

The Function Of Nature In Margaret Drabble's Novel "The Witch Of Exmoor"

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Abstract. The presented article focuses on the role of nature in describing woman character in the novel of modern woman English writer Margaret Drabble. Nature, especially forest plays an important role in presenting the main character's eccentric features as the main character prefers to live in the forest though she has lived in comforts and brought up three children in her life. Her attitude towards nature, forest, animals reveal her inner world and unusual feature in her personality.

Key words: nature, forest, woman, novel, description, place, character

In the process of writing a novel the writer gives attention to particular detail, as it serves to be an important key to presenting the idea of the novel. The characters of the novel act around that detail and their thinking, attitude towards the world is explored. In the novel that detail may stay inactive, but for the writer it is essential in presenting the idea of the author. One of such literary devices is nature, specifically forest. For some writers forests are usually the place in which wild animals, wild birds live and survive. By describing the forests as a location these writers present the relation between humanity and nature. For famous American writer Jack London (1876-1916) the nature was a place in which he presented the relation between wild animals and humanity. For Russian writer Mikhail Prishvin (1873-1954), it was a place in which he explored the animals' life and their attitude towards people. For other writers the description of forests is used in novels as a mysterious place where heroes can escape and survive as they are not able to join the society due to their dirty deeds. The writers who enjoyed the beauty of the forests started using description of forest as a literary device in presenting not only the idea but in demonstrating the unusual characteristics of their main heroes in the novels.

A prominent English writer of the XX century Margaret Drabble in the foreword to her book "A Writer's Britain" states that "at the beginning of the nineteenth century love of nature seemed almost to replace love of mankind as a subject for literature. Despite an uncertain climate and a large-scale industrial revolution, English writers have persisted in seeing and praising the distinctive beauties of their own country" (Drabble, 2009: 6). Though English poet Robert Browning preferred Italy, wrote "Oh, to be in England now that April's there", another English poet George Byron could not suppress a surge of enthusiasm at the sight of the white cliffs of Dover and the green fields of Kent" (Drabble, 2009: 6). For William Wordsworth, a famous English poet of Romanticism period in English literature, nature became his subject matter which lay around him in his infancy. "The river Derwent and the mountains of the Cumberland were as mother and father to him. William Wordsworth forged a new relationship between man and the natural world: he lived in a new communion, and when he was young he found the language, in Shelley's phrase, like clay in his hands" (Drabble, 2009: 149). "Wordsworth not only saw the natural world as a vital formative influence on man; he was at least half persuaded that every living object, even plants and trees, could experience joy and sorrow. The world was a living symbol, but more than that, it lived in its own right" (Drabble, 2009: 153).

In the novel of the modern woman English writer Margaret Drabble forest helps the reader to understand the eccentricity of the main heroine Frieda Palmer. For the writer the forest is a place where Frieda can realize her dream, think of her life and reflect on it. Frieda's attitude towards the forest, animals, birds show her personality as a good woman, mother and grandmother.

The title of the novel "The Witch of Exmoor" (1996) gives the idea about the personality traits of the main heroine Frieda Palmer. The witch is "a woman thought to have evil magic powers, popularly depicted as wearing a black cloak and pointed hat, and flying on a broomstick" (CALD, 2008: 1035). She is the main negative hero described in fairy tales and never does anything good to humans. Even the appearance of the witch reveals her features as an unusual old woman. Another negative association about

the witch is that she does not develop good relations with children, by nature she does not like children and children are afraid of her. But in “The Witch of Exmoor” the author presents quite different “witch” who possesses very different features and almost all of them are of positive characteristics. Frieda Palmer, the witch of the novel, is a mother who has three adult children. All of her children are educated, have their families and children, found their place in the modern British society.

The novel starts with the dinner in which Frieda’s adult children come to decision of what to do about their mother. According to her children Frieda lost her mind or gone senile. But they cannot find any signs that could prove Frieda’s incompetency. For them Frieda’s decision to move to Exmoor and staying there becomes a sign that proves her eccentricity. Frieda doesn’t care what they think, as she has never been an attentive mother when they were young. In order to bring up her children Frieda earned her living by writing. But now her adult children bore her and so she does not worry about them. Her children feel she is a monster because of her past and current inattentiveness. They really have no idea how she spends her days and who her friends are. Critic Mundow Anna states that “two-thirds of “The Witch of Exmoor” is about successful author Frieda Palmer and her relationship with her three children and their spouses” (Mundow, 1997: 6).

When Frieda decides to move to a ruin of a house in Exmoor to examine her life and write her memoirs, her family starts discussing over who should be looking out for mother. Frieda is merely independently living her life and she seems always to have despised her children, their jobs, their spouses, their eating habits and their stuffy, complacent lives. But only now in old age has she decided to desert them and their modern England: abandoning her car in a traffic jam, selling the family house and taking up reclusive residence in a semi-ruin overlooking the sea.

Her life in Exmoor is considered to be a place or a source that can reveal her eccentric features as a witch. Exmoor is an area of moorland with its thick forest situated on the cliff near the sea. The nature of Exmoor is a place where Frieda behaves and demonstrates herself as a witch of the novel. The house in which she settles is vast, hideous and uninhabitable. Electricity often keeps going off there and the house is about to fall into the sea. Frieda purchased a dilapidated thirty-room Victorian castle by the sea. “The house is called Ashcombe, a dull suburban name for what Rosemary has described as a grand Gothic folly... Neither light nor sound emerge from her remote planet” (Drabble, 1998: 85).

The way how the author describes Exmoor reveals Frieda’s style of life that resembles the witch: “Exmoor was full of eccentrics. Would a normal person want to live alone at a place like Ashcombe? Ashcombe had a bad reputation. Nobody normal had ever lived at Ashcombe. In its hotel days, it might have had one or two normal guests, but they hadn’t stayed long. And the manager had been barking mad. So had the proprietor, and so had the retired admiral who had built the place. It stood no reason that anybody who lived alone at Ashcombe might well wander off alone. Nothing illegal in that” (Drabble, 1998: 167). As it is seen from the description, Frieda also preferred to walk alone and find comfort in communicating only with animals and birds in Exmoor.

Frieda’s attitude towards her house also shows her unusual feature as she does not think of order in her house. Her place does not illustrate the warmth which usual woman can create in their house, even the objects kept in Frieda’s house present her weird feature: “All the house was dump, with great mushrooms in places, and she said she’d never been into some of its rooms. Upstairs she had a globe and binoculars and a word-processor. She said she’d found a human skull under the floorboards...” (Drabble, 1998: 109).

The description of nature, especially forest, moorland, woman’s attitude towards nature helps the author to present how eccentric the main heroine is. Thus it can be stated that nature becomes as a device that illustrates unusual features of Frieda Palmer’s personality. Even at the end of the novel Frieda disappears mysteriously as it happens with witches in fairy tales.

References

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