

## Drabble's Ethical Concern for the Elderly in *The Seven Sisters*

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### Abstract

Since the mid-20th century, the world population ageing has made the lives of the elderly a social and ethical issue of increasing importance. Margaret Drabble, a renowned British female writer, has always demonstrated profound ethical concern for marginalized groups in her literary creations. In her later novel *The Seven Sisters*, she turns her attention to the neglected elderly group and tells the story of the elderly protagonist, Candida, who rebuilds her life after a divorce. Current research on the novel mainly focuses on its narrative techniques and feminist themes, while themes of ageing and its underlying ethical concern remain underexplored. In response to this gap, this paper shifts the focus to the writing of the elderly in the novel, aiming to analyze Drabble's ethical concern for this group of people. It also seeks to provide enlightenment about how to deal with the challenges related to the elderly against the backdrop of an ageing society in modern times.

### Keywords

Margaret Drabble; *The Seven Sisters*; The elderly; Ethical concern.

### 1. Introduction

Margaret Drabble, born in 1939, is a famous contemporary British novelist. She is widely regarded as a crucial chronicler of the experiences of British women in the second half of the twentieth century. So far, she has published a number of excellent novels that explore the dilemmas and spiritual pursuits of British intellectual women, such as *A Summer Bird-Cage* (1963), *The Millstone* (1965), *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967), *The Gates of Ivory* (1991), and *The Sea Lady* (2006). Her writing is characterized by its realistic style and acute ethical observation. As she ages, she begins to concentrate her writing on the elderly or ageing protagonists.

This shift is exemplified in her novel, *The Seven Sisters* (2002). It tells the story of Candida, a divorced elderly woman, who is estranged from her daughters and moves to London to live alone. In pursuit of change, she follows the trail of the ancient Roman poet Virgil and goes to Italy with six other women from different backgrounds. This pilgrimage becomes an opportunity for her to rediscover herself and liberate her body and mind. During her journey, she constantly reflects on her past, marriage and the role as a mother, gradually learning to face ageing and future loneliness. This novel depicts the psychological journey of Candida, demonstrating Drabble's concern for women and ethical care for the elderly. At the same time, it also reveals the insufficient attention paid by society to the lives of the elderly.

Drabble's literary creation is in line with the broader ethical shift in contemporary literature of ageing, increasingly addressing deep-seated problems of ageing ranging from physiological and medical challenges to social marginalization, identity, and intergenerational ethics. As scholar Zhang Wenbin observes, the narrative practice of the elderly in the new century literature describes "the survival state of ageing, disease and death" or the "lonely and depressed mental state of the elderly", while also conveying "the concern of the times and the philosophy of life through the construction and narrative of intergenerational relationships" [1]. Similarly, Maricel Oro-Piqueras, in *Ageing Corporealities in Contemporary English Fiction: Redefining*

Stereotypes, analyzes a series of contemporary novels, revealing the ethical issues and cultural mechanisms contained in the representation of ageing in literature [2].

From the perspective of literary ethics, this paper analyzes the elderly protagonist's physiological changes, material living conditions, and interpersonal interactions in *The Seven Sisters*. It not only portrays the phenomenon of ageing but also prompts moral reflection. Ultimately, it urges readers to re-examine societal attitudes towards ageing, and advocates a more compassionate and caring approach to care.

## 2. The Understanding of Physiological Changes in the Elderly

As a realist writer who has witnessed the profound transformation of an ageing society and entered her later years, Drabble does not express dislike or disgust at the physical changes in the elderly but views the process with a clear and empathetic perspective in *The Seven Sisters*. Through her protagonist, Candida, she tells the natural process of physical decline from the skin, musculoskeletal system to the nervous system, regarding it as a normal and universal human experience. This meticulous depiction stems from her commitment to "record all the changes you see" and "describe the matter as it is" [3]. By presenting these physiological changes in an objective and compassionate way, Drabble establishes a fundamental understanding of physical vulnerability, thus forming the cornerstone of her ethical concern for the elderly in this novel.

### 2.1. Ageing of the Body

Candida, in *The Seven Sisters*, moves to London alone after her divorce. She describes herself by saying that "I look faded and washed out" [4]. Her skin becomes wrinkled and the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes grow deeper. Her youngest daughter, Martha, comments that she looks like a flabby mess. She has nothing to say about it, knowing that she has given birth three times and that the skin of her stomach is stretched and sagging. She feels that she cannot ask for anything more from her body at her age. Her muscles have also lost their previous firm state and become loose and weak. Her hair has thinned, the whites of her eyes are bloodshot and her heart has become weak. These are all natural and normal conditions. All age-related signs indicate Candida's advancing age, and she feels powerless and helpless about it.

However, when it comes to the women she meets at the Health Club. Candida always describes their figures, either plump or slender. They are all very young, with silky plump skin and thick hair. The one she is more impressed with is the girl with the fatty tumour. Age, figure, skin, muscle, disease and so on are all things associated with age. As one gets older, one naturally becomes more aware of these matters and the state of others. Similarly, Candida is more susceptible to these aspects, especially diseases and concerns about serious illnesses. Disease is often associated with death, which is something people have to face as they grow older. Candida envies the appearance of those young women, which reminds her of her own youth. Compared with them, her figure is like a withered rose, and she feels helpless about the passing of her youth.

The sight of her own withered skin, stripped of its youthful beauty makes Candida realize that her body is getting older and gradually accept these changes as they should be.

### 2.2. A Decline in Ability

When Candida goes to the Health Club for the first time, she doesn't know how to use the padlock on the wardrobe and then forgets its number, which takes her a long time to recall. This incident largely results from the physiological decline in learning ability and memory. Memory decline is often tied to ageing and is a normal process. She feels confused and panicked during her search. Later, when using the cupboard again, she is more careful and makes special marks to prevent herself from forgetting it again. This is actually a reflection of her lack of confidence

in her memory, and she realizes that her memory has deteriorated and fears making a fool of herself again. When she does not know how to use the padlock, she asks a young woman for help. The woman shows her how to use it and says that she didn't know how to use it the first time either, thereby easing Candida's embarrassment and showing understanding and compassion.

On the first day of their trip to Italy, after a long journey by plane and van, the group finally arrives in another city. Although they wish to engage in all sorts of entertainment, they eventually agree to gather after dinner to read Virgil's anthology for half an hour. Reluctant as they are to admit it, they are old and exhausted from the day's travels. They are not as energetic as they used to be.

Candida was good at her studies when she was a student, reaching an S grade in her Latin class and knowing French. Yet she doesn't think her brain can cope with maths now. "We were an ageing group of students. I guess the course was for slow elderly beginners, inevitably a dying dead" [4]. Even with Mrs Jerrold's explanations, she finds what she learns in Virgil class too difficult. On the first night of the trip, the group studies the Virgil anthology together at the hotel. "Earnestly they bend their heads over the Latin and attempt to disentangle the grammar. Their brains are rusty and dusty, despite the purging of the electric storm, and they find it is difficult to focus on the text" [4]. The Latin grammar is so confusing to them because their aged brains are no longer flexible. This explains how the elderly experience slower brain cell activity and reduced concentration, leading to a natural decline in comprehension and knowledge acquisition. However, they continue to read and study as a way to exercise their brains.

The lack of vitality in her body and the lack of flexibility in her brain mean that Candida's abilities have declined, but this has not affected her mentality or her life very much. She acknowledges and accepts her ageing.

### 3. Compassion for the Material Living Conditions of the Elderly

Material living conditions refer to some of the material bases needed to satisfy human survival, including clothing, food, housing, transportation and medical care. Material living conditions are inseparable from money, which means that economic status is precisely a reflection of material living conditions. When people grow old, they also pursue a good life and hope to live a happy life in their later years. But in reality, many elderly people are not able to live such a life. Drabble notices the problems of the elderly and portrays them in her novel to express her sympathy for their less pleasant lives.

#### 3.1. Oppressive Living Environment

After her divorce from Andrew, Candida receives divorce compensation and lives on a small amount of alimony every month. The small flat she lives in London was bought with Andrew's alimony. It is located in an old building that is poorly maintained. The bathroom is drab, the glass is cracked, and the corridor smells bad. The tenant next door makes noise, and it is tiring to climb the shoddy stairs. She herself feels that it is a "dark, dirty, menacing area" [4].

Candida once had her handbag snatched away in London. So later on, whenever she walks down the street and sees a black man, she involuntarily feels extremely scared, worrying about being robbed again. She doesn't like walking beside highways and railways because of the fallen fences, huts enclosed by barbed wire, stagnant pools of water, animal droppings, piles of bulky rubbish and sneaky people. In the corner of the bus stop, there are several chubby six-year-old boys smoking, their faces pale. Judging from these strange people and the dirty environment, it is obvious that Candida is not living in a good environment. This is a disorderly area with poor sanitary conditions and bad social security. This makes her uneasy and also reflects the dark side of London.

### 3.2. Low Level of Consumption

When Candida goes shopping, she mostly chooses discount shops to buy the cheaper items. Sometimes she goes to a good restaurant for dinner, the expenses are covered by her friends. When Julia visits Candida in London, Candida invites her to a nice restaurant, but Julia pays for it, while Candida herself can't afford it. Candida has a chipped tooth and Anaïs has recommended a dentist to her. She is also worried about whether she can afford the expensive fee.

Candida repeatedly mentions in her diary her inner doubts about the consumption habits around her. She wonders how those young people save money to pay for expensive Health Club and they also often go to dine in seafood restaurants. She wonders the sources of funds for those who squander money in bars and on the streets. She doesn't understand why young people buy soft drinks without hesitation, whereas she doesn't dare to be so "extravagant". She thinks that drinking water is enough. She can't understand why others have money while she doesn't. This psychological imbalance makes her feel unreasonable. Because she has no job and no income, and relies on Andrew for her living support, her life is very hard. Her financial situation is restricted and she needs to be very careful in controlling her expenses.

Financially dependent, Candida has very limited choices in life. She can only afford to live in low-rent, unsatisfactory places and dares not spend money on things that are slightly more expensive. This dependence on others makes her passive, making it impossible to live as she pleases.

## 4. Concern for the Interpersonal Interactions of the Elderly

Interpersonal interaction is undoubtedly important for the elderly as one of the most important ways to obtain information, exchange feelings, promote friendship and enrich their lives in old age. Apart from maintaining good and healthy relationships with family members, the elderly should also have normal social interactions. Drabble is also mindful of the importance of human interaction. Therefore, she writes a lot about the interpersonal interactions between the elderly protagonist and her family, friends and strangers, expressing her concern for the interpersonal interactions of the elderly.

### 4.1. Family Interpersonal Interactions

Candida's husband Andrew is highly competent in his work and management as headmaster of Holling House School and executive director of the charity. He is not only handsome and charming in appearance, but also humorous and cheerful in personality. However, Candida gradually develops a hatred for him. One of the main reasons is that Andrew betrayed her. In fact, there have been problems in their marriage for a long time. The relationship between them is full of difficulties: what Andrew wants is something Candida is unwilling to give, and neither of them can fully meet the other's needs. They seldom express their love in a passionate way. As time goes by, their emotions grow increasingly distant, and both of them are immersed in their own world. In Suffolk's later years, she stops supporting Andrew and finds excuses to sleep in another bed.

Also, she exposed his hypocrisy. "Andrew had come to seem to me to be the vainest, the most self-satisfied, the most self-serving hypocrite in England" [4]. It is absurd that this headmaster, who seems to be full of kindness and morality, engages in an affair with his student's mother while married. Although Andrew maintains a close relationship with Candida, he takes every opportunity to express his dissatisfaction with her. He criticizes the beef she serves as imperfect in the presence of his guests and deliberately embarrasses her by cutting off and setting aside edible scraps.

As for their three daughters, Isobel, Ellen, and Martha, Candida has a rather cold relationship with them. Isobel thinks Candida is a rude and incompetent mother who costs Andrew a fortune in alimony. She loves her father, so she thinks Candida pushed Andrew so hard that he had to cheat. She blames all the problems on Candida. While Candida sees Isobel as a good-looking, self-centered, greedy woman like Andrew. Thus, the relationship between the mother and daughter deteriorates. They hate each other. The daughter doesn't like her mother because she favors her father.

Martha also dislikes her birth mother Candida, but is very close to her stepmother Anthea. The relationship between them is also incredibly poor, with the daughter critical of the mother and the mother resentful of the daughter.

Ellen moves to Finland. She says nothing about her life, her work, her love affairs, which Candida never asks about. As for Candida's flat, though Ellen knows that it has many obvious disadvantages, she speaks of some advantages when she realizes her mother's determination to live there. It is thus clear that, though their relationship is not intimate, Ellen is considerate of her mother's thoughts, and spares her some honor. Candida also thinks Ellen is a reasonable person and does not criticize her or say bad things about her, which shows that Candida has the best family relationship with Ellen.

After the trip, Candida recalls her past life and suddenly realizes the mistake she has made. She comes to understand the value of family and restraint. She is eager to mend her relationship with her daughters and become a caring grandmother. So she reflects on how her past indifference towards her husband and poor relationship with her daughters has led to the tension in the family. She is filled with remorse and determined to make a change. Candida tries to bridge the gap with Ellen, working up the courage to call her to talk, learning about her profession, and looking up her published papers. Afterwards, Candida is invited to Ellen's wedding reception, and the relationship between the two becomes even closer. While attending Ellen's wedding, Candida also spends some time with Martha, and they reconcile. Back in London, Candida also goes out to dinner with Martha and her boyfriend, restoring their normal mother-daughter relationship.

Candida initially expresses her dissatisfaction with her family in her diary. Later, she realizes that she has also ignored them. Most difficult interpersonal relationships are not caused by the fault of one party. Family is our closest relationship, and we all should spend more time caring for them.

#### **4.2. Social Interpersonal Interactions**

In Suffolk, Candida makes two friends. Henrietta, who is thin and bony, is a volunteer. Sally, a social worker, is overly obese. Candida is in a passive position in her friendship with them. Although both women are proactive by nature, Candida doesn't like them to do anything good for her. She thinks they may have ulterior motives. They offer great sympathy and comfort to Candida in her divorce, but Candida does not like it. She thinks they feel sorry for her. They don't understand her true thoughts in her heart, and such sympathy and comfort can't make her feel better.

It is evident that Candida is rather introverted and passive when interacting with others. She has high self-esteem and is sensitive. Even though she knows that other people are doing good deeds, she still feels somewhat resistant to unwarranted kindness from others. She doesn't want others to think that by doing so she appears to be a weak person in need of help. At the same time, she does not open her heart, nor does she reveal her true thoughts on divorce to her friends.

After moving to London, she takes the initiative to enroll in Virgil class. On the one hand, she wants to find something to do; on the other hand, she desires to make different friends. She hopes to get rid of her loneliness by actively making friends. Moreover, this Virgil class is for

old people, who are of a similar age to her own, so she doesn't have to worry about generational gap in communication. Additionally, in this new city no one knows about her past and no one will talk about her failed marriage or broken family. Thus, much of the psychological burden of trying to make new friends is alleviated within this social circle. It provides Candida with supportive social connections and eases her feelings of isolation.

"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" [4]. Candida doesn't want to hang out with older women who hit on her, and she barely interacts with people at the Health Club. She is cautious about making friends. This mentality stems from her inability to get rid of old friends, which is one of the reasons she fled to a strange city. She also escapes from those in Suffolk who have known her and Andrew, yet it is hard to tell whether her flight is an act of courage or cowardice. Because she knows that one of the reasons she makes such a bold decision is that there is something inside her that she doesn't want to face, and it is also part of her cowardice. Bravery is perhaps only a comfort and a hint to herself. She doesn't want to confront her cowardice or even admit it. Even in a strange city, she still faces the new society with her previous attitude and doesn't make any changes in her interaction with people. It's a vicious cycle, which is not good for her relationships.

Introverted Candida is rather passive in making friends and not good at communicating with others. Her personality makes her indifferent and insensitive when communicating with friends.

## 5. A Call on the Elderly To Pursue Happiness

Those who are alive must have pursuits. Without pursuits, there will be no ideals and no goals. They will lose themselves and live an empty and chaotic life, not knowing what to live for. Drabble realizes this, so she calls on the elderly to live a positive life, develop their own interests, do things that make them happy, pursue their own happiness and fulfill their values in life.

### 5.1. Pursuing Happiness in the Mind

"I was suffused by a sense of what I can only call keen anticipation. I felt an intensity of anticipation for I knew not what. My destiny had no shape and no direction. It shone before me like the diffused radiance of dawn breaking over an unknown landscape" [4]. Deep down, Candida realizes that her fate is not to be a housewife who ends up abandoned and dying alone. However, she has no clear direction, as she's been stuck in her family for so long that she doesn't understand society. Although she is old, the light of new life gives her great hope. In spite of the boundless road ahead, she still feels positive, looking forward to a good future. She also feels positive about the unknown ahead and discovers a sense of strength stronger than when she got married and gave birth to three children. This is exactly what it feels like to live for herself.

"Now I live trapped beneath an enclosing grey gloomy London canopy. It is better so. In this trap is my freedom. Here I shall remake my body and my soul" [4]. Living alone fills her with a mixture of fear and hope. Though London is not as wide and peaceful as Suffolk, it is where she can begin her new life. She is aware that her past life as a competent wife and mother is not what she wants. She yearns for something else. Freedom is the first step to change. Although the weather and living environment in London are not good, she has the courage to take the difficulties as a challenge, thinking that the uncomfortable environment may stimulate her transformation more. Hardship in life is a necessary experience that will make her stronger, more optimistic and more determined to build a fulfilling life.

When she finds the cave of the prophet Sybil in the sunlight, she feels that although her body is heavier than before, her soul seems lighter than ever. "For she feels herself to be nearer to the dryness of the sun and to the purifying of the fire. The fluids are drying out of her skin and her

limbs and her entrails. She is turning into a dry husk, a weightless vessel. She feels with a new pleasure the ageing of her flesh" [4]. She finally arrives, and Sybil makes her give in. Although her body is ageing, she firmly believes that this is not the limit and she will not give in. Having been led by fate to Italy and to Cumae, she is determined to continue her quest for a happy life for herself instead of giving up. "She accepted getting older and the death she would face later. Although transcendence and great transformation are unattainable, life is still open and there is still room for learning and change" [5].

Candida adjusts her mindset and rejects the convention, which reflects her firm confidence and tenacious will to pursue happiness.

## 5.2. Pursuing Happiness in Action

In the early days of her new life in London, Candida volunteers signs up for Virgil class. It is the only bond through which she integrates into society and gets along with others. At the same time, studying in Virgil class is also out of her love for knowledge, and she hopes to improve herself through learning. She continues to read Virgil's works even after the class ends. In this way, she can enhance her own value, improve herself and enrich her life. Just as the proverb goes, it's never too late to learn. Candida experiences the joy of gradually maturing through learning and practice.

Health is the prerequisite for the pursuit of happiness. Candida chooses to swim regularly at the Health Club after Virgil class to keep fit. This indicates that she believes she has arranged each day reasonably and strictly followed the plan. She firmly believes that if she violates the plan due to a lack of self-discipline and self-control, or even fails to persist in swimming, her life will no longer have its original order and arrangement. As a result, she won't be able to start a new life well. She may also degenerate, lose sight of her own purpose, and waste time on unproductive days. In this case, there will be no difference from the past, and freedom will be meaningless. It shows that she doesn't give up on herself. She tries to put herself in a better state and plans her ideal life.

"Travel has long been recognised as an important form of intellectual and moral enhancement in the UK" [6]. Looking out of her hotel room on the first night of her trip, Candida feels calm, relaxed and happy, for she has broken away from the monotonous life of the past and sensed a brand-new atmosphere of life. The magnificent scenery, strange sights and dreams on the journey bring her an unprecedented happiness and spiritual progress. She believes that her life should be full of joy instead of being lifeless. She does not travel alone, nor does she travel with Andrew as they used to be. Instead, she is traveling with her close friends, and having friends makes the trip more interesting. Many old people nowadays also do the same. They have the time and money, most of whom have the dream of traveling. They adjust their mind and relax through travel. During their travels, they make friends, deepen their relationship with peers, broaden their knowledge and enrich their life experience.

Keeping a good family relationship is an important part of building happiness. Later, Candida reflects on her mistake and decides to mend her relationship with Ellen. Ellen invites Candida and Martha to her wedding in Finland. Despite her anxiety that she may not be able to get along with her daughters or improve their relationship, Candida encourages herself to do her best and eventually repairs the relationship.

Back in London she keeps a full social schedule, busy knitting sweaters, playing bridge, going to the cinema and the theatre. She gets along well with Stuart, whom she meets in Finland, and is planning a trip to Petra with old friends next spring. "Candida's decision to knit instead of playing card games to pass the time symbolizes her decision to weave her own destiny as a spinner of fate like Cloto" [7]. She summons her courage again and again. She asks about Jenny, the girl with the lipoma. In the middle of the night, she climbs over the railing to remove the dead Christmas tree under the highway bridge. At the end of the novel, Candida expresses her

perception of life, “As for me, I have no home. This is not my home. This is simply the place where I wait” (Drabble, 2002, p. 248). She is full of expectations for the future, and London is not her destination. She’ll also be traveling farther, perhaps with friends, with her daughters or Stewart. “The bright hues herald the limitless potential of older women to create new lives” [8]. Everything is possible. Although Candida is advanced in age, she has understood the meaning of life and that her destiny is in her own hands. As long as she is willing, she can do whatever she wants, and she has become brave and optimistic. She will follow her heart and embrace a bright future. “Candida’s inner cry and monologue show the initiative of life and the courage to accept the challenges of life. She is full of courage and is no longer the cowardly, passive, introverted Candida” [9].

Candida is positive and optimistic about life. She will fearlessly achieve self-growth through learning. She will do one brave thing after another, constantly break through herself, pursue new self-transformation, realize her dreams and self-worth, and gain happiness.

## 6. Conclusion

The Seven Sisters is the diary of an old woman, documenting Candida’s cherished memories of her school days. It traces her journey from being the object of everyone’s envy to experiencing a separated marriage, and then gradually establishing a good relationship with her daughters. In her later years, she lives alone and gets along well with her friends. It also chronicles a process in which she re-understands the meaning of life, bravely facing the reality of ageing and pursuing happiness. In this novel, Delabour presents to readers the survival problems faced by the elderly in the context of an ageing population, including the ageing process itself, a decline in physical and mental ability, financial difficulties, and interpersonal estrangement. She expresses her deep concern for the physical and mental well-being of the elderly.

Ageing is an inevitable stage of life for everyone. The elderly should be valued rather than forgotten. Delabour aims to appeal to people to show more care for the elderly, addressing both their material and spiritual needs, and to provide them with companionship and support. Society should effectively ensure the livelihood of the elderly and encourage them to bravely pursue their true selves. It is hoped that this paper can offer some insights for us in dealing with issues related to the elderly and the problems that ageing countries should pay attention to.

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