failed to recognize was Christopher's burning ambition to succeed, to rise above 'van driving and waiting and dealing and double dealing" (NE, 102).

Towards the end of the novel, when his "desire to grab - herself, children, money, even parents-in-law" (NE, 361) proves too strong to resist and he moves back into her house, Rose nevertheless tries to remain "loyal to her vows" of self-imposed poverty (NE, 385). But, however much she tries to allow herself to suffer through poverty, ironically, Christopher destroys Rose's independence by offering her too much success (unlike those men and husbands of the previous novels who restrict by denying their women social opportunities). Under Simon's watchful eyes, it appears, at first, that "she is winning some victory in there, behind those threadbare curtains" (NE, 385). What happens to Rose, however, represents a final triumph for that kind of life she tries in vain to repudiate, that her district, "by some freak of fashion" (NE, 385), rises above its working-class origins is an ironic blow to her puritan conscience, since she cannot help but be drawn back into a lifestyle which she has tried so vigorously to reject. Simon, in particular, is saddened by the changes: "He saw Rose's house repainted on the outside, he saw Rose taken off for a summer holiday in Italy, he saw her depart for weekends in Norfolk, he saw her offer him drinks as

though whisky were not three pounds a bottle" (NE, 387). More important is the impact of this extravagant lifestyle on Rose herself. Reconciled to a husband she no longer loves, and forced to lead a life which her conscience cannot morally accept, she no longer experiences the "spiritual calm" (NE, 394) of her self-imposed poverty. She feels she "had ruined her own nature against her own judgement, for Christopher's sake, for the children's sake...the price she had to pay was her own living death...as heaven (where only those with souls may enter) was taken slowly from her, as its bright gleams faded" (NE, 395).

In Rose, however, Drabble hints at the direction in which she seems to be moving in her subsequent novels. Rose's failed attempt to renounce material prosperity in favour of a more unworldly and demanding existence looks forward to those later characters who derive a certain peace from experiencing pain and hardship. In terms of Drabble's development, The Needle's Eye shows her wider range, both in sustaining half the narrative from a male point of view and in extending far beyond the privileged social circles of the previous novels. Through richly detailed landscapes, the novel demonstrates an increasing sensitivity and concern for the less advantaged areas of London, first touched upon in The Millstone. Rose's guilt at acquiescing to a world of self-indulgent luxury, as well as Simon's tired, jaundiced perspective point forward to the general sense of apprehension and despair that pervades the next three novels.

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[1] Peter Firchow, ed. The Writer's Place. Interviews on the Literary Situation in Contemporary Britain (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974), p. 107.

[2] Margaret Drabble, Jerusalem the Golden (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1981), p. 27. All subsequent references in the text will be to JG with page number.

[3] Margaret Drabble, The Waterfall (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1972), p. 99. All subsequent references in the text will be to W with page number.

[4] Jane's bitterness is particularly evident in the postscript to the novel where she ponders the thought of "ending the narrative not so much with James's death as with his impotence: the little twentieth century death" (W, 239). She is ashamed of so belittling their relationship, but resents the fact that "In the past, in old novels, the price of love was death, a price which virtuous women paid in childbirth, and the wicked, like Nana, with the pox. Nowadays it is paid in thrombosis or neurosis: one can take one's pick" (W, 238-239).

[5] For example, towards the end of the novel, she refers to "a Tory government, a new Industrial Relations Bill, decimal coinage, a new world later" (NE, 389).

[6] Margaret Drabble, The Needle's Eye (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1979), p. 9. All subsequent references in the text will be to NE with page number.

[7] Christopher Booker, The Neophiliacs (London: Collins, 1969), p. 277.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Christopher Booker, The Seventies: Portrait of A Decade (London: Allen Lane, 1980), p. 9-11.

[10] Booker, The Neophiliacs, p. 277.

[11] Nancy S. Hardin, "An Interview with Margaret Drabble," Contemporary Literature, 14 (1973), p. 289.

[12] A kinship exists between Simon and Rose in that he, too, influenced by his provincial upbringing, suffers from guilt for the ease of his success and his self-indulgent lifestyle. Rose senses this kinship when she tells him about Noreen, the puritanical woman who looked after her as a child: "Simon Camish had responded to Noreen more than some: there was either religion or self-denial in his background, she could tell, or he would not at all have known what she was talking about" (NE, 89-90).

CHAPTER 3

"A NASTY SELF-RECOGNITION"

In her three most recent novels, The Realms of Gold (1975), The Ice Age (1977), and The Middle Ground (1980), Drabble extends her range still further, demonstrably, she now has her finger on the pulse of contemporary Britain. In discussing her career, she has noted that

> In my work, I try to confront the problems that confront me. The worse the problem the more interesting the book. The problems used to be personal ones - how to combine marriage and work, for example - but now I find myself increasingly interested by and able to tackle more general subjects: the guilts and anxieties of British society, an individual's relationship with his own and his country's past.[1]

Her consideration of various social groups in The Needle's Eye points in the direction of her later work in which the personal problems of her characters are related to, and often the result of, the ills of British society as a whole. The failure of Prime Minister Wilson's "classless, dynamic New Britain" and the subsequent economic decline contributed to a general sense of uncertainty, emptiness, and guilt at having been entranced by "the glittering prizes" of the early and mid-sixties, all of which is conveyed throughout these three novels. In The Ice Age, the comedian, Mike Morgan, berates his audience, now mere shadows of that privileged, glittering elite, for being "drunk, idle, affluent, capitalist, elitist," until they are finally driven "ashamed, from their stalls, full, one supposed, of a nasty self-recognition."[2] Drabble shows that she had gradually lost the optimism of her generation, as her social observations become increasingly grim.

In addition, she has grasped "the introverted mood" of the British, who, during the Seventies, were "mainly concerned with themselves" and "obsessed with their own immediate problems which were always pressing enough to give countenance to this self-centered attitude."[3] Even when the settings of these novels extend beyond Britain itself, the concerns of the characters remain firmly focussed on the condition of their country. The Realms of Gold, for example, encompasses a wide, sprawling canvas, a pattern begun with Rose's interest in the small, obscure African nation of Ujuhudiana in The Needle's Eye. Frances's career as an archaeologist takes her out of England in order to trace the pasts of Chad, Adra, and the Sudan, while the geological pursuits of her cousin, David, "had taken him to some strange landscapes, and some strange extremes of heat and cold - the Falkland Islands, the Solomon Islands, Alaska, Australia, Adra."[4] Yet Drabble, in presenting these broader backgrounds, is not deeply concerned with these countries, rather it is from outside England that her characters achieve an objective viewpoint and pass judgement upon the state of their own country. Regardless of where they might find themselves, they always turn their thoughts to England. In the small African country of Adra, for example, Frances thinks, "It was almost impossible for anyone from Europe to realize how extraordinarily new, how unexploited the resources were here. Britain was so old, so crowded, so confused, so sated, so dug-up and reburied, so cross-threaded, all its interests were so interdependent, so obscure. Here, everything was new. Even the history was new" (RG, 249).

Similarly, in The Ice Age, Alison is overwhelmed by the decayed condition of England when she returns from Walachia, "the most obscure and mysterious of the communist states" (IA, 45). She cannot help but draw parallels between the two countries: "After Krusograd, London seemed very large, very frightening, very noisy, very dirty" (IA, 154-155), and later, at Northam Station, surrounded by garbage, she is reminded that "in Walachia, it was clean. The streets were clean. There was no garbage" (IA, 165).

In The Middle Ground, Kate never ventures outside England, but is made to see her country objectively through the critical eyes of an outsider, the visiting Iraqi, Mujid, who "lies in wait for her on her 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."[5] Standing on the Underground platform with him later on, she wonders what he makes of "London Today" (MG, 104), as she reads, as if for the first time, the racist slogans painted on the walls: "She had grown used to them, had learned to ignore them, but in [Mujid's] company they seemed unavoidably prominent" (MG, 105).

Throughout the three novels, however, these rather unflattering observations are counterbalanced by an undying affection and loyalty for England. On her second visit to Tockley, in The Realms of Gold, Frances reflects upon "How beautiful England was, how lovely a place is an English town" (RG, 299), a thought echoed later on by her cousin, David: "England...How lovely to be in England. I don't know why one

ever goes away." (RG, 333). Alison's resolution to "go down with" her country in The Ice Age stems from the fact that "She had so loved England" (IA, 165). And, in a panoramic view of London in The Middle Ground, Kate affectionately surveys the city in which she has lived all her life:

> From the twelfth-floor window London stretched away ...unplanned, higgledy-piggledy, hardly a corner wasted, intricate, enmeshed, patched and pieced together, the old and the new side by side, overlapping, jumbled, always decaying, yet always renewed, London, how could one ever be tired of it? How could one stumble dully through its streets, or waste time sitting in a heap staring at the wall? When there it lay, its old intensity restored, shining with invitation, all its shaggy grime lost in perspective, imperceptible from the dizzy height, its connections clear, its pathways revealed. The city, the kingdom. The aerial view...(MG, 238).

While this optimistic view invests the dirt and decay with "a gold evening radiance" (MG, 238), it does not entirely dispel Drabble's somber portrait of London in the seventies. As in The Needle's Eye, she treats landscape as a subject in itself, providing camera-like sweeps through the eyes of her characters. Kate notes the violent messages slashed across the walls of the Underground, as Evelyn, sitting in a traffic jam, gazes "at the cheap shop fronts advertising perpetual Closing Down Sales and Special Offers, at the banked garbage in black bags, at the dirty pavements, at a stall offering Selected Fruit" (MG, 133).

London, then, is no longer viewed as the centre of possibility and excitement, but has become a violent place, weathered by change, and

ravaged by painted slogans advocating hostility and racism. When Evelyn is nearly blinded by one of her clients, Kate ponders the growth of violence in the city, of "ill will, hatred and frustration, of the terror we each now feel when walking down a concrete underpass, when we fumble for a key on our own doorstep with the sound of footsteps behind us, when an unknown car pulls up at a kerb" (MG, 223). That violence is even more pronounced in The Ice Age, as Max Friedmann is killed by an IRA bomb in a fancy Mayfair restaurant, while his wife, Kitty, loses a foot in the blast: "London was growing unpleasant, everyone agreed" (IA, 13).

Rural England, as well, reflects the declining state of the country. Where The Middle Ground is restricted to the contemporary London scene, the two previous novels demonstrate one of the British trends of the Seventies: a drawing away from the city and removal to the country.[6] In her treatment of the provinces, Drabble no longer looks down upon them as she does in her early novels, but recognizes that they, like London, experience a kind of violence. When Frances makes her pilgrimage to her family's hometown of Tockley in The Realms of Gold, she is appalled by the changes that have overtaken it: "Some of the old shops were still there, but those that remained looked shabby and full of old useless bits...There were two new enormous supermarkets, filling a street each...Instead of tea shops there were Wimpy Bars, dirty coffee shops and sandwich bars, a Chinese restaurant...A whole street full of shops was empty and derelict, awaiting demolition..." (RG, 113). Tockley, it seems, had fallen victim to Britain's great property boom, a

subject to which Drabble gives greater focus in her next novel, The Ice Age. Even though the town appears to be thriving, its development has only undermined its unique character. As Norman Shrapnel writes in his book about Britain in the seventies, "The decline of our towns was progressive and sinister. The smaller ones grew more and more indistinguishable as one routine development scheme after another strove to keep the traffic moving and accommodate multiple stores, after showing a brutal unconcern for the streets and buildings that once gave every town its own character."[7] Hence Frances is bewildered by "the number of estate agents, building societies, investment societies, banks, central heating firms, and lighting firms that filled the best positions in the main streets' (RG, 113). She is even more alarmed to discover that the route to her grandparents' cottage was "utterly, utterly changed. Nothing was left as it had been. Landmarks had disappeared, new ones in the forms of garages and discount stores had risen. And to her mounting dismay, she realized that there was no country left. The whole road was built up, lined with houses" (RG, 113).

Despite the countryside's gradual disappearance and the decline of rural towns, these later characters seek refuge in the provinces from the unpleasantness of London. As Shrapnel explains, this was another feature of British life in the Seventies: "The country cottage habit among the urban middle classes was growing. Motorways had brought the weekend retreat even nearer. Villagers...could move into the nearest council estates leaving their tottery cottages to immigrant townsfolk, who would pay unheard of prices."[8] However, as Frances's brother, Hugh,

and his wife, Natasha, discover in The Realms of Gold, they cannot escape the ills that plague them by retreating to their cottage in the Cotswolds. In spite of the cottage's "idyllic position" and Frances's belief that "everything that Natasha did was real and perfect" (RG, 190), there is an ironic tinge to Drabble's assertion that it was "A pleasant scene, a rural scene, a family scene" (RG, 189). She soon undercuts it with the fact that Natasha "had the gallant air of a woman fighting a losing battle," and "Her husband was drunk, as he was every night of his life" (RG, 190). Through the careful arrangement of decor and an enthusiasm for "real" rural activities, Natasha attempts to give the semblance of a happy marriage. Frances admires the efforts of her sister-in-law, but feels that her grandparents' cottage, although "a gloomy dump", in contrast, had been "the real thing" because they had not tried to create the illusion of anything else: "Compared with this warm, cosy, attractive interior, it had been cramped and draughty, cluttered yet bare, ugly and tasteless, full of cheap mementoes and meaningless souvenirs...Yes, it had been a gloomy dump. But it had been the real thing' (RG, 203). What happens in these later novels is that because they cannot find contentment in London, some of the characters try to renew themselves by turning away to the country. Hugh and Natasha try to find a new vitality through the wholesomeness of rural living. Sadly, however, it does not work, nor can it work, because the problem is not only with their surroundings, but also with themselves. Hugh either cannot or will not recognize this, since he resents Natasha's involvement in group analysis sessions.

This retreat to the countryside also plays an important role in Drabble's next novel, The Ice Age. Moving from the rather amiable tone of The Realms of Gold, she offers a sour portrait of the effects of the economic crisis of 1974-76 on what she admits is "perhaps [an] unrepresentative group of British citizens" (IA, 184-185). As Christopher Booker explains, this crisis was largely a result of the Tory government's relaxing of credit:

> Only a tiny proportion of this non-existent 'new money' went into industrial investment. A much greater amount poured into property, of all kinds... property values soared. House prices doubled in eighteen months, the boom in commercial property was so great that it became a 'bubble', into which the pension funds, banks, 'fringe' banks and insurance companies poured cash with a recklessness never seen in Britain before. It was a very sick period indeed in English life, throwing up all those morbid symptoms which always attend a 'get-rich-quick' psychic epidemic...[9]

In Drabble's words, "depression lay like fog" over the entire country, while "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..." (IA, 62-63).

Anthony Keating, caught up in the property boom and its collapse, tries to escape the general "sense of alarm, panic and despondency which seemed to flow loose in the atmosphere of England" by retreating to his country house in Yorkshire. In contrast to London where a bomb had killed Anthony's friend, Max Friedmann, High Rook House "had seemed

safe, a place where one could avoid the disagreeable intrusions of London life: the people, the garbage, the traffic" (IA, 13). Yet it is not "safe" because it only provides the illusion of escape from the London rat-race, just as Hugh and Natasha's cottage is "the illusion of a home" behind which he camouflages his alcoholism and she, her despair (RG, 240). High Rook House exists for Anthony as a constant reminder that he might never be able to pay for it. As Alison tells him, "You've got a completely artificial way of life" (IA, 175).

Questioning his motives, he thinks of other friends who

> in the past few years, had moved to the country, some driven by prosperity, others by failure. Most had acquired properties within reach of London, in Kent and Sussex and Norfolk, in Oxfordshire, the Cotswolds, Wiltshire, even, by motorway, Wales. Some claimed they wanted to grow vegetables, others that they could not take the pace of London life... What were they seeking, what were they fleeing? Were they fleeing a London that was going the way of New York - garbage-strewn, transport-choked, dirty, violent? Or were they simply seeking every Englishman's dream: his own plot, his own castle, his own estate? (IA, 67).

Essentially, what Anthony achieves in his purchase of the country house is the replacement of one set of material possessions with another. Of that generation obsessed with the images of success, Anthony looks upon High Rook House as little more than concrete evidence of his personal prestige. His reasons for buying it are extremely feeble, as he "did not want a Rolls or a yacht, he did not want an aeroplane, he did not want to ski or to water-ski. So a country house had seemed a natural

stage in his natural progression" (IA, 67-68). Understandably, then, High Rook House "was to him not unlike a prison" (IA, 68-69). Since he is not really of the country and no longer a part of the London scene, Anthony is caught in a kind of inertia. "he had let dust and rubbish accumulate; he had not even bothered to unpack some of the articles that had arrived from London, and boxes and clothes and crockery stood around the large drawing-room and the long stone corridor" (IA, 75).

Similarly, for Anthony's former college friend, Linton Hancox and his wife, removal to the country provides neither solace nor refuge. Their cottage functions simply as an extension of their depressed states of mind and mutual unhappiness:

> It was depressing. The cottage was in a small, straggling, insignificant, not unattractive village, and it was old and should have been picturesque...it was shabby, cramped and ill organized...[it] was bitterly cold, full of an icy damp. being old none of its doors or windows fitted, and the chill oozed in from the fields and the garden...(IA, 71)

And, in The Middle Ground, Evelyn, disillusioned by her job as a social worker in London, has "fantasies of moving to the country, of getting away from all this, of resigning altogether and digging her own garden" (MG, 134-135); but her friend, Stella, who lives in Worcester, informs her that the apprehension and despair that grip London society have spilled over into the provinces, for "the orchards and tennis courts and swimming pools of the West Midlands were no longer the Garden of Eden, had they ever been so" (MG, 139).

In addition to this focus on rural England, Drabble documents the deplorable changes brought about by industrial society and the property boom. Maintaining her position as an objective social observer, however, she refuses to romanticize or become emotional about the effects of industrialism. Frances, for example, recalls a ditch in Tockley which had given her great delight as a child because "it was full of creatures...It was untouched, undisturbed, and the water, over the yellow mud, was clear and cold. Frances often drank from it, and found it delicious" (RG, 107). But upon her return to Tockley, she notes that "There was a building site just on the other side of it, with concrete mixers and signs and heaps of bricks, where once there had been another pure and endless field of cabbages" (RG, 118). And instead of the clear, cold water that Frances remembers, "A thick oily scum covered the water: bits of paper, fag ends, Coca Cola bottles, an old tyre, a chunk of polysterene and a car seat floated in it. Bubbles, not from fish or newts, but from some invisible putrescence rose to the surface" (RG, 118).

Frances's discovery of Mays cottage, the home of her Aunt Con, offers her a pleasant surprise, since, unlike the ditch of her childhood, it remains virtually untouched by both industrial and property development. Understandably, having seen the effects of change on the entire town and surrounding countryside, Frances "had been expecting the worst:" "She had pictured decay, rusted corrugated iron, tin cans, broken bottles, rotten planks, dung heaps, the worst of the country, but

instead there was a cottage, overgrown with thorns and brambles, crumbling and falling, but crumbling to nature only, not to man' (RG, 303).

In The Ice Age, property development comes under heavier attack when Alison tries to manipulate her way through newly-developed Northam, fully aware of "what people complained about when they complained about the ruination of city centres' (IA, 168). The nightmarish predicament in which she finds herself reinforces her fears that the entire country is going to ruin. As she tries to cross a road to some shops, she is overwhelmed by "the stink of carbon monoxide," surrounded by litter, "walled in by elephantine walls," and "deafened and sickened" by the whole situation (IA, 168). 'It was monstrous, inhuman, ludicrous," Alison seethes. The obvious lack of sensitivity in the development of Northam is underscored when she catches sight of a dying dog whose side has been ripped away by a car in his attempt to cross the road. 'Where would it go?' Alison wonders, aware that she, too, is 'forced like the dog to pursue her own ends in a hostile environment' (IA, 170). With the image firmly fixed in her mind, Alison later reproaches Anthony and what developers like him "have done to the face, to the very face of the country" (IA, 176). Her fear that England is "going to the dogs" finds further support when she trips over the dead little dog that the girlfriend of Anthony's business partner neglected to take with her.

Similarly, Len Wincobank's girlfriend, Maureen Kirby, is bothered by his unsympathetic attitude towards tenants who are forced out of their homes for redevelopment purposes: "He was all for more ruthless powers of eviction...poor old ladies touched not a chord in his black

heart" (IA, 88). The eviction of Maureen's own aunt and Len's forced removal of his mother from her terraced cottage recall the case of Mrs. Sharkey in The Needle's Eye who, having been moved to a council flat, soon becomes "fed up' with it: "the plaster was cracking, the lift never worked, she missed talking on the front steps, she missed her neighbours, she missed Rose" (NE, 386). As Christopher Booker explains, the problems experienced by Mrs. Sharkey were not uncommon in Britain:

> The fifteen-storey tower block stands tatty and forlorn, its concrete cracked and discolouring, the metal reinforcement rusting through the surface, every available inch covered with graffiti...Piles of old cigarette packets and broken bottles fill every corner, while the wretched, glum-looking tenants shuffle past to wait for the only lift that is still working...the experience is familiar - that of the contrast between the dreamworld of the architect's drawing and the grim, inhuman result that only too often emerges...[10]

The tower block which, at one time, stood "gleaming white in the sun" is a metaphor for the decline of modern Britain. "The bright, anticipated dream followed by a seedy, nightmarish reality," Booker writes, "has of course been the dominant pattern of much of our schizophrenic century."[11] In the same vein, Drabble's cast of characters, in conjunction with her accurate portrayal of the contemporary scene, demonstrates a movement from "the bright, anticipated dreams" of her early novels to the disillusion which pervades her most recent works. Unlike the early characters who are poised on the edge of "an as yet unrealized

future,"[12] the characters in The Realms of Gold, The Ice Age, and The Middle Ground no longer perceive their futures stretching endlessly before them, and, consequently, they evince both apprehension and despair over what their limited futures will hold. Their confidence over their ability to further fulfill themselves is eventually replaced by a prevailing disillusion and a constant questioning about what they have gained. Thus the characters ask themselves: where has it all gone? was it worth it?, and where do we go from here? In chronicling a generation "obsessed with success,"[13] Drabble shows the overwhelming emptiness of it all.

Drabble seems to push these later characters back upon their own resources, and the ones who are "saved" have a certain deep-down integrity that helps them survive. Rose, in The Needle's Eye, tries to save herself by repudiating success and money, and living a working-class lifestyle, but fails in her attempt. In contrast, Frances in The Realms of Gold enjoys having a career, success, and fame which have all come to her with remarkable ease. Rather than admiring her heroine's achievements, however, Drabble treats her satirically, laughing at her vanity and easy success. "I imagine a city, and it exists," Frances proudly tells herself, "If I hadn't imagined it, it wouldn't have existed. All her life, things had been like that. She had imagined herself doing well at school, and had done well. Marrying, and had married. Bearing children, and had borne them. Being rich, and had become rich..." (RG, 34-35). When one of her colleagues tells her, sarcastically, that "we all know you're the golden girl, don't we?," clearly, we are meant to

see Frances as a greedy, "vain, self-satisfied woman" (RG, 30). In this respect, Drabble is perhaps pondering once again her own seemingly effortless rise to the top of the literary world.

Frances is a particularly unsympathetic figure in the encounter with her cousin, Janet Bird. Where in A Summer Bird-Cage Drabble regards Daphne, Sarah's provincial cousin, as an object of ridicule ("a cross between a symbol and a cartoon," SBC, 111) she looks compassionately upon Janet who tries to eke out a satisfactory existence for herself and her baby. Her attempts to achieve some kind of novelty in her life, for example, her use of the chicken recipe in last month's Femina magazine, are pathetic, and her concerns over which placemats and wine goblets to use simply underline the routine dullness of her every day activities.

Whereas we never know what Daphne is thinking in A Summer Bird-Cage (which increases her ridiculous posture), we are taken inside Janet's mind where we can see that she suffers from what Donald Horne calls "an overriding sense of being nothing much at all."[14] In order to survive a marriage to a man she does not love and to prevent herself from sliding into the likes of her neighbour ("timid, nervous, gauche, sad, unfinished," RG, 152), Janet puts up a barrier around herself and her baby: "She was on her own, in a solitude that was so bleak that it was a thing on its own, almost a possession, almost company. She and the baby were in it together...they shared the same envelope of darkness" (RG, 130-131).

Janet "always deeply dreaded that she would do something wrong" (RG, 133); Frances, on the other hand, is described much more derisively as being a "Happily neglectful, confident mother, no agonizer she over bits of bread salvaged from the carpet, over mud and diseases: haphazard, confident, efficient cook. To them that have, it shall be given. There was no need for Frances Wingate to bury her talents" (RG, 134). Our sympathy for Janet is further increased when we see her from the point of view of Frances who, at first, cannot recognize the total emptiness of her cousin's life. All she can see upon entering Janet's home are "the cheap carpet, the cheap modern furniture, the pretentious orange curtains, the pretentious Swedish candles, the desolate bleak wilderness of boredom..." (RG, 319). Janet, in turn, having recalled the colour supplement article on her famous relation, reacts defensively to Frances's visit with a frosty indifference. From her position of London superiority, Frances automatically categorizes her young cousin as a typical provincial: "tight-mouthed, slightly sour, over-tidy ... critical, mean, not yet quite hardened into irremediable bitterness, but well on the way towards it" (RG, 319-320). In Janet, however, Frances encounters, for the first time, someone who is unwilling to acknowledge her success and fame. Only after Janet reproaches her for the article in the Sunday Examiner does Frances warm up to her cousin: "Janet Bird was not a fool, not a fool at all. She was so pleased, so grateful, that she had thought of ringing her" (RG, 326).

Typically, however, it is the hardship of being without her lover, Karel, that eventually saves Frances and frees her from wallowing in self-importance. When he fails to respond to her postcard proclaiming her love for him because, unknown to Frances, it had been delayed by a postal strike, she believes that he no longer loves her. Unused to such defeat, and despite her continued success as an archaeologist, she is overcome with a sense of aimlessness. Like Anthony in The Ice Age, she is adrift, having abandoned Karel for rather obscure, if not vain reasons: "He was making her better natured and he was preventing her from wanting to work" (RG, 17). But she realizes how alone she is when she becomes ill and has no one to turn to except her family, a realization that precipitates her despair. Recognizing the need to "connect" with somebody, she resolves to "apply herself seriously to the business of living in the world again" (RG, 81). She makes her pilgrimage to Tockley in order "to find out what it was that was worrying her" (RG, 103), but her visit only underlines her despair: "What hopes should one have of any future?" she asks herself, when recalling her trip. "What had she found there? What held her like a stone round her neck, like a stone in her chest, heavy, solid, inert?" (RG, 195). By the end of the novel, Frances finds both comfort and purpose in nursing Karel back to health after he has trekked all the way to Africa in search of her. In addition, she decides to transform her aunt's Mays cottage into her country home, but, characteristically, she must earn the right to its ownership. Rather than giving her the cottage and another "easy success," her father charges her "very nearly the market price for it"

(RG, 356). Thus, having suffered the privation of Karel and the added burden of paying for her country cottage, Frances gains a new vitality and interest in life.

But it is important to note that what Drabble shows in this and the subsequent novels is her generation's lack of stamina and the soul-destroying effect of achieving success so easily and quickly. Ambition and success are finite things; in their middle age, her characters tend to buckle under the boredom and disillusion that overwhelms them. As Frances remarks about her work, "when one knew one was good at it, it lost its charm. Why bother? What did it matter..." (RG, 231). A similar sense of emptiness and disillusion is expressed by the characters in The Ice Age. Recovering from a heart attack, Anthony finds himself in a position to reflect upon his various careers, recalling how, as an Oxbridge arts graduate, he was drawn into the glamorous world of television (the uncriticized goal of some of Drabble's earlier characters), only to have boredom overcome him as it did his contemporaries:

> Friends of his who had entered the parallel trade of journalism reported similar dissatisfaction: they had reached the top too early, some had even managed to earn startingly high salaries too early: and from the age of thirty, what remained but a slow or rapid decline into hard drinking and ill health? Slight thoughts of envy were expressed, occasionally, for those who had professions with a proper career structure of proper incentives: but it was too late for these. (IA, 25).

Swept along by the glamour of a "shining, youthful, vigorous New England"[15] until they stop and take stock of their ambitions, Anthony

and others of his generation eventually sink into bitter disappointment. Anthony, for example, "would wake up in the middle of the night, and think is this it? Is what what? In short, he was underemployed, bored and not at all happy in his relation to his work, his country, or the society he lived in..." (IA, 26). Converted to an even more self-indulgent career in the property racket, he comes into contact with a completely different world than the one he had previously known; property people, he discovers, "did not read novels, or go to good films, or read the arts pages of newspapers, or listen to music or discuss the problems of the underprivileged" (IA, 33). Ironically, however, the property boom collapses, plunging Anthony once again into questioning his actions. Plagued by a conscience which associates his heart attack with punishment, he wonders how "he got himself into this nightmare world", knowing, at the same time, that he has no one to blame but himself: he was "in a trap of his own making" (IA, 14).

Similarly, Alison is disillusioned with her career as an actress, so she, too, is seduced by the glamour of the great property boom until the bubble bursts leaving her questioning the future, but also overwhelmed by a sense of nothingness: "How dull her own life seemed to her now: how dull, and how unnecessary" (IA, 112). More importantly, however, Alison, because of her own experiences in Walachia, is particularly sensitive to the way in which the rest of the world regards Britain. Having been removed from "a splendid apartment" in her hotel "to a small square prison-like room with a bed, a table, a hard high-backed chair, and no hot water" (IA, 91), Alison is painfully aware

that her treatment in Walachia typifies the decline of Britain into a tired, ugly, second-rate power:

> England was a safe, shabby, mangey old lion now: anyone could tweak her tail...Malice and justice united to persecute the once so prosperous, once so arrogant, once so powerful of nations, the nation on whose empire the sun had never set...Whatever was England going to do? Alison far from home, thought of home with sorrow and yearning, but also with a deep dismay...(IA, 92-93)

The property tycoon, Len Wincobank, whose name suggests the boom of the Sixties, also contemplates "England, what was the matter with it? Shabby, lazy, unambitious, complacently high-minded when it so chose" (IA, 56). Yet he, too, is subdued by his misfortunes and eventually reduced to despair. Linton Hancox, whose academic career had once been so promising (but not in the Seventies when to lecture in the classics is a dead-end, even in Oxbridge), bemoans his whole generation: "Oh Jesus...how have we come to this. What has happened to all of us? It should have been so different..." (IA, 58).

The entire imagery of The Ice Age enforces the idea that the English have become imprisoned by their success of the sixties. Where Len and Alison's daughter, Jane, both find themselves in actual prisons, other characters are trapped psychologically. Alison, for example, remains in her "small square prison-like room" awaiting news of her daughter (IA, 91). Unlike Len, Maureen "was free to go out. But she did not much want to go out. There was nowhere to go, no one to go with" (IA, 53). Linton Hancox is imprisoned in his dead-end career,

while the brilliant, slender young scholar that he once was is now trapped in his fat body. Anthony, of course, is caught "in a trap of his own making" (IA, 14), and his country house is "to him not unlike a prison" (IA, 68-69). Ironically, he is actually imprisoned in a communist labour camp at the novel's conclusion, but this hardship helps him to survive. Rather than being reduced to despair as he had been in England, he now has a purpose in life. He fills his days thinking and writing about "the problem of God," believing at the same time that "Those long winter days alone at High Rook House were a warning and a preparation" (IA, 285).

Kate in The Middle Ground is also trapped by her success; as a feminist journalist, she has grown tired of the fight, particularly when it is now fashionable to agree with her. To her friend, Hugo, she recalls the excitement of the struggle, of presenting views which were, if not revolutionary, at least controversial. Now all Kate feels is an overwhelming boredom with women's problems, as well as a feeling of entrapment in a dead-end career. Although Hugo tries to brush away her concerns by telling her that "It's your age, that's all" (MG, 12), he recognizes that what she feels is not necessarily the result of personal change. He is afraid that Kate, like others he knows, is falling victim to "the general doom" that pervades the entire country (MG, 15).

When Kate confronts other friends with her fears and anxieties, "they too, they said, were going through re-appraisals, dissatisfactions, the discontent of realizing that one would never in this one and only life be anything else but what one was" (MG, 61). One of Kate's

friends, Gabriel Denham, who also appears in Jerusalem the Golden, maintains his career in the television world, but has gradually been moulded, since the Sixties, into "a hollow man, a media man, a commercial man" (MG, 202). Where Clara had regarded him as a golden boy, a hero of "some bright celluloid paradise" (JG, 115), Kate sees beyond his charming, but fake, television personality. He is only the "image of all that men might be, charming, smiling, soothing, debonair Gabriel, bedside-manner, television-interviewer Gabriel" who, nevertheless, "must be pleased and placated and offered cups of tea" (MG, 201). The emptiness that his attractive manner cannot quite conceal is symptomatic of television in the Seventies as opposed to the "brave new world" it promised in the Sixties.

Evelyn's disillusion is the direct result of the bleakening social scene she encounters every day in her job as a social worker in London. Like Kate, "her work had once seemed worthwhile," but now, "She saw more of failure than success. The welfare state itself, and all the caring professions, seemed to be plunging into a dark swamp of uncertainty, self-questioning, economic crisis" (MG, 61). Evelyn blames "the diseases of affluence," and reproaches the Sixties for setting up "impossible dreams in television advertisements" (MG, 142).

Hugo himself ponders that seductive decade, questioning not his personal experiences, but those of his generation. He wonders whether they would have approached their meteoric rise differently had they been forewarned of their short-lived euphoria:

> If we could have known...Well, would we have savoured it more? And were we really happy?...If questioned, would we not then have looked back with nostalgia to the carefree days of youth, to unbroken nights, to parties at Hunt's or at Cambridge, to lovemaking undisturbed by children, to love itself (MG, 164-165).

This continual self-questioning throughout the three novels and the characters' awareness of a limited future is connected, inevitably, to the fact that as Drabble herself becomes older, so do her characters. Because they belong to that generation which thrived on appearances and vanity, it is little wonder that they no longer see themselves as 'the young bright set" (SBC, 159). Rather, they are conscious of their years and, at times, attribute their gloomy perspectives to their growing older. Whereas Sarah in A Summer Bird-Cage regards herself in a mirror and takes note of her "Skin and limbs and muscle, all glowing and hot with life and energy and hope" (SBC, 168), Frances in The Realms of Gold looks at herself and thinks that 'she certainly didn't look as though she had much future" (RG, 16). Later, she contemplates her trip to Adra, but even that cannot spark her interest: "She wondered if she were growing old...the spirit had gone out of her" (RG, 194). This feeling of growing older is related, somewhat, to the fact that Karel is no longer there to feed her vanity. Thus Frances's personal identity suffers and she is forced into analysing the fatuous reasons she left him in the first place.

Alison is afflicted with a similar concern about growing old in The Ice Age, in a parallel scene, she too regards herself in a mirror and

thinks: "Yes, there were wrinkles. At last, after years of grace, there were wrinkles..." (IA, 95). Like Frances, she is drained of emotion, but she is constrained, nevertheless, by a fear that is more than just a personal malaise. Drabble develops a correspondence between Alison's awareness of growing older and the image of Britain as a tired, weary old country in the seventies: "The spirit had gone out of the country...The country was growing old. Like herself. The scars on the hillside were the wrinkles round her own eyes: irremoveable. How could one learn to grow old? Neither a country nor a person can stay young forever" (IA, 166-167).

As Alison surveys the scenery outside her train window, so Evelyn, in The Middle Ground, views the "ravages" of London from her car and asks herself: "Was it getting worse, or was it that she was getting older..." (MG, 133). Both she and her friend, Kate, convey this sense of weariness and exhaustion. Yet it cannot be wholly attributed to their growing older, since Drabble presents objective evidence for their malaise in the noise and dirt and violence around them.

Connected to this theme of growing older is the general feeling among the female characters that their children no longer need them. The heroines in these later works take pride in having managed to lead successful careers and to raise children; but when they no longer derive satisfaction from their work and their children have grown up, they are left with a feeling of emptiness. As for the children, they are strangers to the values of Drabble's bright achievers who have become tired and weary. This younger generation, while lacking direction themselves,

are appalled by the fraudulence and the lack of stamina they find in their parents.

In The Realms of Gold, Stephen, whose melancholic nature and morbid preoccupations cast a dark shadow across the plot, searches for a model by which to guide his adult life, but he cannot accept the ways of either his father or his aunt: "Hugh drank, and Frances travelled ... Their responses seemed to him to be luxuries, expensive evasions" (RG, 210). Unlike Drabble's earlier young characters who anticipate glittering futures, Stephen is distressed by the meaninglessness of his life. When he asks Frances, "How can you possibly imagine...that the things you do are worth doing?," and she replies that she enjoys them, he can only marvel at a response that he can never hope to feel himself.

Throughout the novel, Stephen's depression is attributed to "some incurable and ratlike disease," yet his gloomy outlook is shared by his wife, Beata, who feels that "living is a crime" (RG, 92). Frances, on the other hand, is appalled by this next generation's desire for self-destruction. She resents the fact that Beata, "such a miserable creature had found the life-force to buy nail varnish, and had wasted it on nail varnish. The human race, looking at her, appeared threatened with extinction" (RG, 91). Stephen, however, is equally perturbed by his parents' flippant reaction to Aunt Con's death: "they were annoyed, indignant, but by no means overwhelmed. Indeed, Hugh had been quite witty about the subject. A well-balanced man, Hugh" (RG, 349).

In The Ice Age, both Anthony and Alison fear for the future of their children. Jane, Alison's elder daughter, typifies her age, for

hers is "a petty, childish nature...destructively dissatisfied" (IA, 43). Jealous of her handicapped sister and bitterly resentful of her elders, she blames them for her misfortunes in Walachia. Clearly, however, Jane has only herself to blame, as Alison explains before leaving her daughter to return to England, "There you are, eighteen years old, with everything going for you, good looks, brains, money, the lot, and what do you do, you sulk and feel sorry for yourself..." (IA, 149). Anthony, in turn, despairs when he learns that Jane went on a hunger strike "to see what it would feel like." "So it was for this, that he had come all this way: the radiant future, the next generation" (IA, 267). Perplexed by this lack of purpose in the young, Alison decides that "She would not like to trust the future to people like Jane" (IA, 83), while Anthony, remembering the young girl he found in labour in his London home, thinks: "Children of the mid-seventies. He was utterly unable to imagine their future...Maybe there was no future" (IA, 215-216).

Anthony and Alison, however, are both very much aware of the failures of their own generation. "We worked hard when young, we had a conception," Alison remembers, "But instead of solidifying into attitudes, opinions, convictions, however bigoted, we have fragmented and dissolved into uncertainty" (IA, 225). Similarly, Anthony recalls the lost dreams of his entire generation; as well as the failure of the "classless, dynamic New Britain,"

> ...they had worn themselves out and contorted themselves trying a new system, a new egalitarian culture, the new illiterate visual television age. They had tried: they had made efforts...they had learned new tricks. But where were the new tricks? They had produced no new images, no new style merely a cheap strained exhausted imitation of the old one. Nothing had changed. Where was the bright classless enterprising future of Great Britain? In jail with Len Wincobank, mortgaged to the hilt with North Sea Oil (IA, 252-253).

Anthony, then, understands why the next generation has no vested interest in the future of the country. Evelyn, in The Middle Ground, also sympathizes, even though she is appalled by the self-destructive tendencies of young people. Surveying the scenes of London from her car, she thinks, "What could one expect but delinquency, of children reared amidst such prospects? What images could one expect them to create for themselves? No wonder they dressed in battledress, adorned with plate armour of badges on their bosoms and clinking chain mail of staples and safety pins and paper clips. Each day they went into battle, along their own streets" (MG, 135).

Louise's assertion in A Summer Bird-Cage that "I want my life, I want it now. I don't want to give it to the next generation" (SBC, 205) is replaced in these later novels by a compulsion on the part of the parents to help their children, to try to make up for their own failures. As his mentor, Frances feels obliged to listen to Stephen's anxieties· "She had taken him in, at first as a duty" (RG, 89). But when he kills himself, she is, at first, overcome by guilt and self-reproach because she feels she could have helped him; instead, "she had

flown off frivolously to Adra, to sit around a swimming pool drinking and gossiping' (RG, 352). It is only much later that she is able to accept both his death and the fact that she could not have helped him anyway.

Like Stephen, Janet Bird, the provincial housewife, embraces the despair of her generation, and, as a mother herself, she feels she cannot cope. Janet's mother, in turn, is distressed by her unhappiness because "What could one even do for one's daughter? Nothing, nothing. Everything she tried to do came out wrong" (RG, 151). This helplessness at seeing the hostility and obvious lack of direction in the young is shared by Evelyn in The Middle Ground, for she blames herself for her son's behavioural problems and social withdrawal. She reproaches herself even more for dealing with Sebastian "so badly, so foolishly - trying to buy him friends by handing out large quantities of pocket money, trying to buy him off petty thieving by offering him a hi-fi, motorbikes, whatever he wanted" (MG, 138).

This concern for the younger generation is extended to an even broader concern about others in general, constituting a movement away from the egocentric preoccupations of the Sixties to a desire to fulfill one's responsibilities to others. Frances's lover, Karel, is like Rose of The Needle's Eye, in that he cares for people and wants to help them. But he is much more influential than she is even though he often falls victim to those he influences. Whereas Rose tries to assist others through her own monumental gestures like donating her inheritance for the building of a school in Africa, Karel deals with people on an

individual basis, as his life is "full of past obligations, old Jewish refugees, impoverished coffee friends, old school friends, wealthy and boring fools, silly students, mad entrepreneurs, con men, thieves and liars of every kind" (RG, 78). He is compelled into genuinely caring about the anxieties of others, for "How could he say no, when the telephone rang, how could he hurry away from the mad and the lonely?" (RG, 216). Ultimately, Karel, in his selflessness and loyalty, is a man with whom Frances can find peace.

Similarly, Alison is "bitterly, painfully aware of the less fortunate" (IA, 154), of which her daughter, Molly, is one, and so dedicates her time fund-raising for the Foundation for Disabled Children. And Evelyn, in The Middle Ground, even though "she could have been living peacefully on her husband's income, far from dirt and noise, amidst the green pastures, by clear waters" (MG,135), believes "in service, in living, a little, for others" (MG, 140).

In stressing that there is comfort in fulfilling one's responsibilities to others, Drabble appears to be exploring the possibilities of moving beyond the preoccupation with the superficial images upon which her characters have built their lives. Moreover, those who achieve a greater maturity do so only after they have suffered privation and personal misery. This process begins in The Needle's Eye, though Rose's efforts to reach a "spiritual calm" by living in relative poverty are eventually deflected. In The Realms of Gold, Frances, who thrives on flattery and attention, suffers what she fears is Karel's rejection of her. In addition, she begins to see the unimportance of her own

superficial existence in light of Stephen's suicide. She must endure not only his death, but the initial pain of feeling responsible for it. It is obvious that this incident has matured her, since she comes to see his decision from his point of view, rather than as a reflection of a failure on her part. And, even the seemingly insignificant fact of being made to pay almost the full price for her great aunt's cottage moves Frances towards a new self-understanding. Her contentment at the end of the novel is evidence that she has benefited from these burdens.

In The Ice Age, Anthony is not only chastened by his imprisonment within a labour camp, but gains a new spiritual maturity through his efforts to perceive "the nature of God and the possibility of religious faith" (IA, 285). Because Drabble has never actually introduced this possibility in the previous novels, it would appear that she herself is moving towards, if not a solution, at least a way in which to profit morally from the bleakening social scene around her. Significantly, Anthony gains personal insight only after he is stripped of all the material gains that he had formerly cherished. When, from inside his enclosure, he sights a rare bird that he knows "rarely visits below the snow line, rarely visits the haunts of men" (IA, 286-287), he looks upon it as "a messenger from God, an angel, a promise" (IA, 287). That it chose to visit him at all leaves Anthony with a feeling of joy, and imbues the conclusion of the novel with spiritual hope.

In her most recent novel, The Middle Ground, Drabble explores once again the possibility of gaining new insight through suffering. Having been nearly blinded by a client, Evelyn finds herself wondering whether

a belief in God might not offer some consolation, but decides that "one could probably manage without [the love, joy and peace]" of God's comfort (MG, 244). Interestingly, the fact that she qualifies this with the added thought, "For the time being, at least" (MG, 244) could suggest a reluctance on Drabble's part totally to dismiss religion as a solution. In reintroducing the character, Phillipa Denham, who was weighed down by a self-absorbing inertia in Jerusalem the Golden, Drabble presents her as "a devout Catholic" now happily devoting "much of her time to visiting the ill" (MG, 244).

Although The Realms of Gold, The Ice Age, and The Middle Ground are considerably bleaker in their portrayal of British society than their predecessors, this movement towards spiritual growth on the part of some of the characters would account for the flickers of hope on which these later novels conclude. Drabble demonstrates her increasingly sensitive response to the declining state of Britain and the malaise that grips all of society. The deteriorating landscapes of the countryside, and the violence and bombs that occasionally rock London's streets account for the prevailing apprehension. But, perhaps in reaction to her own questioning about the meaning of her success, Drabble attempts to move beyond a litany of woe to suggest the possibility of spiritual maturity through pain and suffering, once they have recognized that there is more to life than superficial prestige, financial reward, and material possessions, her major figures in these last novels seem determined to push onwards.

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[1] Quoted in World Authors 1970-1975, ed. John Wakeman (New York: H.W. Company, 1980), p. 218.

[2] Margaret Drabble, The Ice Age (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1977), p. 210-211. All subsequent references in the text will be to IA with page number.

[3] Norman Shrapnel, The Seventies: Britain's Inward March (London: Constable and Company Limited, 1980), p. 24.

[4] Margaret Drabble, The Realms of Gold (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1979), p. 115. All subsequent references in the text will be to RG with page number.

[5] Margaret Drabble, The Middle Ground (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1981), p. 84-85. All subsequent references in the text will be to MG with page number.

[6] Shrapnel writes that "living in the country appeared to have a stronger appeal than ever." The Seventies, p. 57.

[7] Ibid., p. 53.

[8] Ibid., p. 51.

[9] Christopher Booker, The Seventies: Portrait of a Decade (London: Allen Lane, 1980), p. 108.

[10] Ibid., p. 300.

[11] Ibid., p. 300-301.

[12] Ibid., p. 9.

[13] Ibid., p. 200.

[14] Donald Horne, God is an Englishman (Sydney: Angus E. Robertson Ltd., 1969), p. 38.

[15] Christopher Booker, The Neophiliacs (London: Collins, 1969), p. 254.

CHAPTER 4

"CONCLUSION"

In his critique of the contemporary novel, The Novel Now (1971), Anthony Burgess writes:

> We can no longer expect the one big book, the single achievement, to be an author's claim to posterity's regard. We shall be more inclined to assess the stature of a novelist by his ability to create what the French call an oeuvre, to present fragments of an individual vision in book after book, to build, if not a War and Peace or Ulysses, at least a shelf.[1]

In assessing the stature of Margaret Drabble, it is important to examine her nine novels in sequence, for only then does a significant pattern and scope emerge. Her work spans a period which saw the optimistic anticipation of the early Sixties decline into the weary disillusion of the Seventies. Exploring the concerns of British society as a whole, her vision becomes increasingly dark, as she portrays, in particular, the declining optimism of her generation.

The heroines of her first three novels, A Summer Bird-Cage (1963), The Garrick Year (1964), and The Millstone (1965), are extensions of Drabble's own experiences. As first-person narratives, these early works are limited in scope, but they do reflect the exclusive social world of the privileged, educated elite of which Drabble herself was a member. Yet, influenced by her own Quaker doubts, her delineation of the glossy London scene is tinged by the puritan conscience of her characters who experience a certain guilt about the ease of their success. Furthermore, in her first two novels, Drabble demonstrates the

difficulties of reconciling this success with the constraints and limitations of marriage and children. As the final novel of this early period, The Millstone is an important stage in Drabble's progress, since the experiences of her heroine mark her own growing awareness of, and sympathy for, the every day realities outside the world of brilliant self-fulfillment.

This new social awakening moves Drabble forward to her next three novels, Jerusalem the Golden (1967), The Waterfall (1969), and The Needle's Eye (1972), which represent a crucial period in her moral and social development. Jerusalem the Golden is an essential addition to the oeuvre, for its third-person narrative objectifies the aspirations of her generation, while its cutting satire on the lure of London exposes the shallow quality of this glamorous existence. This novel purges Drabble of her own preoccupation with "the shining, youthful, vigorous New England" of the Sixties.[2]

Her next work, The Waterfall, is a deeply personal novel in which it would appear that Drabble tries to come to terms with her own marriage and successful career by exploring the possibility of finding a man who would stimulate her creative mind rather than confining it. When her heroine finally acknowledges that such an ideal relationship could probably exist only in fiction, Drabble seems to have laid her own concerns to rest, for although she continues to examine the conflict between marriage and success, she never again does so on a purely personal level.

Through The Waterfall, then, it seems as if Drabble has freed herself from any further personal consideration because her subsequent novels are directed outwards and become increasingly complex. In The Needle's Eye, she not only extends her range to include a variety of social groups, but, for the first time, sustains half of the narrative from a male point of view. Pinpointing contemporary events, Drabble demonstrates her growing sensitivity to the ills of Britain and captures the "widespread sense of malaise"[3] that characterized the late Sixties. Rose's disillusion and guilt, as well as Simon's tired, jaundiced view of trendy, affluent London, prefigure the themes of Drabble's later work.

In her three most recent novels, The Realms of Gold (1975), The Ice Age (1977), and The Middle Ground (1980), she expands the settings beyond Britain itself, but her concerns remain focussed on the declining state of her own country and on the apprehension that grips all of society.

When analysing Drabble's development, it is necessary to note that as she becomes older, so do her characters who experience, in addition to the natural downturns of middle age, the dilemma of having reached success so easily and quickly. However, even though they are conscious of their years, they are not totally self-absorbed because they are capable of looking beyond their own problems to see, not only that their contemporaries share their predicament, but that the country itself is crumbling around them. These characters experience alarm at, and

compassion for the declining state of Britain, since that decay symbolizes their own dreams of a "brave new world" now turned to dust. Hence Britain is not so much a setting for Drabble's novels, but a presence of which her characters are acutely conscious, and with which they feel committed to ally themselves.

That the Seventies had a particularly dispiriting effect on the British is apparent in many of the novels which were written during this period. The bleak, weary note that characterizes Drabble's increasingly dark portrayal of the social scene is shared by other contemporary novelists who, like her, feel compelled by the unremitting economic and industrial decline of their country into showing a correspondence between their characters' uneasiness about growing older and their painful awareness of Britain's decay.

If we look at Malcolm Bradbury's The History Man (1975), for example, we can see that, though he approaches the subject through satire, he shares Drabble's reaction to, and subsequent recording of, the bleakening social scene. In tracing the history of his two characters, Howard and Barbara Kirk, Bradbury describes their move from their hometowns in the North of England to the southwestern seacoast town of Watermouth where they now live, chronicling their response to the changing times, through the excitement of the early Sixties to the student revolutions of the late Sixties.

Set in 1972, the novel reveals, through its sardonic prose, that all is not well with the Kirks, for Barbara begins to show signs of

"sourness."[4] When they plan one of their parties, she tells Howard that she is tired of "the swinging Kirk scene," that maybe "I'm getting old" (HM, 8). Like Drabble, however, Bradbury is careful to show that Barbara's weariness is not simply the result of growing older; it is a malaise that is shared by everyone, it seems, but Howard himself. Barbara is appalled by his indifference to the suicide of an acquaintance who believed life was "silly," and implores him to see that it is not only herself who feels this way:

> Doesn't it worry you at all that so many of our friends feel that way now?...do things like that now? That they seem tired and desperate? Is it our ages? Is it that the political excitement's gone? What's the matter?...Do you remember when our sort of people didn't think life was silly?...when things were all wide open and free, and we were all doing something and the revolution was next week? And we were under thirty, and we could trust us?...Don't you think people have got tired? Found a curse in what they were doing?...(HM, 16).

There are in Barbara's words echoes of the worries that overwhelm Drabble's later characters who, like Bradbury's heroine, are representative of that generation which burst upon the scene in the Sixties and are now paying for their success with disillusion and despair.

Like Drabble, Bradbury finds an emblem for this prevailing malaise in his landscapes. Watermouth, for example, is actually split in two: "the unreal holiday town around the harbour" and "a real town of urban blight and renewal, social tensions, discrimination, landlord and tenant

battles" (HM, 14). As in Drabble's most recent novels, the town of Watermouth falls victim to the property developers who dream of a modern city while destroying the small shops and back-to-back houses, those "remnants of the old order" (HM, 11).

As for the university, it has declined from "a peaceful, pastoral Eden," where "peacocks strutted," "the sun shone regularly," and "endless optimism reigned, and novelty was everywhere" (HM, 63), into a dismal place where "the sun rarely shines" and "the peacocks have gone" (HM, 65). The students, who had once been "pleasant, likeable, outrageous people" (HM, 63), are now no longer "bright originals in the old style, but bleaker, starker performers in the modern play" (HM, 65). In addition, no one experiences a sense of community any more, the general despair and anguish are echoed in the dank surroundings: "In the rain the buildings are black; the concrete has stained, the glass grown dirty, the services diminished...there has been a small fire in the library; rapes and muggings occur occasionally in the darker corners of this good society" (HM, 66). Although Bradbury is much more caustic than Drabble, he documents the same decline from the bright dreams of the early Sixties to the malaise which characterized the social milieu of 1972. Similarly, he employs landscape as a subject in itself, as a way of objectifying the prevailing apprehension.

In another novel written in the Seventies, William Golding's Darkness Visible (1979), it would appear that the bleak environment of modern day Britain provides a complementary backdrop for its author's theme

of man's inner "darkness" and capacity for evil.[5] In writing this novel, it had been Golding's "major and overriding intention to write a novel about England."[6] Detailing the falling moral standards, the violence and terrorism, and the influx of foreigners that have altered British society, he chronicles the personal histories of the two twins, Toni and Sophy, who have been abandoned by their mother and neglected by their father. Like the younger people in Drabble's later novels, they lack both direction and a set of guiding values. Toni eventually disappears from the country and joins a group of international terrorists, while Sophy engages in a life of petty crime. Attributing her behaviour to a general social downturn, Sophy eventually confronts her father with a grim fact: 'We're not very wholesome are we?...You, Mummi, Toni, me - we're not the way people used to be. It's part of the whole running down."[7]

That society is not as it "used to be" is apparent to the older characters, who, because of their advancing age, are particularly vulnerable to the rapid changes that have overtaken their country. Sim Goodchild, for example, recognizes that the absence of customers in his bookshop is not necessarily a reflection on himself, but a sign that traditional values and interests have crumbled away. Hence he asks himself every day:

> How bring in the Pakis? How the Blacks? What brilliant and unique stroke of the antiquarian bookseller's craft would prise that crowd of white people away from the telly and bring them to read old books

> again? How to persuade people of the essential beauty, lovableness, humanity even, of a beautifully bound book (DV, 193).

Yet his cynicism is not totally the result of his growing older; it is reinforced both by the lower standards he perceives, as a bookseller, and by the changing nature of the town. As he and his friend, Edwin Bell, walk along the street, passing the recently established businesses of immigrants, a temple and a mosque, and the Liberal Club, now defaced by graffiti, Edwin cannot help but comment: "Different when I came, wasn't it, after the war? London wasn't crawling all over us. The Green was still a village green--" (DV, 203).

The social portraits in Darkness Visible present a spiritual wasteland, and a mirror for the emptiness of aging which is in the vein of Drabble's last two novels. For both novelists, growing old (or middle-aged, the central subject of The Middle Ground) is not simply a matter of a changing self-image or its shifts in one's relationship with the next generation, since Britain itself is decaying and has been drained of moral energy.

Another novel, which appeared in the same year as Drabble's The Ice Age, parallels much of her concern with the pessimism that has overwhelmed her Oxbridge generation. John Fowles's Daniel Martin (1977), like the novels of Bradbury and Golding discussed above, convey the general sense of Britain in crisis, as the hero's personal ageing is accompanied by a bleak, sometimes compassionate, sometimes bitter, view of

his country on the decline. Like the major figures in Drabble's most recent work, Daniel Martin is conscious of his years and aware that his future is limited. Now in his late forties, he can only reflect upon his past and question what, if anything, he has achieved as a Hollywood screenwriter. Ultimately, he explores, among other things, "what had gone wrong, not only with Daniel Martin, but his generation, age, century: the unique selfishness of it, the futility, the ubiquitous addiction to wrong ends."[8]

But, where Drabble's later characters express a weariness, a sadness even, over the dissolution of their dreams, Daniel delivers a much more sour, bitter indictment of that entire generation whose "one abiding drive... was intense selfishness" (DM, 166). They were not eager for excitement (as Booker maintains in The Neophiliacs,[9] and as Drabble conveys in her early novels), but compelled onto the communications bandwagon as a defense against "the whole working-class, anti-university shift in the English theatre and the novel" (DM, 104). Where Drabble's characters express a certain despair and dissatisfaction towards their success, Fowles's Daniel Martin attacks both himself and his contemporaries for prostituting their talents in "a world with a ubiquitous and insatiable greed for the ephemeral" (DM, 277). He resents the fact that they, as a generation, have ignored "true human values" (DM, 278), for the sake of fame and public exposure. Daniel admits to having been "dazzled by the gilt chimeras" (DM,73) of his career, but now feels empty and unfulfilled. In trying to pinpoint the essence of his

cynicism, he contemplates a former college friend who has since become a slick television personality, and concludes that he "could not call Barney a failure in world terms; yet something of that also hung about him - indeed has continued to hang around all my Oxford generation ... destiny then pointed to far higher places than the ones actually achieved' (DM, 104).

This, it seems, is the key to the despair that overwhelms Daniel Martin, as well as Drabble's later characters. Having quickly risen to the top of their fields, they try to analyse their success only to realize that what they have accomplished lacks both substance and worth. That both Fowles and Drabble document in their fiction the disillusion of an entire generation is made apparent by the second volume of Dirk Bogarde's autobiography, Snakes and Ladders (1978), which documents from actuality, almost stage by stage, the fictional picture of Daniel Martin, in particular. Bogarde echoes the concern of Fowles's protagonist over his advancing age, but moves beyond himself (like Daniel and Drabble's characters) to show that his disenchantment with his acting career stems more from the shallow and trivial quality of the majority of his films than from a purely personal sadness at growing older. "Here I was," he writes, "thirty films behind me, popular, highly paid, and constantly in work, something most actors would willingly give up everything in life to have. And yet I was deeply unsatisfied under all the glitter and gloss, unfulfilled, and almost, it had to be faced, ashamed of the position I had reached."[10]

Hence Bogarde expresses unease and embarrassment over a successful career which contributes nothing but frivolous and mindless entertainment, and fulfills no one "apart from the producers" (SL, 187). Similarly, Daniel Martin comments upon "the grand conspiracy of mediocrity that had dominated the home industry for the last twenty-five years" (DM, 42). Both Bogarde and Daniel express a wish to break out of this superficial world that has "generated so much corrupt shimmer, and so little substance" (DM, 143). Ultimately, Bogarde's disillusion with the British cinema spills over into a disillusion about his country in general. His decision to break into a new kind of cinema in Europe is prompted somewhat by the bleak social and political scene. As he explains in the first volume of his autobiography, the country he had decided to leave was no longer the one he had enjoyed and loved as a boy, but "a fast changing England. A country bent determinedly on its quiet revolution, led by people who, with avuncular joviality, constantly assured the Middle Classes that they were all doomed."[11]

In discussing the decline of optimism in the contemporary British novel, it is important to distinguish between that pessimism which is generated by the decaying of Britain, and that which stems from a purely personal souring. As Bernard Bergonzi notes in The Situation of the Novel, "The times, for a contemporary Englishman, are neither secure nor cheerful, but for a novelist with a sufficient historical sense and the right combination of concern and detachment they could be remarkably interesting and rewarding."[12] In those novels discussed above, we can

see that, as vastly different in technique as Bradbury, Golding, and Fowles are from Margaret Drabble, they all share to some extent her reaction to the physical deterioration of the country as well as the moral disintegration of her contemporaries. In each of these works the characters possess a certain awareness which, inevitably, links their personal malaise to a more general apprehension which grips, if not all of society, at least their generation.

If, on the other hand, we look at a writer such as Kingsley Amis, we can see that the pessimism which begins to emerge in his work from The Anti-Death League (1966) on[13] does not appear to be the result of any social sensibility but of a personal cynicism and concern about growing old. Amis himself corroborates this downturn in his novels, explaining that as he becomes older he modifies the way he looks at things: 'There's been an increase in the dim view which is taken of life, and the element of horseplay and high spirits decreases.'[14] But unlike Drabble, for example, Amis does not seem to possess that same generosity or compassion that would allow him to look beyond his cynical self-absorption. Rather, he maintains that "it's not the job of the novelist to represent the contemporary scene in any sense."[15] Hence it is apparent from three of his novels written in the Seventies, Girl, 20 (1971), Ending Up (1974), and Jake's Thing (1978), that they "derive much of the force of their frustration, anger, and harsh comedy from their author's awareness of the shadow of death."[16]

By examining Jake's Thing (1978), we can see that Amis's perception of the "crumbling" postwar world is, indeed, "related to [his] own gradual ageing,"[17] because the protagonist of this novel is essentially Jim Dixon of Lucky Jim (1954) grown older and sourer.[18] Whereas Jim was afraid of his students' intelligence, Jake despises his charges because they possess no intelligence at all. In one episode where he attempts to explain the importance of correct spelling to a student, rather than expressing concern over the erosion of standards (as a character in a Drabble novel might have done), Jake strives "not to shake from head to foot with rage and contempt as he spoke," and summons "to his aid the thought that in the Oxford of the 70's plenty of his colleagues would share [this student's] difficulty."[19]

Hence Jake illustrates the way Amis writes from within the cynical viewpoint of his own and his central character's persona, the world outside is simply a mirror which reflects that jaundice. Although Jake's lost libido is meant to be comic, it is a bleak metaphor for his loss of interest in everything. The world that he inhabits is not particularly stimulating, but his perception of it only convinces him of his own inner sourness. He possesses neither the necessary sympathy nor the incentive to move beyond his jaundiced perspective to try to improve things.

Jake's Thing is a bleak novel, deriving much of its sourness from the ageing of both its author and protagonist. But, as Doris Lessing shows in her novel, The Summer Before the Dark (1973), ageing does not

necessarily have to lead to such cynicism. In trying to come to terms with her middle age, her heroine, Kate, achieves (and Jake does not) a spiritual maturity through the gradual realization that what matters most is her "sense of self."[20] This self-discovery begins with Kate's awareness that, having adopted roles that served her family's needs, she no longer matters much in their lives. Only after she becomes ill, ravaged to the point where even her neighbours do not recognize her, does Kate begin to see the total absurdity of the way she dressed to reassure her children or to proclaim her husband's status. Dressed badly, she is "invisible," dressed well, she is equally an illusion. Appearances, she discovers, have ruled her life since she was sixteen. It is this journey towards a "sense of self" that compels Kate to abandon her unfulfilling, maternal facade before returning to her family at the novel's end. Her eventual refusal to dye her grey hair becomes a defiant symbol of her self-discovery.

If we compare Lessing's novel with Drabble's The Middle Ground, we can see that, though they both centre upon the subject of middle age, their authors employ different techniques that achieve, paradoxically, the same effect: a kind of universality. The heroine of The Summer Before the Dark is virtually isolated during her crisis, and so must struggle through it on her own in order to find the courage to readjust her own self-image to what she perceives is her relative unimportance in the family. But Kate Brown's crisis is presented as an archetype of what all women of a particular age and sophistication must, or ought to

undergo. The Middle Ground's Kate, on the other hand, does not measure herself against her family, but sees herself in relation to the rest of society. Whereas Lessing's heroine looks within and tries to readjust her ideas of herself as woman, mother, wife, and lover, Drabble's character sees her worries about her life and career in those of her contemporaries who, like her, have tried to ride the rapid social changes that have altered Britain since World War Two. So that although her Kate is presented as a particular individual, Drabble also suggests that Kate's crisis is not entirely a matter of her own changing self-image, but is one that is shared by those around her.

Drabble, then, views the world from a social standpoint. Lessing, however, tends to view it politically, as her vision is much more global than Drabble's. She is concerned not with Britain, but with an entire world in crisis. Even when her social portraits in The Summer Before the Dark resemble in detail those found in Drabble's work, as when Kate enters the shop in a working-class neighbourhood and despairs over its second-rate food, Lessing expands this experience to make a general statement about the condition of the world. "Meanwhile millions of people were dying all over the poor parts of the world because they got nothing to eat, millions of children would never be normal because such food as she had put in her pretty plastic bag that had a design of orange and pink daisies on it did not come their way at all..." (SD, 165). Kate herself is employed at Global Food, an international organization whose "business [it] was what mankind eat" (SD 15).

It is within this global perspective that Lessing universalizes her heroine's experience, for Kate is "that well-documented and much-studied phenomenon, the woman with grown-up children and not enough to do, whose energies must be switched from the said children to less vulnerable targets, for everybody's sake, her own as well as theirs" (SD, 21). Kate eventually reaches a point where she ceases to be an individual character in a novel, and becomes more an illustration of what all women undergo in middle age. Lessing begins her novel with the image of "a woman," standing "on her back step, arms folded, waiting" (SD, 5), and continues to punctuate it with statements about women in general. Kate, for example, reproaches herself for having spent so many years of her life in front of a looking-glass, "Just like all women" (SD 159). Furthermore, when she returns to London after becoming ill in Spain, the hotel where she stays appears to be a microcosm of the world, since both its guests and its employees are of various nationalities: "She might as well still be in Istanbul, she might be in Malaga or Alicante - she might be anywhere..." (SD, 129). Lessing's point is apparent, for clearly we are meant to see Kate as an emblem of all Western middle-aged women, British or otherwise.

Her journey towards the real, inner self becomes, then, a kind of allegory, which is parallelled by her dream sequence about the seal. When her dream concludes with her returning the animal, that symbol of her "sense of self," to the sea (an image of "life" and "hope," SD, 227), it signifies her new inner awareness. In this same vein,

Kate's relationship with Maureen, the younger woman with whom she temporarily shares a flat, can be seen as an exemplar of women striving to help other women, since Maureen undergoes a similar dilemma. As Kate gradually moves towards a way of coping with her traditional roles as a mother and wife through spiritual maturity, Maureen is on the threshhold of adopting these roles herself. Although Kate cannot convey totally the secret behind her newly-acquired inner peace, it would appear that her decision to leave her hair grey has influenced the younger woman, since Maureen eventually cuts off her hair as a defiant act of self-assertion to those men who want to marry her.

In The Summer Before the Dark, then, Lessing moves beyond the bonds of the realistic novel into the realm of allegory in which the characters themselves appear to be types or illustrations of a universal theme. This work anticipates Lessing's more recent progress into science-fiction where she feels relatively free to arrive at, and to convey to a wider audience, the universalities of human experience throughout history.

This, however, is where her younger contemporary differs, since Drabble, through her vivid characterizations and particularity of detail, upholds the tradition of the realistic novel. Nowhere in The Middle Ground, for example, do we get the sense that Kate is representative of all women, even though, like Lessing's heroine, she tries to come to grips with middle age and a role (as a feminist journalist) which appears to have come to a dead-end. But, rather than limiting her vision to Kate's particular experience, Drabble demonstrates her keen

social awareness (which has been present in her work from A Summer Bird-Cage on) through Kate's perception of her life story within the context of a rapidly changing Britain. In agreeing to make a film about women, "focusing on the choices now made by girls leaving schools, five years after the Sex Discrimination Act, and contrasting them with the choices made when she was a girl of twenty-five years ago" (MG, 81-82), Kate is forced into a reassessment of her own life which she tries to resolve by returning to her childhood home: "Romley, she [hopes], would restore a sense of perspective" (MG, 109). Inevitably, this delving into "the far-off mythical past" (MG, 127) allows Drabble to chronicle something more than the personal life of her heroine, for Kate's recollections of her childhood haunts, as she views them in the present from atop a grassy bank, demonstrate the changes that have overcome Romley. But, even though Drabble particularizes this scene, Romley becomes a microcosmic example of the changes that have taken place in the towns and suburbs of the entire country over the past forty years. Hence Drabble conveys in her detailed, realist landscapes the history of contemporary Britain's decline. As Kate makes her way past the new housing estate into the surrounding countryside, she notes: "The dirty tangled roots of childhood twisted back for ever and ever, beyond all knowing," whereas "Back in the artificial pleasure ground [of the estate], the dear solitary carefully nurtured groups of saplings stood and shivered in loneliness, straight and slim, sad and forlorn" (MG, 131).

Interestingly, rather than limiting her range, Drabble's detailed, realist style achieves the same kind of universality that Golding, for

example, achieves through myth, or Lessing through allegory. Throughout her oeuvre, she demonstrates that she does indeed possess "a sufficient historical sense,"[21] because she captures not only the changing climate of British society, but the history of an entire generation. She also possesses "the right combination of concern and detachment,"[22] because, where Bradbury, Golding, and Fowles all portray Britain as a spiritual wasteland, Drabble, prompted as she always has been by a puritan conscience, perceives the possibility of a spiritual regeneration from within the ruins she describes in such detail.

Ultimately, she appears to suggest that Britain's recovery will result from the moral regeneration she portrays in the major figures of her most recent work. Having struggled through the crisis of middle age, The Middle Ground's Kate takes heart in the fact that Romley, London's "little sister," despite being ravaged by development, appears nevertheless to be 'resurrected," and "the stone that weighted her," like that which had weighted Kate, "dissolves" and "she rises up" (MG, 238). Even the passing detail of being made to pay almost the full price for her aunt's cottage has a chastening, yet renewing effect on Frances in The Realms of Gold. But the most significant example of moral regeneration appears at the conclusion of The Ice Age. From inside a cold and bleak labour camp (the culmination of the metaphors of ice and deadness which colour the novel and create an image for contemporary Britain), Anthony's sighting of a rare bird that seldom visits below the snow line fills him with joy and spiritual hope.

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[1] Anthony Burgess, The Novel Now (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 19.

[2] Christopher Booker. The Neophiliacs (London: Collins, 1969), p. 254.

[3] Ibid., p. 277.

[4] Malcolm Bradbury, The History Man (London: Secker and Warburg, 1975), p. 17. All subsequent references in the text will be to HM with page number.

[5] Virginia Tiger, William Golding: The Dark Fields of Discovery (London: Marion Boyars, 1976), pp. 32-33.

[6] Ibid., p. 228.

[7] William Golding, Darkness Visible (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 185. All subsequent references in the text will be to DV with page number.

[8] John Fowles, Daniel Martin (Toronto: Totem Books, 1978), pp. 614-615. All subsequent references in the text will be to DM with page number.

[9] Booker, The Neophiliacs, p. 98.

[10] Dirk Bogarde, Snakes and Ladders (London: Chatto and Windus, 1978), p. 192. All subsequent references in the text will be to SL with page number.

[11] Dirk Bogarde, A Postillion Struck By Lightning (London: Chatto and Windus, 1977), p. 193.

[12] Bernard Bergonzi, The Situation of the Novel (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 224.

[13] Philip Gardner notes that "chronologically the centre of Amis's fiction, The Anti-Death League, is also its major turning-point. from a kind of comedy (or the verbal simulacrum of it) to seriousness manifested in sobriety of language as well as in the virtual extinction of already diminishing comic incident." Kingsley Amis, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1981), p. 146.

[14] Dale Salwak, "An Interview with Kingsley Amis," Contemporary Literature, 16, No. 1 (Winter 1975), p. 7.

[15] Ibid., p. 4.

[16] Gardner, Kingsley Amis, p. 92.

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[17] Ibid., p. 148.

[18] Gardner writes: "...the disenchantment of Jake's Thing is offered as a contrast to the hopefulness of Amis's first novel, Lucky Jim. Jake's Thing is his only other novel to have a university teacher for its protagonist...and to be set, at least for nine of its twenty-eight chapters, in an academic environment...where Jim taught Medieval History, Jake teaches Early Mediterranean History. The protagonists' names are disguised reflections of each other: Jake (Jaques) - Jacques - James (Jim); Richardson - Dick's son - Dixon, and in the 'attempted suicide' of Kelly...there is an obvious recollection of the suicide attempt of Margaret Peel..." Ibid., p. 106.

[19] Kingsley Amis, Jake's Thing (London: Hutchinson and Co. Ltd., 1978), p. 113

[20] Doris Lessing, The Summer Before the Dark (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1980), 45. All subsequent references in the text will be to SD with page number.

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VITA

Surname: SHEPHERD Given Names: NANCY EILEEN

Place of Birth: VANCOUVER, B.C. Date of Birth: February 10, 1956

Educational Institutions Attended, with Dates of Entering and Leaving:

UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA, B.C.	1974	to	1980
UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA, B.C.	1981	to	1982

Degrees, Diplomas, Etc., Awarded, with Dated and Names of Institutions:

B.A. (Double Major)	1980	University of Victoria, B.C.

Honors and Awards:

Publications:

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NANCY E. SHEPHERD