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学位论文

From Millstone to Milestone:

A Thematic Study on Margaret Drabble's

The Millstone

从磨石到里程碑

试论德拉布尔早期代表作《磨石》的主题

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Introduction

With thirteen novels and a great number of other writings and three major literary prizes, she is surely a prolific and versatile British writer.

She has been called as an expert witness in an Old Bailey Obscenity case, is always being asked to pick the best books of the year (as well as having hers included in others' choices).

She is one of sixteen academics and authors the New Statesman once asked whether Britain should remain in the Common Market.

With three children well brought up, she proves to be an excellent mother.

Who is she?

Margaret Drabble is her name. She is also named as “the George Eliot of our time,”¹ and “the novelist of maternity,”² with which we may learn partial and only partial truth about her. The most practical approach to obtain the whole truth about a writer is to study his or her works, both individually and as a whole.

As far as scope is concerned, Drabble's novels can be classified into two phases, which mark her progress as a novelist. The first-phase works include her first five novels, which may be labeled as "independent girl stories" because they tell about the young woman endowed with talent, beauty, health, and good education. They mainly dwell upon the private experience of the privileged. Her second-phase works show her broadened vision and deepened concerns. Although with different visions, all of Drabble's novels share something in common—they are all about female intellectuals' seeking for identity in chaos both inside and outside themselves. The former is the germ of the latter if compared to a big tree.

The present thesis, consisting of four chapters in addition to an introduction in the beginning and a conclusion at the end, aims mainly at the studies of the two important themes in Drabble's *The Millstone*. This novel belongs to her first-phase works, but bears the themes, the Disorientation theme and the Quest theme, indicating the basic concerns in most of Drabble's work. Drabble's thematic achievement in this novel is thus regarded as a milestone in her writing career.

To develop the thematic study on this novel, a general review on Margaret Drabble's life and career is presented. As an intellectual, Margaret Drabble never forgets her mission of preserving or guarding the

significance of human's existence in this world. Her works shoulder this mission. Whether her quest as an intellectual is a success or a failure depends upon her works, which indicate that she has developed from a literary disciple to a major writer.

The next two chapters, dealing with the two themes of the novel, the Disorientation theme and the Quest theme, are the core of this thesis. What the second chapter tackles is the Disorientation theme—man's disorientation in modern society. The social background of the novel is first of all presented briefly: the permissive British society in the 1960s is the backdrop of *The Millstone*. As an intellectual of Britain in the 1960s, Rosamund Stacey fails to become an integrated person just because she, like many intellectuals, loses her way. As an intellectual, she has lost her sense of responsibility as an interpreter and guard of the significance of man's living in the world. Instead, with her identity as an intellectual as an excuse, she has been staying in the ivory tower of academe to avoid deep emotional contact with others. In fact, she is self-centered, self-conceived, and thus self-deceived. Other intellectual characters in this novel are also analyzed, such as Lydia, Joe, and Rosamund's father, Prof. Stacey, who have also lost their ways. All of them can not draw strength from the traditional values and they have no idea of how to establish new ones.

The third chapter deals with another theme embodied in this novel: the Quest theme, which is closely related to the Disorientation theme—the Quest theme. In *The Millstone*, the protagonist, Rosamund Stacey's quest for identity is of universal significance, but the goal of this quest is by no means easy to obtain. Rosamund Stacey first seeks her economic independence by becoming an intellectual. Using her intellectual identity as an excuse, she has been staying in the academic ivory tower to avoid deep emotional contact with others, a fact of which she is ignorant. As a result, without entering the real life, her identity as an intellectual is not a milestone but rather a millstone on her way to achieve her integrated personality.

Accidentally, or to be exact, inevitably, she becomes a mother, an identity enabling her to achieve her independence in emotion, because, as an unwedded mother, to protect her child all by herself, she has to seek help, to communicate. The love for her child makes her gradually go out of the ivory tower to face the realities of life. Motherhood enables her to approach the goal of her quest—a whole person. Through depicting Rosamund Stacey's quest and success, Drabble, as a moralist in contemporary world, puts forward her suggestions for the disoriented in this chaotic world—to face, to accept, and most important of all, to love,

consequently, to change the millstones of life into the milestones of life.

The last chapter focuses on the evaluation of the artistic features of *The Millstone*, including the symbols, the first-person narrative, the intertexts, and the open ending. Drabble's employing of these artistic techniques proves that Drabble is a novelist who can both assimilate from and innovate in the traditional artistic techniques.

All in all, *The Millstone* with these two themes, with which most of her later novels deal with, is of milestone-like significance to her writing career: it establishes Drabble's fame as a chronicler, a moralist, and an artist. Despite the demerits of this novel, Margaret Drabble, with her millstone-like sense of responsibility and her ambition to make greater artistic achievements, does not and will not fail her reader's expectations.

Notes

1. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 5 (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1976), 118.
2. Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 303.

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Chapter 1

From Millstone to Milestone: Margaret Drabble's Quest

I. Life of Margaret Drabble

Before proceeding to the particular discussion on Margaret Drabble and her *The Millstone* (1965), it would be constructive to briefly introduce her life experience and main works.

Margaret Drabble was born on June 5, 1939, in Sheffield, Yorkshire. Her father, John Frederick Drabble, was a barrister, then a circuit judge for Suffolk and Essex, and later, after retiring, a novelist. Her mother, Marie Bloor Drabble, was an English teacher at The Mount in York, a Quaker school her daughters were later to attend. As time has proved, the parents have a determining influence on her life and career. Both parents came from the working class families: one has a small sweet factory; the other were potters from the Potteries in Stratfordshire. However, both were the first to leave the families for university education, and both graduated from Cambridge. This family root and this transition from the working class to the middle class are of great significance to both their own lives and later to those of their children. They tended to believe that

they were privileged but they were uncertain that they deserved to be privileged. They knew that they must work harder so as to be qualified for this status. Therefore, as a child, Margaret Drabble was required to be self-disciplined, to work hard, and to be independent. Inevitably, the relationship between parents and children, especially that between mother and daughter, becomes the frequently emerging subject in Margaret Drabble's works. Take *Jerusalem the Golden* as example, the hostile first and finally forgiving relationship between Clara and her mother is a case in point.

Margaret is the second child in a family of four children, including an older sister Antonia Susan, a distinguished novelist and critic, a younger sister Helen, an art historian, and a much younger brother who is a barrister. Margaret Drabble compares her family to the Brontë family because both are of the same size and constitution, and what's more, like the Brontës, they were all commonly interested in writing, and in their childhood composed stories together. Although living in a large family, Margaret Drabble was a lonely girl, often ill, detached from her siblings. She spent her time alone writing, reading, and "just being secretive."¹ It was very natural for such a little girl to love literature. Among the other three children, the elder sister Antonia Susan inserted a strong influence on Margaret, just as Jane Gray in *The Waterfall* (1969) says, her cousin

Lucy “was my sister, my fate, my example; her influence on me was incalculable.”² Therefore it is natural that the competitive and also affectionate relationship between sisters becomes a convenient subject of her novels. For example, Margaret herself and Antonia Susan are quite likely to be the archetypes of the two sisters in her first novel, *The Summer Birdcage*. Therefore, Margaret Drabble admits, “one’s relationship with one’s siblings and parents is something that you’re going to write about again and again, in different forms.”³

Another determining influence comes from Arnold Bennet (1867-1931), a distant relative from her mother’s side. She is attracted by him because, as she says,

He has a great respect for ordinary life and ordinary people.. And because of this grounding in knowledge of ordinary, which Virginia Woolf, for example, did not have, Arnold Bennet tells you things that Virginia Woolf simply didn’t know.⁴

And she shares his respect for the ordinary. This respect for the ordinary determines her attitudes towards literature.

The religion attitudes the family took may also be one of the determining influences on her later choice of literature as her life-long career. The Drabbles were not Quakers at the time—the father took the children to the Anglican church; the mother was an atheist—but they were sympathetic to the Quaker values and in later years joined the Society of Friends. The children were instructed to live their lives not to their own satisfaction, but in contribution to the general good. The Quakers believe in moral pressure, not punishment, and Margaret Drabble admits that the moral pressures from her parents were very strong.

The love for literature resulted in her studying English literature at Newnham College from 1956 to 1960. Then she was a student of F. R. Leavis, and she shares his belief that the novel is “the one bright book of life,” and that fiction at its best is distinguished by what Leavis called “a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity.”⁷

After graduating from Cambridge, however, she did not devote herself to literary creation. Instead, she got married right after graduation in June 1960, and together with her husband, Clive Swift, a Cambridge graduate in English, who became a leading actor, joined the Royal

Shakespeare Company. In spite of all this, her lover for literature overwhelmed her other interests at a quite amusing moment, during her first pregnancy, she began to write her first novel, and it turned out to be an immediate success with both the readers and the critics. From then on, she began her quest for her own identity through writing. At the same time, she became the mother of another two children. This marriage ended with their divorce in 1975. This failure has profound influence on her life and career, at least, at the beginning of their separation. When Swift first left, she did not know if she would be able to write again, and what's serious is that she began to question the value of marriage. After living alone with her children for years, there came her second marriage to Michael Holroyell, the distinguished biographer and man of letters, in September 1982. Tears and sweats, doubts and uncertainties, have witnessed her winding journey to obtain her desired identity as a woman and an intellectual. In this sense, she is just like the pilgrims in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, one of her favourite books during her childhood.

II. Writing Career of Margaret Drabble

When still a little girl, Drabble showed a deep love for literature because of the atmosphere of her family. Studying English literature at

Cambridge might be helpful for the writing training, but she did not start writing for publication. Because she thought the critical atmosphere was too discouraging for a young writer to be self-confident of his or her literary talents, she just kept it to herself if she really ever wrote something. It was only during her first pregnancy that she began to write her first novel, *A Summer Birdcage*, since she thought she could do nothing except writing a story. She did it almost as a kind of entertainment to cheer herself up as she felt that the role of a wife was just like a piece of stage furniture. It was in 1960. She was encouraged by the enthusiastic critical response it caused. It is not accidental that she wrote her next two novels during her second and third pregnancy respectively since, on the one hand, she was discouraged by her setbacks on the stage, and on the other hand, she was quite bored with her role as a housewife. It seems that literature for Drabble at that time had the cathartic function defined by Aristotle. Therefore, there is some truth in the saying that Margaret Drabble is a writer because she is a woman, and Drabble herself admits, "I try to confront the problems that confront me."⁸ It is true that her fiction is nourished by her own personal development, at least her first three novels are a case in point.

As far as Drabble's first three novels are concerned, it is not an overstatement to call Drabble as a semi-autobiographical novelist.

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