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## **WOMAN'S THIRD AGE: *THE SEVEN SISTERS* BY MARGARET DRABBLE**

### **Abstract**

Margaret Drabble's *The Seven Sisters* (2002) evolves the middle-aged Candida Wilton's quest for a life after marriage and menopause: 'woman's third age', 'the age of ageing'. Rendered redundant by her husband Andrew, headmaster of a Suffolk school, rejected by her three daughters Ellen, Isobel, and Martha, and replaced by Anthea Richards, Candida has abandoned Suffolk and relocated in the anonymity of London. Yet, Candida is quite courageous and starts an odyssey with six other women friends and the journey forms only one quarter of the interestingly structured novel. Drabble's narrative style is poignant; nevertheless, her last fiction is regarded as very depressing by some reviewers, despite the unusual construction of her narrative. The aim of my essay is to explore Drabble's last fiction *The Seven Sisters*, mapping Candida's fluid identity at the so-called woman's third age phase, concurrently pinning down Drabble's peculiar narrative style of utilizing various disciplines regarding mythology, intertextuality, gender and psychology.

### **Key words**

*Margaret Drabble; The Seven Sisters; women's third age; postmodern narrativity; intertextuality; sisterhood; death; mythology*

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Margaret Drabble's last fiction *The Seven Sisters* (2002) evolves Candida Wilton's quest for a life after divorce and menopause coined as "woman's third age, the age of ageing" (Stovel 2004: 101). Despite the fact that Drabble does not specify Candida's age, she implies that it is near 60. Abandoned for another woman by her husband Andrew, headmaster of a Suffolk school, rejected by her three daughters Ellen, Isobel, and Martha, Candida leaves Suffolk and relocates herself in the anonymity of London. However, Candida is quite courageous and starts

an odyssey with six other women friends, yet the journey forms only one quarter of the interestingly structured novel. Drabble's narrative style is poignant; she is usually considered as a "lover of narrative interruptions, master of metafictionality, and past-mistress of plot reversals" (Stovel 2004: 103). Elisabeth Jay, on the other hand, also holds that Drabble's last fiction *The Seven Sisters* refutes the conviction that Drabble's novels offer "the easy pleasures of the romantic novel spiced with the intellectual respectability open to readers whose education also bestowed – the ability to think in quotation" (1993: 571). Nevertheless, *The Seven Sisters* is also regarded as very depressing by some reviewers, despite the unusual construction of her narrative. Thereby, the aim of my paper is to explore Drabble's *The Seven Sisters* by mapping Candida's fluid identity at the so-called woman's third age phase, concurrently pinning down Drabble's peculiar narrative style of utilizing various disciplines regarding mythology, intertextuality, gender and psychology.

*The Seven Sisters* is composed of four chapters: "Her Diary", "Italian Journey", "Ellen's Version" and "A Dying Fall". The narrator of the diary is Candida Wilton herself, writing on her laptop about her solitary life in London after the divorce. The "Italian Journey" is narrated by a third person about the six women friends following the steps of Aeneas, the seventh sister being their Italian tour guide. "Ellen's Version's" narrator is her daughter Ellen who finds Candida's diary after her suicide and comments on her mother's diary, accusing her mother for distorting the facts for most of the time. The final section, "A Dying Fall" reveals that the narrator has been Candida throughout all the four chapters, including the third person narration. She has not committed suicide, and she has been trying to relate the events through different lenses. Regarding her style, Rubenstein states that Margaret Drabble's increasing incorporation of postmodern narrative concepts in her novels has its roots in her earlier thematic concern with fragmentation. As Drabble's novels became "less concerned with morals and more focused on the arbitrary nature of the universe, her increasing use of disjunctive narrative structures, self-reflexivity and other postmodern concepts seems natural" (1994: 136). However, although Drabble uses postmodern theories, by her last fiction, I suggest that besides relocating the readers' conception of Candida's identity three times, Drabble's postmodern narrative style basically serves for mapping the complex emotions and self-judgment of a solitary woman at her 'third age', abandoned both by her husband and her three daughters. Hence, the diverse narrators serve for her efforts of moralistic purposes, which are seeing oneself both from a neutral and from a daughter's point of view. Through these perspectives, Candida reveals different realities about herself and her relations with her family and friends.

Furthermore, the title *The Seven Sisters* also signifies contrary and ironic allusions to various meanings. Apart from the alternate name for the Pleiades constellation and the mythological allusion to the nymphs in the train of Artemis, it is the name of a train station in London and in fact it is what Candida manages to bring together the six women friends for the Italian journey and their Italian tour

guide Valeria. As for the signification of the Pleiades constellation, it is disclosed as part of Candida's vivid imagination. After her divorce, Candida moves to London and buys herself a flat of two rooms and a bathroom. Since she can only see the motorway and the railway from her window, she gets interested in the sky, which she states is very different from the "innocent" Suffolk sky and that she can see the constellations of the Great Bear, Cassiopeia, the Seven Sisters and the Swan and ironically adds "[a]ll these I have seen, or fancied I have seen" (46). As she spent most of her married life in Suffolk, it is possible to hold that the imaginary sky view signifies positive possibilities for her. Candida admits "[a]s a nun enters a convent in search of her god, so I entered my solitude. I felt fear, and I felt hope" (54). Moreover, the repetition of the seven sisters in multifarious contexts connotes to Derrida's terminology "*différance*" (emphasis original) of which he avers "[i]t is because of *différance* that the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called present element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element" (1972: 90). Thus, he also points out that "*différance* would be not only the play of differences with language but also the relation of speech to language, the detour through which I must pass in order to speak, the silent promise I must make; and this is equally valid for semiology in general, governing all the relations of usage to schemata, of message to code, etc." (1972: 91).

Fundamentally, the theme of sisterhood and womanhood dominates the novel more than the mythological or intertextual allusion to Virgil. In fact, Drabble's use of the term 'sisters' is ironic because although her narrator Candida is a single child, she somehow maintains six friends, and their relationship alludes to the controversial theme of sisterhood. Giobbi states that the theme of sisterhood with its symbolical and psychological implications has been pervasive in women's literature since Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1992: 241). For Giobbi, Austen is caught between her attraction to Marianne's spontaneity and Elinor's reserve, so Elinor's self-restraint and Marianne's indulgence in sensibility are shown as equally possible and plausible female attitudes (242). While rewriting Aeneas in a postmodern fashion in the way that the seven sisters/friends follow his footsteps, Drabble repeats Austen's attraction with highly diverse seven women, enabling Candida to compare and contrast herself with them with the intention of comprehending her own fluid identity reiterated in different lives and diverse perspectives, as alternatives of selfhood. During her initial solitary life in London, Candida joins an evening class on Virgil's *Aeneid*. To the question she asks herself why she joined it, she replies:

[b]ecause its very existence seemed so anachronistic and so improbable. Because I thought it would keep my mind in good shape. Because I thought it might find me a friend. Because I thought it might find me the kind of friend that I would not have known in my former life.

Already I was wary about making friends with the kind of person who would want to be friends with a person like me. (10)

Candida's inferiority complex that arises from her husband's infidelity inhibits her from making friends easily. When the Virgil class is cancelled and the building is transformed into a Health Club, a woman her age in the club tries to make friends with Candida to which her reaction is quite exaggerated:

That woman who told me on my second visit that I'd got my costume on inside out was lying. I hadn't. It was a ploy. She wanted to engage me in conversation. She wanted to latch on to me and use me and be my friend [...] I said, coldly, something like, 'No, I haven't', and pulled one of my towels around myself before striding off towards the stairs [...] To be honest, I probably also said, 'Thank you.' I'm not very good at being very rude. But I am quite good, for better or for worse, at avoiding people, and I've made sure that I never change in the same section as her again. She was an older woman, like myself. She had hoped she had spotted a weakling in need of protection. I avoided her. In fact, come to think of it, I haven't seen her for months. Maybe she's moved away, or died. (11)

Death is a recurrent theme in Candida's narration, a signifier of her depression and old age, and she elaborates on her own death by faking her suicide in the chapter titled "Ellen's version". Another reason Candida discloses about making new friends is because she is "so bad at shaking off old ones" (12), since those are the friends she knew during her married life in Suffolk and she couldn't "face them" and "ran away" (12). Thereby, Candida points out, "I still can't decide whether courage or cowardice prevailed in me" (12). Candida also does volunteer work, visiting a man in prison in Wormwood Scrubs. She never reveals why she has took up the task, but the nature of their relation unveils Candida's ambivalence in relationships and her narcissistic character: "The man in Wormwood Scrubs makes few demands on me. He is safely locked up, and he can't get out. That's the kind of friendship one can control, on one's own terms" (12). It is an uneven relationship and whilst it projects Candida's will to control relationships, it also reveals her inability to control unless the person is safely locked up. Candida also divulges that her relationship with her husband has ended because of her frigidity, hence she oscillates between inferiority and narcissism. Christopher Lasch maintains that in clinical literature, narcissism serves as more than a metaphoric term for self-absorption. As a psychic formation in which "love rejected turns back to the self as hatred", narcissism has come to be recognized as an important element in the character disorders that have "absorbed much of the clinical attention once given to hysteria and obsessional neurosis" (1979: 222-3). Lasch likewise notes that psychoanalysis, a therapy that grew out of experience with "severely repressed and morally rigid individuals who needed to come to terms with a rigorous inner 'censor'", finds itself "confronted more and more

often with a 'chaotic and impulse-ridden character' " (224). It deals with patients who "act out' their conflicts instead of repressing or sublimating them". These patients, "though often ingratiating, tend to cultivate a protective shallowness in emotional relations" (224). Lasch concludes that these patients "lack the capacity to mourn, because the intensity of their rage against lost love objects prevent their reliving happy experiences or treasuring them in memory. They avoid close involvements, which might release intense feelings of rage" (224). Besides her frigid relationship with her husband and friends, Candida's relationship with her three daughters has also been shallow. Additionally, she believes that they have taken sides with her husband Andrew. Thereby, Candida's analysis of her relationships with the few people around her is shaped by her variable narrators. Only when she takes the stance of her daughter Ellen, Candida starts questioning her own faults from Ellen's perspective, which brings about a transformation in their relationship.

Another controversial standpoint in Drabble's *The Seven Sisters* is the autobiographical narration of Candida Wilton. Primarily, the text is disclosed to be an autobiography of Candida Wilton's as maintained by the first and fourth chapters. Yet, by Drabble's postmodernist incorporation of fragmentation, self-writing attains an extraordinary turn by third persons. Janette Rainwater in *Self-therapy* (1989) maintains that present-awareness, or the "routine art of self-observation" (9), does not lead to a chronic immersion in current experience. On the contrary, it is the very condition of effectively planning ahead. According to Rainwater, the art of being in the now generates the self-understanding necessary to plan ahead and to construct a life trajectory which accords with the individual's inner wishes. Keeping a journal and developing a notional or actual autobiography is a recommended means of thinking ahead. The journal, Rainwater suggests, should be completely written for oneself. Thus, the journal itself becomes the explicit form of an autobiography, and so 'autobiographical thinking' becomes a central element of self-therapy (54). However, putting Rainwater's and similar self-actualization therapies about the emergence of contemporary 'post-traditional' culture in the context of a wider argument, Evans notes that according to Giddens "external anchors and restraints supplied by others – rooted in ideas of obligation, duty and permanence – are now usurped by the 'reflexive' project of the self" (Evans 2004: 127–8). Candida's autobiography likewise concerns not only the past, but also future plans and choices. In *Modernity and Self-identity* (1994), Giddens argues that "[i]n a post-traditional social universe, reflexively organized, permeated by abstract systems, and in which the reordering of time and space realigns the local with the global, the self undergoes massive change. Therapy, including self-therapy, both expresses that change and provides programmes of realizing it in the form of self-actualisation" (78–9). A lifestyle can be defined as a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfill utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity (80). Thus, durable sexual ties, marriages and friendship relations all tend to approximate today the *pure relationship*. In condi-

tions of high modernity, the pure relationship comes to be of elementary importance for the reflexive project of the self (80). Among these, modern friendship exposes this characteristic even more clearly. A friend is defined specifically as someone with whom one has a relationship unprompted by anything other than the rewards that that relationship provides (82).

As to Candida's relationship with her parents, she mentions briefly that her father is dead and her mother is in a care home. Candida implies that she does not go to visit her mother as she has become "very difficult and talks a great deal about Jesus" (24). Candida marries Andrew, a "very good looking Englishman" who is "correct in every way" (14). They were a happy couple when they were young, and she discloses that "[p]eople probably thought I was lucky to catch him, though I too was pretty enough when I was a girl" (15). Right after saying she lacked self esteem, Candida adds, "I haven't aged well. People say women don't. That's not always true, but it has been true in my case ... Now I look faded and washed out" (15). As for her marriage relationships, from her autobiographical stance, she accuses Andrew for deceiving her with Anthea and marrying her. While Candida's autobiography serves her as self-reflection, she starts finding fault with her own behavior as well, though solely for the last few years of her marriage, and accordingly justifying herself with menopause:

I did not conduct myself like a lady in those last few years in Suffolk. I had small tantrums over small things and slept much in the afternoons. I behaved in a mildly deranged and menopausal manner. [...] I withdrew my wifely support from my husband and gazed at my handsome daughter Isobel with envy and distrust. [...] I moved out of my husband's bed and said that I preferred to sleep alone. I made the excuse that this was because I slept so badly. [...] It is true that I sleep badly. I still sleep badly. Things got worse when I stopped Hormone Replacement Therapy. I still have night sweats, though they should have stopped long ago. I no longer sweat during the day, but I do feel hot at night. Nobody warned me of this. [...] What would have happened to me and my marriage, if Jane Richards had not drowned herself in the Lady Pond? From that death, Andrew and Anthea took life, and now they are man and wife. [...] I think much about drowning. [...] I know the very place. I wade in, but only up to my knees. (74)

Although Candida starts with the analysis of her menopausal period, she believes that she loses her husband because Anthea's daughter Jane commits suicide and while trying to console her, Andrew is drawn to Anthea. This trauma evokes the feeling to commit suicide, and Candida fictionalizes her suicide in the third chapter and tries to regard things from her daughter Ellen's point of view. The events reviewed by Ellen's narration bring about self-criticism again and reveal that Candida has always been a frigid woman, not towards her husband only, but her three daughters as well. She even goes as far as saying that Andrew probably had an affair with Anthea's daughter Jane as well, reasoning that that must be why

the daughter committed suicide walking in a lake. Nevertheless, when she takes up the autobiographical narration again in the final chapter, Candida reveals her doubts about that possibility. Since she continuously assesses her relationships, as maintained by Giddens above, the third age revealed by Candida oscillates between depression and a will to hold on to life. She finally admits that she “disliked” her husband, specifically giving the details of when she started disliking him. She cooks a Hungarian goulash for her dinner guests, and her husband criticizes her in front of them by saying, “Well, sweetie, not quite one of your best, is it? [...] ‘Just a wee bit on the disgusting side, I’m afraid’”, and pushes all the meat to one side (84). Candida remarks “[a]t such moments, one dies a little, but I was also angry. I felt I had not deserved such treachery” (85). It is the only episode, in fact, where Candida accuses her husband for his manners towards her, besides adultery.

As to the relationship with her daughters, Candida claims her three daughters, Isobel, Ellen and Martha have sided with Andrew. She blames Andrew for having “alienated” and “seduced” them and “stole their hearts away” (20). Nonetheless, after sometime in her narration she asks, “Did I want children? I don’t know. I loved them, when they were little, in a programmed biological maternal manner, and I am hurt now they have rejected me in favour of their father. It is not their fault that he forced them to take sides, but I do feel, in an old-fashioned way, that they should have been more loyal to their mother” (35). It is possible to deduce that among her daughters Candida has the most positive relation with Ellen who, she says, was the foremost of her daughters to visit her in her new home. She points out that: “Ellen, I feel, doesn’t dislike me. Nor is she in love with her father. She sees through both of us. She has wisely decided to remove herself. She lives in a small town in Finland” (46). For Isobel and Martha, Candida claims that they are “more censorious” towards her and more “obsequious” towards their father (47). Since Isobel expressed the view that Candida was wasting family money by insisting on living alone in London after the divorce, she relates that her oldest daughter Isobel is “very self-centered and avaricious” (47). Candida sums up giving a harsh description of her daughters as follows:

My daughter **Isobel**, my haughty first-born, thinks that I drove Andrew into adultery and into the arms of the wounded Anthea. In her eyes, her father can do no wrong, and I can do no right.

**Ellen**, the second-born and the least favoured, has removed herself from the blood-soaked family arena. She has denied her kith and kin and her inheritance. She is cool and dry and far away.

**Martha**, the youngest, the afterthought, the little baby of the family, is as thick as thieves with her stepmother, Anthea, and she endeavors day and night to steal favours that were once awarded to her hard and grasping sister Isobel. (48) (emphasis original)

Giddens contends that parent-child relations are “something of a special case, because of the radical imbalance of power involved”, and adds that a person



who has left home may keep in constant touch with his parents “as a matter of obligation; but reflexively ordered trust must be developed, involving mutually accepted commitment, if the relationship is to be deepened” (1994: 98). Giddens also holds that one of the reasons why the reflexivity of the self should produce more accurate and insightful self-knowledge is that it helps to reduce dependency in close relationships (1994: 98). Consequently, it is possible to suggest that Candida tries to free herself from depending on her husband and daughters by continually assessing them in the context of self-reflexivity.

It is only before the Italian journey with her women friends that Candida manages to write “*I am happy now*” (emphasis original) (161). After her brief encounter with her husband over the phone before she leaves for the journey, with an effort to justify herself, she reveals: “I am not inhuman. I do not wish to cut myself off utterly from my family. It is simply that I feel a need to redefine what my relationship to my family should be, in these latter days, in these survival days, after biology has done its best and worst” (160). Candida cannot overcome the reality of her husband’s infidelity and discloses that: “[h]e has done me such wrong that I don’t know how to read him, how to speak of him, how to remember him, how to think of him anymore. He is like a great blank in my memory. He is like a hole cut in my side” (160). In the end, Candida manages to reconcile only with Ellen by attending to her wedding in Finland.

As for the ironic construction of “seven sisters”, Candida’s choice of five friends and the addition of the Italian tourist guide is a random and an arbitrary choice. Candida’s diary criticizes all her friends ruthlessly, starting with her friend Julia Jordan who has become a famous author. Julia has been a high school friend and she briefly introduces her as: “Julia is rich, and Julia is famous, and Julia is a wicked woman. Julia lives in Paris and she threatens to visit me soon. Julia is free” (25) and adds: “I wonder why she has kept in touch with me, over the years. I cannot think that my dull life can be of much interest to her, yet she is very faithful to me. She never forgets my birthday ... I don’t know why she bothers with me. I have nothing to offer” (37). While criticizing her friends, Candida fluctuates between their behavior and hers, consequently blurting out, “Julia is a wicked woman. I am a wicked woman. Her sins are of commission, mine of omission. Both are grave” (37).

During her married life in Suffolk, Candida relates that she “allowed two women to befriend” her (18). They are Henrietta and Sally, for whom she comments: “I cannot remember any moment at which I made any friendly step towards them. They co-opted me, and I failed to prevent them from doing so. That is how it happened. I have always been a passive person” (18). She maintains her so-called friendship with Sally Hepburn, a social worker, in her new life as well, introducing her as follows:

My fat Suffolk friend [...] Sally is a pain in the neck. That’s a coarse explanation, but Sally is not a delicate woman. She was my neighbour, I didn’t let myself admit even to myself that I found her irritating. [...] Sally

has a maddening habit of assuming that I share all her problems and all her weaknesses. She is two years younger than me, yet she seems to go ahead, like a specter with a corpse lantern, lighting the way to the tomb (39). [...] I am so mean about Sally. But she has subjected and subdued me and I must fight back somehow. I fight back on this silent scroll of outrage, because I am bound to Sally for ever. I will never shake myself free. (41) [...] Women's lives. How they entwine about one another and strangle one another (41).

Thus, Candida justifies her ambivalence in the so-called sisterhood of the seven sisters.

Candida meets Anaïs Al-Sayyab at her Virgil class. Anaïs is a new friend in her new life, therefore; contrary to the friends she had attained during her school years and her married life, Candida is "always pleased to see her, and [she] is pleased that she bothers to keep up with [her]" (66). Anaïs is defined as "striking" and "spectacular" by Candida, the terms she has not denoted to her family and friends of her former life. Moreover, Anaïs believes Candida plays "some role in her life", she is not sure what it is, but she is "happy to play it" and proudly introduces Anaïs to Sally.

To her already existing friends, Candida finally gets enough courage to call her Virgil class mentor Mrs. Jerrold, and when she receives a positive reply, visits her in her home. Her respect to Mrs. Jerrold's old age, vitality, and her being a poet prevents Candida from making negative comments about her, and she manages to include Mrs. Jerrold on the Italian Journey. Her last friend is also from her Virgil class: Mrs. Barclay. Cynthia Barclay used to be Mr. Barclay's housekeeper and then he married her. Candida portrays her as having "a restless energy" but "no skills" and not being "good with money" (118). Contrary to Candida, "[s]he plays life as it comes, and learns as she goes. She's tall and bold and firm and mannered" (119). Yet for herself, Candida points out: "[a]t my age, you don't have aims. You run, in order to stand still" (130) and adds: "I neither live nor die" (125). When they meet again by the help of their mentor Mrs. Jerrold, Mrs. Barclay and Candida talk about their Virgil class, and when Candida receives a good sum of money which enables her to travel abroad, Anaïs is the first friend she announces her good fortune to. At Mrs. Barclay's, by Mrs. Jerrold's inclusion, they plan a trip to Cartage and Naples, following the footsteps of Aeneas, sailing from Tunis to Naples. As for the date of the voyage, Candida comments: "[w]e all of us seemed to be remarkably free and had various dates to choose from. I suppose that's not very surprising at our age. We are of the third age. Our dependants have died or matured. For good and ill, we are free" (148). Despite all the negative feelings she narrates about her former friends Julia and Sally, Candida includes them on the trip and manages to form the six sisters. For the addition of her detested friend Sally, Candida reasons as such: "[m]aybe I wanted to patronize her. She has always thought she was patronizing me. I wanted to turn the tables. To make her eat at my table. Or did I want to be kind? That seems unlikely. The human heart is black" (151).

Candida, then continues to reflect on her friends' attitudes through the third-person narration with seeming objectivity in the section entitled "Italian journey". She manages to confess, "[t]here is some strange unnatural compulsion binding the two women from Suffolk, connecting the spinster, Sally, and Candida, the abandoned wife" (169). More significantly, Candida's third person narration ironically projects: "Candida herself, freed from her own whining monologue, is also aware that she has turned into another person, a multiple, polyphonic person, who need not pretend to be stupid, who can use long words and make classical allusions", in other words, she has "renounced her victim role" (172). Drabble goes on with Candida's experimental polyphonic stance by impersonating her daughter Ellen as narrator, who comes to Candida's home after her suicide and finds her diary in the laptop. Rewriting Candida's life from Ellen's voice, by the next episode, Drabble surprises the readers that neither Candida committed suicide nor Ellen has been narrating; it has been Candida impersonating Ellen throughout the chapter. Head holds that Drabble supplies some of the most interesting examples of how "a version of realism might respond to the implications of postmodernity whilst retaining its own integrity and identity" (2002: 231).

The last section called 'A Dying Fall' also contains a final episode that engages an event: when Candida tries to put back an old Christmas tree over the fence, she gets injured. Rubenstein maintains that Drabble's use of bodily injury images is a means of expressing her pessimistic views, and her changes in narrative structures reflect her concern with fragmentation and her incorporation of post-modern theories (136). In line with Rubenstein's comment, Candida's last words are unequivocal in the sense of depression as she welcomes death: "I have no home. This is not my home. This is simply the place where I wait [...] I am filled with expectation. What is it that is calling me?" (306). In 1980, at an interview with Diana Cooper-Clark in *Atlantic Monthly*, Drabble complained of her sense of the pressure on the contemporary woman writer to produce politically correct role models that might contribute to the emancipation of women: "[i]f I end with marriage, it's going to be seen as a mistake; if I end with a woman alone, it's going to be regarded as a triumph. All you can do is to write about how it seems to you to happen at the time" (70). Patricia Waugh reminds us that women writers of Drabble's generation (Angela Carter and Antonia Byatt) deployed "metafictional textualism as an ethical tool rather than one of indiscriminate ontological pluralization – and in this respect they have exerted an enduring influence" (2006: 194).

Consequently, despite her third age and self-reflexivity, it is also possible to suggest that Drabble's Candida partially reconciles with both her past and new life. However, although Rubenstein calls it depression, ending her narration in this way Drabble defies a twentieth-century taboo. Craib contends that death has become a subject nobody talks about and that socially approved mourning rituals have all but disappeared; the bereaved are ignored, or expected to be back in a normal life as soon as possible (1998: 267). Considering the betrayal by her husband as a sort of death for Candida, it is possible to argue that her fluctua-

tion between life and death arises because of not being able to mourn her loss. Therefore, as Craib points out, melancholia is “a state in which we have taken the lost loved one inside and kept him or her there, attacking ourselves rather than the person who is lost” (1998: 269). The controversy arises because “[o]n the one hand there is an implicit or even explicit recognition of the implacability of death, the normality of grief and the never-endingness of mourning. On the other hand, there is the desire to iron all this out, turn it into a positive experience and avoid any depth investigation of the internal world” (272). Locating Candida’s position into Craib’s contention, apparently,

[i]n a society which is increasingly frightening, we can think of change as always positive, when in fact it is arguable that it is increasingly destructive – of relationships and lives [...] we do not possess formulae for living- or for dying – and that we are as isolated and threatened as everybody else (1998: 275).

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