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**Margaret Drabble's Affair with the  
Past in the Witch of Exmoor, the  
Peppered Moth and the Seven Sisters**

**Marta Lupa**

**Teacher of English as a foreign language**

**Poland**

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**Margaret Drabble's *Affair with the Past in the Witch of Exmoor, the Peppered Moth and the Seven Sisters***

**Marta Lupa**

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**Abstract**

Margaret Drabble never directly says what she means. Instead, she represents the meaning by plot, characters or, more importantly for this paper, by references to the past. I use the term past rather than 'authors' or 'works' purposefully since Drabble uses literary history, or I should probably say history in general, in a much broader sense. The author employs former literary texts, genres, characters, scientific theories and cultural archetypes not only to subvert their conventional notion but, first of all, having referred them to contemporary plot and protagonists, to somehow "transcribe" them into postmodern reality.

In this paper I would like to present three different strategies of her 'cooperation' with the past, namely the reference to a genre, a scientific theory and a particular text. First, I would like to focus on *The Witch of Exmoor* where she refers to the traditional understanding of fairy tale and demonstrates its irrelevance to contemporary reality. Second, I am going to move on to *The Peppered Moth* in which characters' growth is illustrated by allusion to industrial melanism being an example of the 'survival of the fittest'. Third, I am planning to concentrate on *The Seven Sisters* as the reflection of Aeneas' quest. Moreover, as Drabble's later novels are rich in links to other works, authors and ideas, I would like to demonstrate how she signals which of them are essential for the uncovering of meaning.

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When I attempted to write my MA dissertation, I proposed the title *Intertextuality in the Novels by Margaret Drabble*, but I soon realized that intertextuality is too narrow a term to describe Drabble's relation to the past. As the daughter of the writer John Frederick Drabble, the former student of English Literature at Cambridge University and the editor of the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, she is a very allusive author. Especially her later novels are packed with references to various literary texts, mythology, Bible, art, genres, cultural archetypes and scientific ideas. However, the question is whether all these allusions play a significant role in our understanding of her novels. The vast array of references she makes seems to suggest that only some of them can be treated as signposts in the interpretation process; the other do not allude to general meaning and have a rather local character. What is more, the distinction between these two types is facilitated by the narrative strategies Drabble employs to signal where we should seek the interpretative hints. In this paper I would like to discuss these strategies as well as three different approaches to the past, namely, a reference to a particular text, a scientific theory or a genre. First, I would like to focus on *The Seven Sisters* as the reflection of Aeneas' quest. Second, I am going to move on to *The Peppered Moth*, in which characters' growth is illustrated by allusion to industrial melanism being an example of the 'survival of the fittest.'<sup>1</sup> Third, I am planning to concentrate on *The Witch of Exmoor*, where she refers to the traditional understanding of fairy tale and demonstrates its irrelevance to contemporary reality

Beginning with *The Peppered Moth* Drabble, typically for her, establishes the most important influence for her novel already in the title. The 'peppered moth' refers to the theory of industrial melanism introduced by J.W. Tutt and later confirmed by H.B.D. Kettlewell. In 1955 the scientific journal *Heredity* published his article 'Selection Experiments on Industrial Melanism in Lepidoptera.' The paper presented a series of experiments which were conducted in order to explain the increase of the number of black-bodied peppered moths (carbonaria) and simultaneous decrease of pale forms of these species (typica) in industrial areas of Britain. He proved, what was earlier suggested by Tutt, that due to industrial revolution and subsequent pollution the trees where the moths rested blackened because of the soot. Consequently, the white forms of the peppered moths were more visible than the black ones and died out of predation (Brookefield, 2009). The theory of industrial melanism is still considered as correct and set as an example of Darwinian natural selection (Majerus, 1998). Drabble employed this scientific theory to present the history of three generations of women – Bessie, Chrissie and Faro for whom the inspiration was her own family. What is more, in this novel the author uses specific techniques to put the readers on the right track. Despite she

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'industrial melanism' refers to the process that occurred in the nineteenth century Britain where significant pollution contributed to gradual disappearance of white form of moths in aid of the black ones which were better camouflaged from predators against the sooty trees and buildings; simultaneously it was the example of natural selection and 'survival of the fittest.'

does not provide any direct quotations from the texts of evolutionists, she still alludes to the theory of evolution, and especially industrial melanism, through mentions of these scientific ideas, plot and language. The novel begins with a scene of a lecture by Dr Hawthorn on mitochondrial DNA in Breasborough - the home town of three main protagonists – Bessie, her daughter Chrissie and granddaughter Faro. Recently, in the town the 8,000-year-old skeleton has been discovered and Dr Hawthorn's tries to find his descendants. Faro has already given a sample of her DNA but for the results of this test the reader will have to wait to the end of the novel. However, that is only one of the numerous references to evolutionism. Faro herself is a scientific journalist and wrote a thesis about 'changing concepts of evolutionary determinism' (Drabble, 2001). Her mother Chrissie, in turn, is not directly connected to Darwin but as a former student of archaeology she is definitely interested in the roots of humankind. In fact, most of the characters are in some way fixated on the past. Seb - Faro's friend

*has become obsessed by the mummy portraits of Ancient Egypt, and has tried to persuade Faro that she is the reincarnation of an unidentified Graeco-Roman Egyptian woman of the second century AD* (Drabble, 2001).

The house of Faro's aunt is crowded with mementoes of the past. 'A strange mixture of styles and substances and periods presents itself in Dora's small front room,' the narrator describes. (Drabble, 2001). Faro's cousin's wife commits suicide after a depression caused by her unhealthy interest in holocaust. Drabble by these personal histories seems to constantly underline the burden of the past that is carried by the characters. Moreover, she links this burden with evolutionary determinism and survival of the fittest through the usage of scientific language to describe characters' personalities or particular events. When Faro and Steve Nieman, the character who found the skeleton, are sitting at the excavation spot Drabble depicts them as follows

*Faro Goulden and Steve Nieman are not well camouflaged as they perched on their limestone ledge amidst the bracken and hawthorns and small holly bushes, sharing a date and a walnut slice. (...) Faro and Steve would be easily spotted by an airborne predator* (Drabble, 2001).

The narrative, being filled with phrases like 'mutation', 'survival' and 'genes', circulates persistently around the topic of evolution. In addition, particular scientific theories are not only mentioned in the book but also examined by the characters. First, Darwin is discussed by Bessie and her friend: 'She has an impassioned conversation with Reggie Olroyd about evolution., If Darwin is right, why haven't human beings evolved more visibly since the time of Pharaohs?' (Drabble, 2001) Then, Faro explains to her cousin Peter Cudworth that she considers herself more as a 'neo-Lamarckian'<sup>1</sup> or 'a Bergsonian':

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<sup>1</sup> According to Lamarck, species inherited the features acquired during the lifetime in order to adjust to the environment. Darwin refuted Lamarck's theory, having claimed that the inheritance of acquired characters is not possible and that the evolution is based on the principle of natural selection.

*She didn't hold with Darwinian or genetic determinism. Of course she knew that that was how things were, but she didn't like the way things were. (...) She'd like to think one could rediscover an argument that would reinstate the freedom of the will and the adaptability of species (Drabble, 2001).*

Finally, the peppered moth itself is evoked. Faro discusses its history with Seb. *He too has been on the Internet, and he wants to tell Faro about *Biston betularia*, the Manchester moth, aka the peppered moth. (...) Seb says there is some new stuff on the net about this famous moth. According to a local Linnean Society up north, it is behaving in a peculiar manner. Its population, which was thought to have been decreasing as a result of the Clean Air Acts, is showing a sudden and unexplained upsurge (Drabble, 2001).*

Faro questions Seb's revelations and his notion of industrial melanism since he incorrectly argues that the white moths darkened due to pollution. At the end of the novel when Faro is cleaning her aunt Dora's flat and finds two novels by Georgette Heyer titled *The Black Moth* and *Faro's Daughter*, the narrator asks 'maybe Georgette Heyer is trying to tell her something?' (Drabble, 2001) The readers, in turn, ask themselves what Drabble is trying to say by this comparison to peppered moths. Noticeably, several reviewers explain Drabble's symbolism of peppered moth in the way that suggests her misunderstanding of the whole concept of industrial melanism. For instance, Nora Foster Stovel writes that

*the peppered moth of the title, "*Biston betularia*, the Manchester moth" – a mutant that adapted to its grimy coal-mining environment by transforming itself from white to black, (...) symbolizes the gradual darkening of the depressive Bessie Bawtry Baron as she finds herself buried back in the grim Yorkshire mining country she so loathed as a child (Foster Stovel, 2003).*

However, as the fragments cited before show, Drabble was perfectly aware of the correct version of peppered moth story. That is why, industrial melanism, I believe, is linked to Bessie, Chrissie and Faro in a slightly different way. This theory mirrors the phases of symbolic darkness and light in the history of this Breasborough family. The first black peppered moths were discovered in 1850. The cause for the spread of their population was discovered in the 1950s. In 1956 the Clean Air Act was introduced and reduced the amount of pollution. As a result, the white moths gained the advantage again which caused the increase in their population (Brookefield, 2009). Similarly, the dark period in Faro's family started at the beginning of the twentieth century when Bessie was born. After graduation, unable to fulfil her dreams about a satisfying career and forced to move back to her home town, she started gradual falling into darkness understood as her depression. This darkness left its mark also on Chrissie who ended up as a divorcee but managed to find happiness in the later part of her life. Faro represents the phase of significant increase in the number of white moths as she finally managed to escape the darkness. She was able to reconcile love with career but, first of all, she was not forced to do anything. In one of



the last scenes of the novel Faro is listening to *The Messiah*, an oratorio composed in 1741 by George Frideric Handel which recurs through the whole novel starting with Faro's great-grandfather Bert singing it every Christmas. Therefore, *The Messiah* becomes an integrating motif for the whole text what shows constant presence of the past in the protagonists' lives. When Faro is listening to the recording these particular fragments are cited

*And every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low, and the crooked places shall be made plain... (...) For the people that walked into darkness have seen a great light... (...) Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Speak ye comfortably unto Jerusalem...(Drabble, 2001)*

It seems as if this section is directed particularly to Faro who can finally take the burden of family past from her shoulders. *The Messiah* is the only reference, apart from those connected with evolutionism, that appears in the novel several times. As for the other ones, it is significant that majority of them emerges in the first part of the novel describing Bessie's youth. Since she studied English, a lot of her literary influence are brought up like, for instance, T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Browning or Walter Scott. Several fragments are cited like Keats' "Ode to Melancholy". However, these texts are mentioned only on one level, either by title, name of the author or direct quotation. What is much more important is their accumulation in this particular part of the book, as if Drabble wanted to show the importance of childhood and adolescent experience for the later stages of life. Therefore, despite the fact that these texts are not directly connected with evolutionism, they put the stress on the same topic, that is, the weight of the past.

*The Seven Sisters* tells the story of Candida who after her divorce moves to London. She is forced to start her life again in her fifties. As a therapeutic device she employs a diary which constitutes the text of the novel. Already the title of it transfers us to the ancient Greece and mythology in which 'the seven sisters' was a name given to Pleiades – seven daughters of Atlas: Maia, Electra, Taygete, Alcyone, Celcieno, Sterope and Meropez. They were transformed into stars and formed a cluster which appearance on the sky above the Mediterranean Sea heralds the sailing season.<sup>1</sup> But is mythology the right trail in the interpretation of this book? At the beginning of the novel the reader learns that Candida, the main protagonist, attended the classes on Virgil's *Aeneid* and she herself, as the novel is written in the form of a diary, quite frequently mentions this myth, especially the character of Dido. When she observes the rebuilding process of her Health Club she is reminded of 'Dido and the building of the city of Carthage' (Drabble, 2002). She also states that '[she] would like to see the ruins of Carthage' and 'the cave of the Sibyl' (Drabble, 2002). This dream comes true in the second part of the book when Candida together with her friends, as the mythical seven sisters, go on a trip to Italy to follow Aeneas' lead. However, *Aeneid* is also referred to by direct quotations. Being in Italy Candida gazes out of a hotel window and quotes Virgil's text 'In such a night stood Dido with a willow in her hand' (Drabble,

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<sup>1</sup> The word 'plei' derived from Greek means 'to sail'.

2002). When the characters reach Sibyl's cave they read the Virgilian inscription on the stone: 'Spelunca alta fuit vastoque immanis hiatu, scrupea, tuta lacu nigro nemorumque tenebris...Procul, o procul este, profane..' (Drabble, 2002).<sup>1</sup> What is more, mythology is employed on the linguistic level as well, particularly, when it comes to names. All the protagonists have rather ancient names: Candida, Cytניה, Anthea, Anais etc. Most of the places they go to also refer to mythology (ferry Arethusa, hotel Diana) which is quite usual while being in Italy but, still, it highlights this connection to myths. Moreover, Drabble takes the next step and mediates the references to *Aeneid* and mythology through other texts. The second part of the novel is titled 'Italian Journey' which we can associate with Goethe's travel report. One of the protagonists, Mrs Jerrold, during the trip reads *The Death of Virgil* by Herman Broch. Furthermore, Drabble moves in her literary allusions even further in time, and in one of the comments added to the text she cites a fragment of Louis MacNeice's poem 'Thalassa'<sup>2</sup>: 'Put out to sea, ignoble comrades. Our end if life. Put out to sea' (Drabble, 2002). The title Thalassa, being a primordial Greek sea goddess, again takes us back to mythology in general sense but also puts a focus on one of the mythological symbols used by the author, that is, water which seems to be omnipresent in the whole narrative. First, significant number of literary allusions is linked to water images – Pleiades as the signposts for sailors, Aeneas' quest and already mentioned Thalassa. Second, the main protagonist Candida seems particularly attached to water. When she starts writing a diary she states

*This nothingness is significant. If I immerse myself in it, perhaps it will turn itself into something else. Into something terrible, into something transformed. I cast myself upon its waste of water* (Drabble, 2002).

She lives by the canal and attends regularly the swimming pool. She receives a tape with 'a sort of watery wailing an underwater echoing sound' (Drabble, 2002). She throws away her engagement ring into the swimming pool. Finally, when in the third part of the book she fakes her death, she drowns herself in the canal. Second symbol she uses is a mistletoe. Mistletoe appears for the first time in one of the cited fragments of *Aeneid*, 'Book VI':

*There stands a Tree; the Queen of Stygian Jove  
Claims it her own; thick Woods, and gloomy  
Night,  
Conceal the happy Plant from Humane sight.  
One bough it bears; but, wond'rous to behold;  
The ductile Rind, and Leaves, of Radiant Gold...  
Through the green Leafs the glitt'ring Shadow glow;  
As on the sacred Oak, the wintry Mistleto* (Drabble, 2002)

Later, when she is observing the canal through a window, she '[has] fancied that [she has] seen great clumps of mistletoe hanging' and describes it as

<sup>1</sup> 'Deep was the cave; and downward as it went, from the wide mouth, a rocky wide descent...Begone, you who are uninitiated. Begone...' (Dryden)

<sup>2</sup> Louis MacNeice; 1907-1963; Irish poet and playwright; the poem 'Thalassa' was found in MacNeice's papers after his death.

‘strange plants’ which ‘are plants, and no plants, and they live between the species. They are life, and they are death,’ and, having added ‘I neither live nor die’ (Drabble, 2002), she compares herself to this ambiguous plant

In one of the interviews Drabble stated ‘I should have an incident or a theme or a story line that carries that idea [meaning], rather than just telling people what I mean’ (Cardwell, Kingsley & Underwood, 2000). As a result, the author very rarely gives any definite answers to the readers and her novels are known for the lack of distinct endings. Still, it seems that in her later novels the answer often lays in literary allusions and so it is in the case of *The Seven Sisters*. Drabble, having determined *Aeneid*, myths and mythological symbols as sources most vital for the overall understanding of the novel, seems to reflect three different aspects. First, mythological symbols she uses appear to be a reflection of Candida’s personality. Both water and mistletoe are associated with some kind of doubleness and inbetweenness; they are simultaneously connected with life and death. Similarly Candida, being ‘afraid to live and to die’ (Drabble, 2002), belongs to both these worlds. Consequently, her personality is fragmented and incoherent. In the last part she claims: ‘I am one of those small, insignificant, unfinished people. I respect those who can make an ending’ (Drabble, 2002). References to particular myths, in turn, attempt to signify the importance of the past, both in personal and cultural way. Candida, despite her effort to run away from the past is, in fact, surrounded by it. Her Virgil classes, friends with their ancient names, constant references to literary heritage and comparisons to Dido, seven sisters or Ophelia make her strongly attached to history. However, as the past has a rather painful dimension for her, she avoids expressing her memories and accept it. It is not until the third part of the book, written from the perspective of her daughter - a speech therapist, when she is able to utter some of the most distressing recollections and make peace with them. On the other hand, Drabble also shows the significance of the past in a more general context. As I have already presented, she alludes to mythology through other texts, first through Goethe and then Louis MacNeice, as if to underline this temporal dimension of literary heritage. She tries to show the significance of the past to the present. Candida also seems to fully understand that one cannot live without one’s past, that we are made of our past. But because her past is so painful, the first thing she does after her removal is to disconnect with her past. In her new flat she had only a few mementoes of her previous life and she ‘[has] some hope that by stripping most of mine away [objects], I might enter a new dimension’ (Drabble, 2002). But when this refusal of the past does not work, she attempts to find a way to reconcile with it. Finally, the fate decides for her and sends Candida a winning lottery ticket which enables her to finance her journey to Italy to follow Aeneas’ lead. As symbolical Aeneas she embarks on a quest to meet her fate. Nevertheless, the main difficulty during the journey is not physical hardship but a difficult process of facing her past and accepting her future no matter what is. The chapter ‘Italian Journey’ finishes with Candida’s entering Sibyl’s cave like Aeneas in the ‘Book VI’ of *Aeneid*. The next part is written by Ellen, Candida’s daughter and announces that Candida died which, as I have already

mentioned, is a lie. This symbolical death and the third person narrative allows the protagonist to express her aching memories and to move on and start living again. The novel finishes with a quote from the Bible ‘stretch forth your hand, I say, stretch forth your hand’ (Drabble, 2002) which describes the moment when Jesus cures the man from leprosy. It seems that for Candida the illness was her past and her fear about the future but now, when she accepted the burden, she is able to stretch her hand and patiently wait for her destination.

Similarly to previous works this time Drabble also puts us on the right track from the very beginning. Having titled her novel *The Witch of Exmoor*, she takes us to the world of fairy tales. This time, however, she is much more economical in alluding to the past. Contradictory to preceding narratives, she rarely provides any other references than those connected with fairy tales. Nevertheless, having followed her hints, the reader cannot be mistaken where to look for the interpretative answer. She alludes to fairy tale genre by particular scenes, direct mentions of the authors, the narrative form and the plot itself. We meet the characters – two families, the Herzs and the Palmers – in a idealized setting.

*Begin on a midsummer evening. Let them have everything that is pleasant. The windows are open on to the terrace and the lawn, and drooping bunches of wistaria deepen from a washed mauve pink to purple. The roses are in bloom.* (Drabble, 1997)

In this pastoral surrounding the protagonists are having a fantastic meal that includes ‘bowl of fruit’, ‘noble slab of cheddar cheese’ and French wine. But soon to the story ‘the evil’ character is introduced- Frieda Haxby, the title witch and the mother, and so is her new ‘home’. Frieda, being tired of her family problems and rotten society decided to move to Ashcombe – a ruined property at the edge of Exmoor coast, which seems to be an ideal location for a witch. Her visitors are welcomed by a sign ‘Beware of vipers breeding’ and interiors from a gothic novel.

*On a heave mock-Jacobean sideboard stand three skulls, two animal (a badger and a sheep?) and one human. Their grim effect is softened by a cracked red Bristol glass vase holding a peacock feather, a skeleton clock in glass case, and a large alabaster egg – a nature mort, not a shrine or cemetery* (Drabble, 1996).

Furthermore, Drabble reminds the readers about the fairy tale reference by several scenes which, due to their awkwardness, disrupt the flow of narrative. When David, Grace and Benjamin are visiting Frieda, in contrast to her horrifying house, she looks like a princess.

*And Frieda Haxby was wearing her tea-gown. There she stood, shoulder to shoulder with her grandson, in a floor-length gown of radiant midnight blue embroidered with silver. Sequins sparkled on her bodice(...) Silver earrings dangled from the lobes of her ears (..) (Drabble, 1996)*

Finally, in the last chapter of the book when Emily, Frieda’s granddaughter, comes to Ashcombe after her death she meets a toad at the doorstep and then a deer which runs into the ruined house.

*The hounds stream after her, and Emily dashes to bar the window, as the deer takes refuge behind the table, putting her hoof through the back of Leland's canvas (...) Emily spread her arms against the window, and screams. 'Stand back, stand back'* (Drabble, 1996).

What is more, the authors and titles connected with fairy tales genre are mentioned by the characters several times. Frieda recollects a conversation with a writer Susan Stokes who said that 'there were only two plots to choose from. One was Sleeping Beauty, the puberty myth. The other was Cinderella, the tale of Rags to Riches (Drabble, 1996). The title 'witch' has a copy of 'Grimm fairy stories illustrated by Arthur Rackham'(Drabble, 1996). Being an adult she read Bruno Bettelheim<sup>1</sup>, but as a child she was deeply interested in 'the goblins, the princesses, the old men of the sea, the water maidens, the raven brothers, the haunted woods' (Drabble, 1996). Interestingly, when she tries to describe her difficult relation with her sister Everhilda, she uses a form of narration characteristic to fairy tales. She starts her story as follows 'Once upon a time there were two little girls, and their names were Everhilda and Frieda Haxby' (Drabble, 1996). Additionally, she uses vocabulary specific to fairy tales. Therefore, Frieda is accused of being 'a wicked godmother' who 'put a spell' on Benjamin or 'turned [her family] into stone' (Drabble, 1996). Most importantly the author refers to fairy tale genre by the plot, however, not directly but by the subversion of its typical elements. Steven Swann Jones offers four characteristics of this genre which are the 'incorporation of fantasy', 'the undertaking of a quest', 'central protagonist presented in an unambiguous way' 'happy ending', (Jones, 2002). Starting with the elements of fantasy, it seems that in *The Witch of Exmoor* it is used in a very superficial way, as if the author wanted to give only an impression of fantasy. Furthermore, this impression often turns out to be false since behind these strange, almost magical scenes, described earlier, nothing more is hidden; there is always some rational explanation for every situation. The deer running into the house is not a fairy tale unicorn but a haunted animal. Jones also suggests that fantasy in fairy tales is often a manifestation of cosmic morality where good characters are rewarded and the bad ones punished. This leads, in turn, to one of the most important messages of Drabble's fiction who, by her extensive cooperation with the past, not only shows the importance of tradition, but, first of all, she rewrites this tradition in a contemporary mode showing that the present is much more complicated than the past. That is why, in *The Witch of Exmoor* this cosmic morality cannot be manifested as none of the characters is entirely good or bad; there is no clear divisions. Contradictory to black and white world of fairy tales, both The Herzs and The Palmers are presented in the most ambiguous way. Frieda, as the title and, supposedly, central protagonist is rather omitted by the narrative - the reader rarely sees the story through her eyes. Moreover, despite being called 'the witch', she does not seem the worst character; quite the opposite. As the only one she is courageous enough to see

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, 1903-1990, child psychologist and writer. He wrote *The Uses of Enchantment. The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*.

the corruption of the society and then to run away from it. Frieda's escape can be also interpreted as a fairy tale quest since she went to Ashcombe not only to run away but also to write her memoirs and, as Candida from *The Seven Sisters*, to reconcile with her past. Nevertheless, the typical quest described by Jones should lead to some kind of solution. In Frieda's case it seems unfinished as she falls of the cliff and dies. Still, the most subverted element of fairy tale is the happy ending. The last scene of the novel brings back the pastoral landscape of the beginning. Benjamin and his cousin Emily, while visiting Ashcombe after Frieda's death, are setting off on a rural trip and jumps into the river. However, this apparently happy ending is preceded with a series of tragic events. Frieda dies in mysterious circumstances, her son-in-law Nathan dies of a heart attack, Benjamin overwhelmed by the fortune Frieda left him falls into depression and almost kills himself, one of his cousins Simon is hit by a lorry and also dies. This definitely does not seem like a fairy tale ending so what is the purpose of employing this particular genre? Drabble in all three novels uses the same reference strategy. By alluding to the same text, genre or scientific theory on several level, that is, through plot, vocabulary, quotations, symbols, titles or authors she creates a web of allusions that is supposed to place the reader on the right interpretative track. Undoubtedly, especially in *The Seven Sisters* and *The Peppered Moth*, she applies numerous indication of other sources. However, most often they are signalled only on one level and function either as characteristic of a particular character or the element of cultural context in which the characters live. In *The Witch of Exmoor* Drabble, having established this elaborate framework of allusions, created her own, contemporary version of fairy tale; version that undermines this traditional, rigid division into good and bad. She attempted to show that world is neither that magical nor that simple place as fairy stories tend to present. It is much more complicated and cannot be limited to any number of plots.

Margaret Drabble published her last novel *The Sea Lady* in 2006. Last year her short stories appeared in a collection *Life of A Smiling Woman* which was preceded with semi-memoir *The Pattern in the Carpet*. Her later novels, starting from *The Witch of Exmoor* are unfairly neglected by the critique. She is accused of abandoning stronger, more feminist characters from her earlier works in favour of ambiguous protagonists like Candida or Frieda. However, I believe there is much more than that in her later works. While in the first three decades of her career she focused on either psychological or social aspects of reality, presenting women fighting for their place and happiness in the world of swinging sixties and later in Britain of Margaret Thatcher, in her later fiction she adopted much more reflective and general tone. In these novels, having created an elaborate and sophisticated web of allusions to past works, art, science, she points out the most significant part of this past on which she is going to comment. Very often this commentary is aimed to show her respect for tradition but also to present her penetrating rereading of it. What emerges from this reinterpretation is the irrelevance of the past to contemporary world but simultaneously its overwhelming impact.

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