CHAPTER VI

THE NEEDLE'S EYE : SHIFT TO OMNISCIENCE

I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart
(Yeats,'The Circus Animals'Desertion')

The Needle's Eye, Drabble's sixth novel, marks
the culmination of her first phase of writing and a
definite development in her artistic career from that
early phase of novel-writing in which she did provide
patterns, explanations, and rationales, partly
religious but mainly Freudian. Broadly speaking, the
early novels could be called Bildungsromans, a form
which has endured into the twentieth century because
even after institutional structures of belief have
been invalidated by history, we can still believe in
the great fiction of the individual's growth and
development. But for Drabble, whose protagonists
have grown and developed with her, this form, which
worked so well for depicting late adolescence and
early adulthood, began to seem inadequate, oversimp-
lified, and prematurely determined. It usually ends
with its protagonist's attainment of wisdom and
triumph, over adversity, or as is the case with
Drabble's more ironic versions, with the protagonist's
perception of limitation. Thus novels end, yet life
goes on. Since Drabble has written many novels and
since they have so closely followed the stages, though
surely not the facts, of her own evolving life and
career, the problem of artistic form and closure in
relation to on-going experience has become increa-
singly a subject to be explored within her writing.
If we look at the evolution of narrative form in
Drabble's corpus we see a clear development away
from the Bildungeroman towards a structure that is
communal and process-oriented rather than individual
and finite. The earlier novels have a singularity
of vision while the later ones have multiple
perspectives. With the plurality of perspective
comes a necessary condensation and de-emphasis of the
controlling vision of the Bildungsroman. This
technique has also tended to widen each successive
novel's scope while shortening the amount of
fictional time. The history of an individual has
flattened out to a brief span in the life of a group.
This is indicative of the merger of the individual within the communal life. So the novels only show different stages of human life itself. If to James the novelist's art imposes order over the chaotic reality, to Drabble, ostensibly then, art should show what life is like, should render it truthfully and authentically as it appears to us or to the novelist at the various stages of life. If in our youth, because of our narrow vision and extreme self-centredness, we tend to see life in terms of neat categories and shapely patterns, ignoring the larger reality, Drabble shows it by employing a single central "intelligence" as a controlling agent in her early novels,(written when she was herself in her youth). 1

By the same logic, if in our adulthood and middle age, because of the ever-widening vision and perspective, we take cognizance of what is outside the self, then

1 I used to be very solipsistic at university. I used to be appallingly selfish. I still am in some ways. I just can't get away with it as I used to. And I used to be terribly interested in my own brain and what it was perceiving and whether there was any outside reality...I could get myself into a state where I believed that the outside world wasn't there. And when I had children, I realised it was just very permanently there forever. Having children gives you an excess to an enormous common store of otherness about other people. This is how I learned that other people really existed... says Drabble in Dee Preussner,"Talking with Margaret Drabble," p.575.
the novels concentrating on that period of life, try to render the broadening vision which questions the neat patterns and categories of the exclusivist individual vision as it does not take into consideration the vast network of humanity. The later novels, by employing multiple protagonists, an intrusive narrative voice, and numerous other devices, try to capture the ever-shifting kaleidoscopic vision of the vast network of interdependences of the collective political economic and social life. However, the presentation of the simultaneity of various angles of view does not imply loss of faith in some sort of underlying order in the baffling reality. Drabble is, in fact, trying to represent "the simultaneity of goings-on in the contemporary Britain - social attitudes, the way people behave" and so on - "through a variety of view points". She is not interested, in these novels, in the larger perspective of fiction but in "just working out what's happening now."2 Such a presentation, therefore, does not nullify her faith in the

deep invisible structures of the society. The shift to omniscience may also be to achieve detachment and go on to investigate more knowingly a changing reality.

The Needle's Eye has not entirely abandoned the old conventions of plot, character and form. Although it dips into its characters' memories and past, the novel's action takes place within a brief span of time. We get the protagonist's past and even present not through a linear chronological order, but through a stream of consciousness representation of their minds responding to internal and external stimuli of all sorts. Instead of giving a detailed, ongoing account of the events in one life, it probes the lives of two protagonists. As the plot leans away from the diachronic to the synchronic, the focus widens from the single structural principle to a far-ranging pluralism. The protagonists do not make a fetish of their respective viewpoints, instead they constantly go on probing their motives, criticizing their respective stands and are always flexible enough to take into consideration multiple perspectives.
Here Drabble bends the rules of the old fictional estate though she does not break them altogether. She is trying to hammer out a new realism consonant with the late twentieth century relativism designed to render, "the multi-faceted, irreducible, shocking, shifting, contradictory nature of experience" in an "increasingly complex, post-Freudian, self-aware, plural, fragmented society."³

It also subverts the narrative of individualised ego as the direction of the narrative is centrifugal rather than centripetal. Along with many other late twentieth century novelists, Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, Nadine Gordimer, Toni Morrison, Anita Brookner, to name only a few, Margaret Drabble has been engaged in a revision of literary realism.⁴ Employing a variety of innovative narrative techniques and complicated intertextual dialogues with the literary


⁴ Bromberg, p.5.
past, her mature work has both "deconstructed tradition" and invented a new metafiction in order to write the "new reality of contemporary women's lives." However, though her later fiction is, in Drabble's own words, "self-doubting, self-conscious, self-questioning, ironic" the characteristic features of a postmodernist sensibility, - her novels still boldly take the 'mimetic leap of faith.'

She has thematized her anxiety about the possibility of accurately representing "reality" in imitative art, in her novels, beginning with *The Waterfall* in 1969. She has also explored and discussed these issues from a critical perspective in an October 1985 lecture entitled "Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in the Post-War British novel", and also in a June 1985 interview with John Hannay, conducted when she was "in the middle of composing ... *The Radiant Way.*" After several

5 Bromberg, p.5


7 Hannay Interview, p.129.
pages of conversation about the problematic relations of literature to life and to literary tradition, Drabble finally makes a declaration of faith:

The whole concept of story-telling, of intertextuality, is fascinating, but I suppose I cling, possible vainly, to the faith that behind the story, there's a sequence of events, and if I tell enough stories, I will find the true story, the true story.\(^8\)

In this quote Drabble makes no claim to an exclusive truth, but rather underlines her ongoing struggle to discover and narrate stories that are true, rather than stories we have been taught to expect by the weight of literary convention and tradition. Earlier in the interview Drabble asserts that "Writing isn't about writing, it's about the other thing, which is called life."\(^9\)

It is precisely Drabble's commitment to mimesis, her belief in the referentiality of fictional

---

\(^8\) Hannay Interview, p.140.

\(^9\) Ibid, p.130.
language and the possibility of telling the truth about "living in ... an increasingly complex, post-Freudian, self-aware, plural, fragmented society" that has made her fiction progressively more self-conscious, both in relation to literary tradition and in terms of her own uneasy narrative authority.

In the "Mimesis" lecture Drabble discusses the evolution of nineteenth century realism beyond the modernist work of Joyce and Woolf where the author withdraws from the narrative, to the post World War II novel, typified by The Golden Notebook, where "the author reappears, insisting on the reader's attention to the literary, refractive nature of her work, and yet ... simultaneously insisting on its realism, its truth to observed life, its non-literary dimensions, its non-literary authority." (p.8). Drabble refers to Lessing's multiple narrative devices in The Golden Notebook as exemplary of twentieth century novelists' "many approaches to the elusive nature of reality, to the insoluble problem of style" (p.9). Drabble is the inheritor of Arnold

10

Drabble, Mimesis lecture, p.12.
Bennett's tradition of realism in the novel, whom she admires and whose biography she wrote as an act of faith and as an expression of her admiration for him both as man and artist. At the same time she recognises that a fragmented, self-aware society may require disrupted, self-reflexive narrative forms to represent it. Drabble's own most recent novels -- which do not fall within the perview of this study -- also express a recognition of "the fictiveness of discourse generally," and an awareness of the particular ways in which the literary tradition she has inherited inscribes a particular culture and ideology.

For Drabble, Lessing and some other writers this "postmodernist anxiety attack about representing reality" is rooted in their awareness that "Women and Women writers today, are living lives that are very different from those of their nineteenth-century counterparts" (Mimesis, p.7). Beginning with Woolf, twentieth century women writers have looked at their lives and then seen that "the novels, without meaning

Woolf calls upon women to write a new fiction, to break the sentence and the sequence in order to tell the truth of women's lives. Drabble's "Mimesis" lecture echoes Woolf as she introduces a discussion of Doris Lessing's experimental, original "attempt to represent reality without omissions, warts and all" in *The Golden Notebook*. However, Drabble's is not a feminist or propagandist stance - telling women what they should do, how they should lead their lives in opposition to patriarchal culture; she is responding to what is already there as a "new reality"; examining and revising literary realism in the light of this new reality:

One of the most interesting areas annexed by the post-war novel is the area of the woman's novel. This is new ground, in the sense that it is a new reality. Women today, women writers today, are living lives that are very different from those of their nineteenth century counterparts, more different than the lives of Snow and Amis from the life of Trollope:

they are living lives, as Doris Lessing has said, such as women have never lived before. The New Woman has had to forge a new novel to describe these new experience. Doris Lessing has been in the vanguard of this exploration, and her attempts to represent (and thereby to help to create) the new reality have been sustained and heroic.

(Mimesis, p. 7)

Drabble's discussion of Doris Lessing's exploration is a pointer to her own attempt to represent the contradictory, shifting, shocking, and elusive nature of reality beginning with The Waterfall (1969), traversing through The Needle's Eye, puncturing the pretences of the traditional novel in The Middle Ground and abandoning altogether the old rules of plot and characterisation in The Radiant Way.

If female, not feminist, consciousness has indeed propelled writers such as Lessing and Drabble into a postmodernist recognition that literary representations are culturally constituted and that form as well as content is necessarily ideological,
they nonetheless resist what Robert Scholes has called the "hermetic" impasse of poststructuralism which asserts that literature is nothing more than a "self-referential metalinguistic system." Along with such literary critics as Rita Felski, Judith Newton, and Linda Alcoff, Drabble is articulating—in her novels and in her essays and interview—"a defence of literary realism, the reality of the subject, and the possibility of human agency," which also acknowledges the postmodernist recognition that the "subject is culturally constructed," as well as distrust of the solipsistic self-reflection in the contemporary novel:

... I distrust fictions that have become as self-reflecting that they cease to reflect the outside world in any recognizable way. I like the humdrum, the everyday, the humble. I like descriptions of clothes and streets and houses, of people cooking meals and eating meals, and washing dishes ... Nothing is too trivial, nothing is too humble, nothing is of itself too debased.

(Mimesis, p.12)

13
Bromberg, p.6.
Thus Drabble writes, as she grows, a new metafictional realism which includes destabilizing discourse about her own narrative craft and the European novelistic tradition she has inherited, examined and revised. Her recent fiction certainly conforms to Patricia Waugh’s definition of metafiction: "selfconsciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality."\(^{14}\) Nonetheless, she remains a realist; she builds upon the Great Tradition and insists in the interview with Hannay that "writing isn't about writing: it is about the other thing, which is called life!"\(^{15}\)

Drabble began in the early 1960's as a conventional realist, anchored firmly in the nineteenth


\(^{15}\) Hannay Interview, p.130.
century and celebrated for her adaptations of traditional fictional forms and techniques to contemporary issues and protagonists. She first investigated the power of her narrative inheritance to interpret and distort reality in *The Waterfall* (1969) which alternately presents a third person romantic plot of doomed romance fashioned after *The Mill on the Floss* and other nineteenth century plots of adultery and then the female protagonist's first-person deconstruction of that story, told in the name of contradictory reality and with the knowledge that a new story requires a new morality and a new ending. Juxtaposing the construction of romantic narrative with its revisionary critique reveals the constitutive power of narrative tradition to shape not only novels but our experience of "reality" itself. In her more recent fiction, Drabble has examined, critiqued and revised one novelistic convention after another. After *The Waterfall*, she developed the plurality of perspective introduced in *The Needle's Eye* (1972) and elaborated in *The Realms of Gold*, into the more numerous voices and decentred action of *The Ice Age* (1977) in which
the romance and quest plots of the central protagonists are aborted and remain unfulfilled.

The Middle Ground published in 1980, 'subverts narrative telcology more radically than any previous work, nearly abandoning the conventional plot.' The Middle Ground does feature a central protagonist, Kate Armstrong, but her story does not finally dominate the novel's plot, which begins with her midlife crisis but then stalls in the mystery and the ultimate insignificance of that crisis, finding new momentum in the drama of a secondary character. The abandonment of the protagonist as the determinant of plot signals Drabble's recognition that narrative dominance has political implications. A novelist's choice of stories and protagonists necessarily reflects and engenders an ideology by privileging a particular point of view, experience, and world. The multiple protagonists and narrative experiments of Drabble's more recent novels challenge the romantic individualism of nineteenth-century Bildungsroman and subvert its narrative structures. She raises the most troubling questions about narrative in The Middle Ground, asking finally whether any of the patterns
of art can accurately reflect life, with its essential unpredictability and endless openness to interpretation, especially when the artist must always speak from within the world she seeks to represent and when seemingly innocent formal elements also necessarily encode socio-political relations and history.

In *The Radiant Way*, Drabble pursues doggedly the anxiety-laden task of redefining the form and ideology of the English novelistic tradition in order to accurately represent late twentieth-century experience and reality. From the very beginning Drabble has been a highly literary and allusive writer, engaged in strenuous dialogue with the canon in all her novels. The sheer number and range of allusions indicates the centrality of literature to Drabble's characters and the intensification of her struggle "to find the true story." In *The Radiant Way* more than 65 writers and about a dozen visual artists appear in the text. They include Dante, Shakespeare, Austen, Dickens, Charlotte Bronte, Trollope, George Eliot, Gaskell, Hardy, Wordsworth, Blake, Tennyson and such twentieth-century writers as Lawrence, Joyce, Woolf, Orwell,
Yukio Mishima, and David Lodge. In this novel, more than in any other, Drabble overtly continues to employ intertextuality to engage in debate with literary tradition and to emphasize the literariness of all texts, including her own. She also explores the impact of reading the Great Tradition on contemporary English society (Leavis himself is mentioned many times). Thus, the profusion of allusions in the novel, signals the author's central preoccupation with the questionable validity of narrative art and its fictive orders. The Radiant Way is, in its acute self-reflexiveness, a highly problematic novel, burdened by the tension between Drabble's postmodernist self-awareness and desire to claim her place in the great tradition of the English novel. It often sounds a note of plaintive nostalgia for various lost or ruined paradises evoked by the title metaphor, including childhood, post-World War II dream of a new meritocratic, classless society in England, the marriage plots and happy endings of nineteenth-century novels.

Now The Needle's Eye which stands at the culmination point of Drabble's early phase of novel-
writing, fractures the singularity of vision with the inclusion of not only another narrative perspective but also the intrusive narrative voice. Two plots are interlocked with the growing friendship of the protagonists to create contrapuntal ironies and a new self-reflexiveness about the novelist's art and literary tradition. This corresponds to Drabble's greater exposure to the external real world and the consequent acknowledgement of a vision other than her own. Rose is at the centre and her perception of experience is sometimes posited by the omniscient narrator and sometimes she goes down the deep corridors of memory lane and scoops up as much from there as she possibly could with a view to casting a retrospective glance on her present, as well as to make sense of it. Her past story, besides, does not come to us in straight linear chronological order. We get it piecemeal, on various occasions through the stream of consciousness when her mind responds to internal as well as external stimuli or when she answers Simon Camish's questions while he reads her documents. At other times we get it through the omniscient narrator appropriated to her thought-
processes while she is reviewing some of her past decisions. The major portion comes through her mouth when she, as if unconsciously, remembers her past and soliloquises about it and sometimes talks about herself as if to someone before her. But that sequence of events which is antecedent to the visible plot is put forth when she relates her tale to Simon while answering his queries about her marriage - its preceding and succeeding drama and its bewilderment.

The whole tale is, however, given its primary movement by the occurrence of one event and that is the reopening of the custody case of her children by her estranged husband Christopher Vassilis. However, of what had corrupted their marriage while it existed and the consequent separation, we come to know through omniscient narration appropriated to Rose's thought processes. The shift to omniscient narration, while retaining the individual points of view of the protagonists, signals Drabble's cognizance of the fact that the choice of the subject as well as the narrative point of view is dictated by a particular politics. Hence she subverts the narrative politics of her
earlier novels by resorting to the omniscient narration to convey the impression that the novelist creates in imitation of God with the assumed knowledge of the minds of his characters which is always questionable. Hence the choice of a particular protagonist as the determinant of the plot or the omniscient narrative voice as the informing agent is not in any way apolitical. The omniscient narrator at least takes multiple angles of experience into consideration. This is substantiated in the novel by the protagonists' taking the entire gamut of their experiences into consideration to understand the real motives behind their major decisions. I shall again return to it later on.

The time span of the novel, however, covers only that sequence of events which shoot out of the re-opening of the custody case of the children by Christopher: Rose's receiving of the letter from her solicitor and from Christopher, her immediate legal response to it; her coming into contact with Simon Camish at Nick and Diana's party and the contact instantly turning into genuine friendship; Christopher's
taking away children as usual and then threatening with a note that he has run away with them; Rose's prosecuting him with the tedious legal action and then the final denouement of her going away with Simon to her parents' house in search of her children and surprisingly finding them there; the reunion of the family and Simon's gradual realization that he cannot have Rose who is somehow inextricably wedded to Christopher; and Simon's forging stronger ties with his own family where earlier on he had found only negation and dissatisfaction; the two families coming closer and Rose's realization that she has to give up her spiritual well-being within a self-made small world for the sake of her children and Christopher. The final movement of the plot is in the direction of achieving merger with the larger community; technique-wise through the critique of the subjectivity of vision by resorting to omniscient narration and thematically through giving equal weightage to the lives of the protagonists. However, over and above this sequence, there is a wealth of the memories of past of the protagonists evoked by the present text-time of the
novel which help to understand their respective crises, otherwise their present seems to be an enigma. It is shrouded in a mist and through these past recollections, at various moments of the text time of the novel, Rose talks of her marriage to Christopher, the reasons for its breakdown and the consequent building up of her own small world with children and a few neighbours over whom she unconsciously acts as a matron.

Rose unearths, as it were, the whole heaped cupboard, full of the different states and stages of her life - Rose, as a child, taught to despise possessions; Rose, pale, in tears, confronting solicitor after solicitor; Rose, exiled; Rose returning weeping in the pages of The News of the World; Rose married - with the preceding and succeeding embarrassments; Rose locked into bed rooms, beaten up, bleeding, scarred, divorced, threatened; bruised, scruffed and scratched, "and really very happy now if only people would allow her to continue with her own admittedly "curious theory" of living" (NE, p. 91). 16

This happy state, receives a jolt in the beginning of the novel with the re-opening of the custody case. We are told how calm and contented she was and still is if only Christopher could let her live in her own way. The reception of the letter fills her mind with thoughts of Christopher in such a way that she can hardly organise them. Some of them are to do with violence, some with blood and some with the Bible. It is this train of thought which gives us the most crucial portion of the novel, coming as they do through the medium of omniscient narrator. We come to know that because of her realization that "all was up" between the two made her separate from Christopher, whom she had madly loved and for whom she had endured innumerable hardships. They had reached a point beyond any hope of repair:

The walls behind them to that flat plateau of mutual co-existence, of occasionally sunny tolerance were no longer scalable, they were down for ever now and unless they parted dirty, dishevelled, undesirable - they would kill each other, perhaps even literally.

(NE,p.93)
The children had suffered from all this, of that she had no doubt. She had taken them from him because he had wanted her to have them. She had prevented him from attempting to repent. She had not allowed him to re-enter the small world she had made for them. She had (he said) poisoned their minds against him and it was true; she had tried not to but it was true. When he had made efforts toward the end to reassert his authority over them, she had undermined him. She had ignobly set up herself against his forfeited power. She had been ashamed of it. She had despised herself for it but she had been incapable of doing otherwise.

This is the effect of casting the tale through the filter of omniscient narrator. It takes all the possible points of view into consideration before convicting or absolving Rose of her share in what has happened. It removes the blinkers from our eyes and enables us to see a thing with both our eyes. Had it come through the mouth of the protagonist, he or she would not have been able to turn the kaliedoscope and show all the possible colour patterns.
Simon Camish, while taking a lively interest in Rose's affairs and even declaring "My dear lady you needn't feel that I will be interested in seeing any side of the case but yours" (NE,p.43), in response to Rose's "I am aware that there are different points of view, there are two sides to every case, you might not necessarily agree with my way of looking at it at all," comes to believe through Rose's version of the tale that Christopher had married Rose astutely for the money. And when she gave away the money for the construction of a school in some part of Africa - Ujuhidiana, he deserted her out of terrible fury for her act. However, this belief of Simon is deconstructed on meeting Christopher in person by chance at a party. He talks at length about his relationship with her which reveals to him that he could never have married her for money:

Christopher offered no explanations of externals, he behaved as though they did not exist. It seemed to be the underlying connections that he was after, it seems to be the truth that he was after. And listening to him, listening to his endless rambling, dissertation on Rose's ingenuity, on her selfishness, on her histrionics, on her desire to degrade
Christopher; by proving to him her own estimate of his own motives, it becomes clear to Simon that he would have to abandon, for ever, his hope, which had once been as strong as a certainty; his hope that Christopher had married Rose for her money, simply, and would as simply, one day forfeit her. Christopher, evidently had no interest in the money at all. He had no guilt about it either. It meant nothing to him. What he was interested in was power, and motivation, and emotion, and love; listening to him was like listening to Rose. It was as crazed, as unworldly, as immediately comprehensible.

(NE, p. 253)

This is the intrusive narrative voice giving us the analysis of Christopher's feelings about Rose which carries conviction as it is confirmed by his dogged pursuit of the case in spite of his having lost it once. Not being content with this appraisal of his feelings, the novelist presents Christopher directly in person and let us peep into his heart to be able to establish or demolish what has already been arrived at by the omniscient narrator:
She undermined me, she has done so from the beginning, she had no trust in me. She panicked as soon as she married me, she only did it to give herself a real fright, and then she could not face it when I turned out all right. When I was loyal to her. I'm telling you she could have taken anything in me except my efforts at good behaviour, and I did try, I nearly killed myself trying, I ruined myself for her...

(NE, p. 253)

It is as though Simon is confounded by the truth, and his impressions about Rose are shaken. He is baffled by the complex nature of their relationship and faces difficulty in attaching himself wholeheartedly to Rose. For several days he does not even ring up Rose until they once again meet by chance at a party.

This is the effect of presenting the tale from various angles. Had we been given only Rose's version or Simon's impressions formed about Christopher's motives for marrying Rose, the real nature of their relationship would never have been demystified. Hence Drabble deconstructs each perspective to show that none has absolute validity. This de-emphasizes that
central individualistic controlling vision which was the structuring principle in nineteenth-century fiction, and in her early novels. The use of various filters or consciousnesses by Drabble, in this novel for the first time, questions the self-sufficiency of the subjectivity of vision as well as undercuts the postmodernists' belief that various viewpoints do not add up or cohere into a unified whole. By her new narrative strategy, Drabble is trying to give us a deeper understanding of human nature. The various angles of vision do not necessarily collide with each other. More often than not, they supplement each other as we are taken down the stream of consciousness itself and shown the dark craterous bottom of the psyche and its external stimuli.

Simon Camish's own story is poured forth as an interior monologue, occasioned by his speculating over Rose's situation and his own interest in her. He pursues his reflections to their end perhaps with a view to comparing his life history with hers as well as with the life of those people who live for glamour and with whom, seemingly, he does not share much. He is more embittered and dissatisfied with his marriage
than Rose and tries to understand his reasons for marrying Julie, and what attracted him to her in the first place. He reminisces about his past life with his mother, early childhood and adulthood and then his marriage to Julie. He has to confess that it was her colourful world with all the attendant luxuries and amenities that had attracted him to her - a far cry from what his mother had truly to offer - bleakness and dryness, symbolic of her willful life. He arrives at the usual bleak perch. With a shock of astonishment he recognises, in his own behaviour, an eternal human pattern of corruption. He cognises that he does what everyone else is doing although he had thought himself different. He feels that he is rather enacting those old and preordained 'movements of the spirit' and the 'ancient patterns of decay' that everyone else is guilty of:

Corrupt, humanly corrupt, if not professionally so, and humanly embittered. and his spirit will struggle feebly within the net that held it, and he would imagine some pure evasion, some massive rent through which he could emerge. But there was no action possible, that would not involve destruction, violence, treachery,
of those to whom he had pledged himself, and of the only useful actions of his life. And of those, there were some. There were even many. He was caught. And his spirit would hunch its feathered bony shoulders, and grip its branch and fold itself up and shrink within itself, until it could no longer brush against the net, until it could no longer entangle itself, painfully, in that surrounding circumstantial mesh.

(NE,p.140)

This corruption consisted in his initially being drawn to Julie for her glamorous world and in his sense of repulsion from his mother. Though she had fought valiantly against bleakness yet she was unable to conceal it from her son. Her aspirations had saved her from death yet she was merely living on the will which was terribly exhausting. "... This living on will, this denial of nature, this unnatural distortion; but if one's nature were harsh, what could one do but deny it and repudiate it in the hope that something better might thereby be? It was for him that she had hoped," and so on, "through the generations" (NE,p.188-189). He had become a barrister because of his mother's ambition for him
and had probably accepted Julie's money for her. Yet on second thoughts he is unable to decide whether he had accepted money and Julie's life-style for her or for Julie or for himself. He considers it deplorable to make others responsible for his actions and aspirations as he had been a climber all his life. He had tried to control his accent in order to rise higher and higher. And from his personal instance he goes on to speculate on humanity in general:

...There was no achieving and no arrival, there was merely a ghastly chain of reiterated disillusions, and each generation discovered a new impossibility, and all the more miserably because it had been given to hope for more. He thought once more of John Stuart Mill and the despair that had seized him: to conceive the right end and then to despair, that was a fate that he had feared often enough for himself, with his petty tinkering and his nagging readjustments and his dreary slow calculations. Oh yes, he cared for the fate of mankind, he cared for the quality of the living of life, but man had
been formed too low in the scale of possibility, with just enough illumination (like Julie and his mother and himself) to suffer for failure, and too little spirit to live in the light, too little strength to reach the light. Or rather, there was no light, or none that man might enter...

(NE, p. 189)

Scanning thus the entire gamut of human possibilities and the contradictory, shifting, ironic and perplexing nature of human experience and the futility of human wishes and designs, he continues his unsatisfactory life with his wife. His wife who cannot appreciate his work or his attitude to life, is drawn to glamorous personalities, big cars and glittering parties. Simon being unable to afford a big car, she pays for it but while he drives it around, he behaves as if it were his own. This smacks of corruption to him. Recognition of his own corruption incapacitates him to act, and in effect drags his life along with Julie. The final recognition that strikes him in the face that Rose is inextricably wedded to Christopher, opens him out and, consequently, he discovers more sympathy in himself for his family.
The problems of knowledge, experience and judgement (Drabble's favourite themes) recur once again in this novel with greater vibrations. While Rose goes down the memory lane with a view of retrospective introspection, scanning the past and the present, and imagining the possible future, she is confronted with the various selves she had had in the past and what relevance they have for her present. The question is whether her present self is independent of them or whether augmented knowledge, experience and judgement discard the earlier selves or uphold them. Or, to put it more precisely, what is the relevance of what one knows at various stages of one's life? Is what one knows at a particular stage of life nullified or repudiated by what one learns or experiences at another? Rose, while taking stock of her entire experiential spectrum, remains rather indecisive as no single point of view guarantees the whole truth which becomes clear to her as she considers various points of view about the raised problem:

It always distressed her, the callousness with which one discarded one's past self,
the alacrity with which one embraced the wisdom of the present. Looking back upon one's past, one could disown it, with knowledge, experience and judgement all augmented but what if one had been right and ceased to be? And what were those years, if they ceased to exist?

(NE,p.87)

In her better moments she hoped they were foundation stones. But what would be one's fate if one were burying beneath "rubble some priceless intuition." Anyway, one would never know as beneath the rubble it would be lost for ever. It could no longer be examined. And the distressing thing was that in looking back, some of the necessity seemed to have gone from one's actions. Knowing now what had happened to the money given for the school and what had been the consequences of her parting with it, she thought she knew better now though at the age of twenty-four that had been the only thing to do. The fact that she could no longer remember the self that had married Christopher, nor the self that had signed the cheque, did not mean that they had not been necessary. Perhaps one has to go on, wearily, continuing to make mistakes in the hope that they are acts of truth, of faith and of righteousness yet
at the same time having acute self-consciousness
that after some time one cannot even believe one
had done that with any conviction. Sometimes in
endeavouring to build upon the foundation stones,
one of those selves could be literally bombed and
blasted out of existence.

Saddled thus with all kinds of relativistic
structures of consciousness, she cannot unequivocally
take one view as she is at the same time investigating
the possibility of knowing at all. She conducts, as if
by instinct, a systematic critique of reality. Reality
emerges to be something which had to be attained, not
merely taken for granted, and the attainment is a
continuous process that never allows the concept to
stabilize, or the word to offer a convenient mould of
meaning. Rose's developing consciousness of different
levels of reality and the shifting states of her
consciousness is captured in her prolonged brooding
over the relevance or otherwise of different selves
and the problems of knowing at all. It has both
surface and depth; both opacity and transparency. It
holds our attention at the formal level while directing
it to the level of content. The content remains
inconclusive but on the formal level she takes a leap of faith; "so perhaps she had not been so foolish, after all. On faith, on works, on spiritual progress, on all these counts she was quit" (NE, p. 89).

Rose's speculations envisage the recognition of the fact that the world in its 'essence is paradoxical' and that an ambivalent attitude alone can grasp its contradictory totality. In allowing such speculations, Drabble betrays an ironic vision that takes cognizance of the mutually contradictory viewpoints of a given situation, recognises their implications and cognises that absolute certainties about human life are vital lies perpetrated by some conventions of writing with ideological implications. Rose, after Drabble, shows an acute awareness of contradictions, paradoxes and anomalies in her thinking as well as in her actions whether it is her giving away money in charity or her recognising and conceding Christopher's rights over her children or her conceding that all her various selves are real in their own right. The very fact that Drabble is a 'realist' and not a 'propagandist' forces her to discard her blinkers in search of the true story,
in search of what life is like rather than what it should be like. This makes Rose probe the darkest recesses of her psyche and present what is there with all its contradictory streaks and ambivalences. And yet Drabble does not conduct this critique of (the 'static' view) reality with a non-committal or apathetic attitude of a pure ironist who thrives on presenting and celebrating the vacuity or the anarchy resulting out of such a presentation. Drabble's protagonists, in this novel, after passing through various states and after scanning past, present and the possible future, opt for the life of the earth rather than seek sustenance from, and exist for, the disengaged imagination alone, 'absolved from all morality.' They implicitly embrace 'the wrinkled reality' and 'ask forgiveness for having fed on lies.' 17 This is especially clear from the course Rose's life takes in the novel.

At an early age Rose discards her parental background with its lack of vitality and ebullience

and tries to make her nature bit by bit. She makes efforts to go beyond the fatalistic pattern to live a life of her own, divested of all filial ties." All alone I arrest the course of nature, I arrest it, I divert the current" (NE, p.117). Her expectation that her marriage to Christopher would take her out of the curious, bleak, mercenary atmosphere that compellingly stank of living death to her, was frustrated by the forces over which she had no control. The spontaneous joy and renewal, vigour and vitality she experienced with Christopher for a brief time was brutally murdered with their forcible separation from each other. In the second phase of her life with Christopher, she was initially happy as long as she could pleasantly look after her children single handedly. But once she was 'overtaxed' and physically 'exhausted' and 'overstrained,' she could not look after them with pleasure. She started quarreling with her Greek husband violently and incessantly till they literally wanted to kill each other. Finally Rose ended up alone with the children, thinking that that was the right thing to do:

She had strengthened herself on those hard years and set up a small world with her
children and had learned to love the hardships of dealing with them. She had made them a life from which he had voluntarily abstracted himself. And then it was a life she could not change or abandon... It has been acquired through too much labour to be relinquished. She had wanted to continue to be it. She could not have it taken from her.

(NE,p.162)

In short, she had built up a world that excluded much from it. It included her children and a few poor neighbours over whom she had a sort of supremacy. It was an imaginative enclosure in which she experienced spiritual bliss. It was a cloister inhabited by her alone with Christopher driven beyond its borders. A deserted, weird part of London it was: "I hated it at first, I hated it for years, but I believed in it, and now I love it," she gestured. 'All this you see, I created it for myself. Stone by stone and step by step I carved it out. I created it by faith, I believed in it, and then very slowly, it began to exist. And now it exists. It is like God. It requires faith,"

(NE,p.43-44).

She did not want to lose it all as it was
where she belonged. Quite simply she did not want, like many unreasonable slum-dwellers, to be rehoused. She felt that there was some inexplicable grace in living so. Her awareness, that probably it was useless, unproductive, irrelevant like living in a closed world, does not make her closed life less attractive to her. She attaches significance to her habitat as "a nun (does) to arbitrary vows" recklessly committing herself, expecting little, even doubt and despair, to persist. "The sun whose existence she had merely supposed through faith had shown forcefully upon her" illuminating her and the relations that she had simply supposed to have existed. But"what sort of defence would this make in a court of law" (NE,p.165), asks Rose, self-consciously, of herself. She undercuts her own pattern of living by examining it, criticising it and subverting it which is obvious from her choice of words. Surely a nun's attitude to life is not something which a realist would adore as it is devoid of the real heart-beat of life and closes all doors to external reality. At its best it is an escape from life which surely will not do as Drabble would instead call for an active struggle
with the world, and prefer to be of it rather than opt out of it. And the very fact that Christopher did not remarry and let her be happy in her cloistered fanciful world is the most scathing attack on that world and the intriguing part of their relationship. She rightly asks herself whether she should ever have left him or found in herself the strength to endure their dreadful conjugal life. She was exonerated by the courts, by the press, by friends, by everything else but could she absolve herself from guilt being a person who recognises that experience is open to multiple interpretations of which no one is simply right and that the 'coexistence of contraries'or incongruities is 'a part of the structure of existence.' Much before she actually takes back Christopher, she broods: "perhaps she would be forced to abandon herself and to return to her non-self; to the self she had been with Christopher, and on his terms, this time too" (NE, p. 197).

As long as she lived alone with children in the weird part of London she was spiritually fulfilled by maintaining contact with her few modest neighbours
and by doing all her jobs herself without anyone's domination. But this enclosure expunged so much that was there. She had shut herself up in a sort of cocoon and fled in the face of the larger society which she had known and with which she was vitally linked. The constant efforts made by Christopher to perturb her self-contained world on the pretext of demanding his children and her own growing realization that she cannot deny him his own children, force her to break the narrow fold and readmit Christopher into it with all the accompanying involvements and commitments, stresses and strains. In so doing she establishes a truck with the real historical world other than her enclosed, selfish world where she cared, broadly speaking, only for her soul and excluded the claims of others. She realizes that for the proper nourishment of children symbiotic relationship of parents is a vital necessity. Therefore, to achieve an equipoise in her psyche, to live with the claims of the self as well as the claims of others, she could not but put herself back in touch with the communal external rhythms of life. However, it should not give one the impression that after the rapprochement she lives happily ever afterwards. She, in fact,
quarrels more vehemently and impetuously with Christopher. That is, after all, the price she had to pay for rooting herself in earth. It is a great challenge to individualistic leanings to live with the community, rather than out of it. That is what, after all, maintains a steady tension in the personality which paradoxically fortifies it.

The nature of her friendship with Simon, consequently, changes. The two families come closer; Simon becomes friendly with Christopher and his wife Julie becomes a good friend of Rose. The stark realization that downs on both Rose and Simon is that in spite of wishing to marry each other, they find themselves inextricably bound to their respective families. Rose's symbolic come back not only to Christopher but to her parents in their house disconcerts Simon immediately, "... this gathering constituted itself as a finale, as a denouement, as a conclusion with no prospects" (NE,p.332). When Rose actually re-admits Christopher to her house, her life and her body, Simon finds more generosity in himself towards his wife and children. And both of them do so with a sense of inevitability, of duty,
of responsibility, and out of no overwhelming psychological requirements of their own. In the case of Rose the reunion is only a prelude to her further suffering; it is a depersonalising process - a disintegration of personality, as is evident from our pursuit of her thought-processes, coming as they do through the medium of the intrusive omniscient voice:

She had taken him back because she could not bear to keep the children from him. Why should she be so silenced, so compromised by her own act? And it was not only in silence that she suffered. Her whole nature was being corrupted by her deep resistance to Christopher, by the endless, sickening struggle to preserve something of her own. She had become irritable, nagging, shrewish, difficult: She quarrelled with Christopher, in public, over the least issue,...

(ME,p.394)

In short, she could not bring herself to be pleasant or placid. She looked back with bitter regret to those exhausting days of peace, when she was on her own, alone, lovely and could go quietly to bed. She lived now in dispute and squalor for
the sake of charity and love. She had ruined her own nature against her own judgement for Christopher's sake and for the sake of the children. She had sold for them her own soul: "And the price she had to pay was the price of her own living death, her own conscious dying, her own lapsing, surely, slowly from grace" (NE,p.394).

But on second thoughts after probing her decision more deeply, characteristic of her self-doubting mind, she feels that her conception of grace had been narrow. It has been solitary as it had admitted no others. It had been 'without community' though that made its loss no less real. At times she tried to persuade herself that her decision to live with Christopher was not only right but also beneath all her resistance, satisfactory to her. But she would catch herself out as she felt depths of relief in his absence. And, therefore, she had been right to take him, measured thus in terms of anguish, and of suffering, "There has been no ulterior weakness of her own, no sexual craving had prompted her to do so. She had done it for others. Her duty, that was what she had done" (NE,p.395). Perhaps in
the end she would settle down, "live through it. Get over it." The very fact that she effaced herself by taking him back absolves her, by breaking her self-centred universe.

To Drabble, this is a challenge that one has to accept to be able to be a part of community. It is only by living with external rhythms that we become relevant to others as they become relevant to us. This is how symbiotic relationships in society are formed. Otherwise one might as well vanish like a vapour. Drabble is ostensibly concerned with here and now and how to make it meaningful not only for ourselves but for the community as well. The merger of the individual will, in this book, with the communal will is a pointer to Drabble's later fiction where the individual's importance is enormously diminished for the greater good of the community shown through the subversion of the traditional plots which are largely individually oriented.

The overall narrative structure of the novel tends towards a contemporary variation of "the narrative of community" but does not quite become.
It is Drabble's later novels which emulate the narrative of community in *totto* because of the profounder recognition of the illusion of personal identities outside the community. It is a little noticed, primarily female literary tradition that for the past century and a half has portrayed the self "as part of the interdependent network of the community rather than as an individualistic unit."¹⁸ That is why the symbol of the exclusivist soul does not emerge as something to be treasured for it struggles to keep Rose away from the life of the body and its vital link with the community. She decides to silence all her 'demented ideologies' and her self-righteous faith and embrace the 'warm daylight of life.' This is made clear, once again, from the omniscient narrator's delving deeper into her consciousness and coming out with this revelation:

She had seen her soul. It was dark and crying and bloody like a bat or an embryo, and it was not very nice at all, not an agreeable thing, and it flapped and squeaked

inside her angrily whenever Christopher touched or spoke to her. Let it go, strangle it, burn it. The warm day light of life she would aspire to, Oh she would make it though her nails were torn, her knees barked with hanging on; and the harsh clanging of her own voice, the sounding of righteous brass and the clanging of the symbols of her upright faith demented ideologies, she would silence them all, she would learn to do so.

(RN, p.396)

Rose might once again part with Christopher after some years when the children are grown up. Her decision is relevant to her now. The implication is that her ego is not that of the existential fiction anchorless and rootless. By her decision she roots herself firmly in earth, commits herself to its variegated moods and strangles that soul which resists the throbbing life of the body and the contact with what is non-personal. In the Hannay Interview Drabble makes this very explicit:

Rose went back to Christopher because she acceded to his demands, once she'd won the right not to. She was n't sure that she was
doing the right thing, but she felt that it would be better, somehow. Also it makes her more a human person, doesn’t it? I know I had a very strong sense, when I finished The Needle's Eye, that this was real; this is the way people behave—illogically. Good people behave foolishly, bad people behave astonishingly well. The jumble of human affairs is so peculiar.\(^\text{19}\)

Nonetheless the ending, in spite of approximating to the predicated reality, is generated within the work itself. For, a constant tension is built up between its correspondence to the external reality and coherence achieved within the world of novel itself. Drabble's own comment that "she wasn’t sure that she was doing the right thing, but she felt that it would be better somehow" carries in itself the possibility of affirmation, though every affirmation in the novel includes a negation, for the course cannot be divorced from the conclusion. The implicit ambivalence in the text prevents conclusiveness, the certainty that this is the only right action possible.

\(^{19}\) Hannay Interview, pp. 147-148.
The questionings in the novel reach to the deepest levels, demanding the consideration of the problems of knowing and being with which religion and philosophy have traditionally concerned themselves and which, with the advent of modernism, have been given over to novelists and other 'imaginative writers': Rose's and even Simon's self-consciousness is characteristic of modernist literature. But whereas a modernist's scepticism of the truth of all else, makes the attention of his fiction rest essentially and ultimately upon itself, upon its own paradoxical actuality as fiction, 'a reality which is not true, a truth which is not reality,' their (Rose's and Simon's) self-conscious awareness of the questionable validity of what they think to be right and 'real,' does not imprison them within the artefact itself. But they take an 'imaginative' leap of faith out of the fiction by taking cognizance of what is out there as a stark and recognizable reality - their coming back to home and wife in one case and home and husband in another. This self-consciousness is to be distinguished from the Romantic conception of the transcendental self. It involves
not the Romantic assertion of an identity between the self and the world but the self's vital necessity to be rooted in the world. Therefore, the novel does tell a story or many stories. Hence, the need to analyse that story, the "story" which supplies a form and finality to existence, substantiated by Drabble's own assertion that 'this was real' this is the way people behave." What is more, it makes Rose 'a more human person' and defeats her exclusivist faith and 'demented ideologies' a legacy of modernist sensibility.