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**BETWEEN ACCEPTANCE AND REJECTION  
– MARGARET DRABBLE'S: *THE MILLSTONE***

The fact that *The Millstone* is the story of a woman, told in the first person, focuses the reader's attention on the emotional aspect of her life, presents her own view of it, and exposes the extent of her self-centredness. Although Rosamund Stacey introduces herself as a "Fabian rationalist", and "feminist" brought up "to be equal", the experience which she recalls shows her torn between acceptance and rejection of life, and her desperate fear of self-exposure, resulting from her crude, feminist upbringing. With all her failures and limitations she proves to be a very anti-feminist heroine.

Those who might affect her character, her friends and George in particular, turn out to be equally deficient. The influence, permanent and decisive, from which she can never free herself, is that of her parents. Though physically absent, they fuel a constant necessity for Rosamund to live up to the heartless principles they created. She has no contact with her brother, and very rare communication with her sister Beatrice, the only person from whom Rosamund can accept sympathy. She never writes to her parents and though she often mentions them, there are no signs of affection. The fact that she goes on living in the grand, parental atmosphere of their flat, passively waiting for their decision if she should stay or move out, may symbolize both indifference and submission. Rosamund herself admits: "Sometimes I wonder whether it is not my parents who are to blame, totally to blame, for my inability to see anything in human terms of like and dislike, love and hate: but only in terms of justice, guilt and innocence",<sup>1</sup> she also confesses: "Hitherto in my life I had most successfully avoided the bond that links man to man."<sup>2</sup> Her father being an economist, her mother – a feminist, and both of them hypocritical socialists, they set emotionless, dehumanizing patterns based on false, misrepresented notions

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<sup>1</sup> M. Drabble, *The Millstone* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

of equality and independence which Rosamund seems to be doomed to follow. Consequently she thinks love to be fatal and corruptive and any kind of dependence or commitment sinful.

As J. V. Creighton says: "Her parents' characteristic self-denial and self-sacrifice have been duplicated by their daughter, so inhibiting her emotional responses to others that she is incapable of spontaneous love or friendship, or even of spontaneous dislike."<sup>3</sup> Considering the same problem V. G. Myer adds: "In Rosamund's case her inherited morality is in some ways a source of strength."<sup>4</sup> but on the other hand: "limits her full human development."<sup>5</sup>

Rosamund's defective personality deeply affects her intricate social relations. It cannot be overlooked, however, that Rosamund a University graduate herself, moves in the society of educated people, writers whom one might expect to be more sensitive and refined. Unfortunately, they all appear to be awkward and undefined, therefore the relationships they establish are ambiguous and superficial.

Although in her narrative Rosamund concentrates on a short but crucial period of her life, she starts with what she calls "the Hamish episode" which is to symbolize love without making love. She confesses that for some "deeply rooted Freudian reason"<sup>6</sup> definitely meaning reluctance and rejection, she signed her own name instead of Hamish's in the hotel register. By accepting a boyfriend and going to a hotel she tries to imitate the style of cheap fiction and to find her own place in the permissiveness of modern society. Rosamund claims that from that moment on, her private life follows the Hamish pattern, but in actual fact her relationships with Joe and Roger are much stranger and worse. She simultaneously dates two men, of whom she knows very little and to whom she presents herself as an "emancipated woman", leading a secret life, a "sexual vagabond" pretending to each of them to be involved in a love affair with the other. At the time Rosamund finds the system satisfactory but it is easy to guess that, as J. V. Creighton says: "Rosamund lives a significant part of her life as a studied lie protecting her inner self."<sup>7</sup>

In spite of her cold, calculated attitude she finally comes to the correct conclusion: "Clearly neither of them was very interested in me, or they would not have been content with this arrangement. All I had to sacrifice was interest and love. I could do without these things."<sup>8</sup> None of the three

<sup>3</sup> J. V. Creighton, *Margaret Drabble*, (New York: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1985), p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> V. G. Myer, *Margaret Drabble: Puritanism and Permissiveness* (London: Vision Press Limited, 1974), p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> M. Drabble, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> J. V. Creighton, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>8</sup> M. Drabble, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

seems to be capable of developing deeper, more intimate feelings. Their relationship is just a way of killing time through pubs, drinks, cinemas, parties. The men not only create cheap fiction but they themselves belong to the world it portrays, the world of permissiveness, of endless possibilities, of emotional impotence.

Lydia, the only girlfriend of Rosamund, mentioned at length in her narrative, is a representative of the same world. Her life is like a constant journey between boyfriends and social meetings, leaving her almost no time to relax, to wash or to clean her clothes. Neither specially gifted nor hard-working enough to be successful, she remains a flat artist with nothing to say and nowhere to go. She comes to Rosamund homeless exactly when the latter begins to feel lost, lonely and in want of help. But Rosamund cannot ask for help therefore although she finds Lydia: "intelligent and self-reliant and interesting" the greatest advantage of their sharing the flat is as Rosamund says: "that she suggested it as a favour to herself and that I had not had to ask."<sup>9</sup>

Having been brought up to be independent, she cannot bear the thought of not being self-sufficient and considers any possible, approach to others as causing trouble, pain, fuss. Consequently, she can accept herself only as a donor and never as the recipient. Shaped by her parents' fair, economizing, intellectual, attitude, she can only accept herself as "confident", "self-reliant", "equal to anybody alive", "capable of advising herself", not knowing "what the word jealousy meant", "an attractive girl, independent, strong-willed, and very worldly and au fait with sexual problems." She rightly observes that she is: "Lucky in work, unlucky in love."<sup>10</sup>

No weaknesses are allowed in Rosamund's life, that is why she builds a wall of secrets and lies, separating her from other people. Thus she prefers to believe that it is only sex she fears because she can neither face nor acknowledge the truth of her life

I was guilty of a crime, all right, but it was a brand, new, twentieth-century crime, not the good, traditional one of lust and greed. My crime was my suspicion, my fear, my apprehensive terror of the very idea of sex. I liked men, and was for ever in and out of love for years but the thought of sex frightened the life out of me ... Naturally enough my virtuous reluctance made me very miserable, as it makes girls on the back page of every woman's magazine, for like them, I enjoyed being in love and being kissed on the doorstep, and like them I hated to be alone. I had the additional disadvantage of being unable to approve of my conduct, being a child of the age, I knew how wrong and misguided it was. I walked around with a scarlet letter embroidered upon my bosom, but the A stood for Abstinence not for Adultery.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Alluding to "a scarlet letter" Rosamund encourages a comparison that might provide a clue to her dilemma. She juxtaposes her own experience with that of Hester Prynne, the main character of *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, a book that expresses the idea of Puritanism, according to which a human being endowed with free will can live in agreement with his/her conscience and moral code only if his/her feelings and intellect are not in conflict. In the case of Rosamund, they prove to be in constant and bitter conflict and cannot be reconciled since her life is under the power of intellect. Hester is forced to wear a scarlet letter A, because through responding to her feelings she has committed adultery and has given birth to an illegitimate child, a daughter – called Pearl (during her final conversation with George, Rosamund sees Octavia shine with "pearly brightness"). Having refused to reveal the name of the child's father (Hester protects him, as he is a generally admired puritan priest) she has to live outside the community. Through her extremely imposed experience of rejection and physical alienation, Hester grows bitter but also kinder, more understanding and more sympathetic towards people who despite having persecuted her previously, soon approach her attracted by her kindness.

Rosamund commits the same act but her situation in all its aspects is quite the reversal of the one described. Her society is wholly permissive, she suffers no pressure, no interference, whatever she does, it is her choice. As she herself reflects: "There was nobody to tell, nobody to ask."<sup>12</sup> It is she who must decide whether to have the baby or not, whether to tell George about his parenthood or not, whether to become more open or more isolated. Although wherever she turns she is offered help, Rosamund chooses deep, emotional alienation not only for herself but for the baby as well. As E. C. Rose says:

What Rosamund is actually rejecting is one of the consequences of sex, intimate involvement with another human being. It is love she is rejecting, not sex, as is clear in her response to Joe's desire to help her through her pregnancy "All I knew was that I must get rid of Joe quick before he sensed my poverty, because Joe was capable of pity kindness".<sup>13</sup>

Despite the chance that offers itself to Rosamund in her budding affection for George, and her experience of womanhood and motherhood, Rosamund deepens her isolation instead of breaking it. "There is no sign" says Rose "that Rosamund is significantly nearer the possibility of true intimacy at the end of the novel than she is at the beginning."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> E. C. Rose, *The Novels of Margaret Drabble, Equivocal Figures*, (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1980), p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

In my opinion, Rosamund's situation is much worse at the end than it is at the beginning, she not only remains reasoning, detached, not only rejects sincerity, intimacy and love but also fails in her obligation towards her daughter. Rosamund's encounter with George does not seem so much accidental (as she herself suggests) considering her reactions to his presence from the very beginning of their acquaintance. Although he is vague, unassertive, dressed in "effeminate clothes", speaking with "a feminine emphatic diffidence", "unwilling to reveal himself and though Rosamund herself suspects him of being homosexual, George affects strongly both her emotions and senses. "I used to enjoy meeting him" she admits "because he always seemed pleased to see me and used to make lovely remarks."<sup>15</sup>

Consciously or subconsciously Rosamund recognises the pleasant and warm sensations caused by George's closeness, when he offers his arm she is shocked by how much it affects her, and she confesses: "I withdrew my arm with some reluctance" on approaching her house she adds: "I felt unreasonably elated and the familiar details of the building seemed to take on a sudden charm."<sup>16</sup> Rosamund's description of that evening which slightly changed the course of her life and might have caused her complete transformation, proves the significance of her relationship with George and shows clearly the striking similarity between their reactions, although his thoughts are never revealed and the reader can see it only from Rosamund's point of view when she describes the situation:

Knowing that he was queer, I was not frightened of him at all because I thought that he would expect no more from me and I was so moved and touched and pleased by the thought that he might like me, by the thought that he found me of interest. I was so happy for that hour that we lay there because truly I seemed to see him through the eyes of love, so irrationally valuable did he seem ..., before I knew where I was I found myself thinking that I couldn't stop him if he really wanted to, because I liked him so much and if I stopped him he would believe that I didn't: also that if ever, now: also that it would be good for me.<sup>17</sup>

And she later muses:

I see that my diffidence, my desire not to offend looks like enough to coldness, looks like enough to indifference, and perhaps I mean it to, but this is not what it feels in my head. But I cannot get out and say ... In case I am not wanted. In case I am tedious. So I let him go, without a word about any other meeting, though he was one thing I wanted to keep: I wanted him in my bed all night, asleep on my pillow, and I might have had him, but I said nothing. And he said nothing.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> M. Drabble, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

Rosamund's behaviour throughout the evening is based on the a pretence, resulting from her split personality, deep inside she is longing for love, togetherness, acceptance but on the surface she is always on her guard against attack on her independence, detachment, non-involvement, as one who does not feel like going beyond "touch without contact". Neither of them seems to be able to make an effort to bridge the gap. George, with his camp manners, always refuses to talk about himself and always resists, as Rosamund says, the pressure of her interest "with expert skill". Rosamund, on the other hand, with her fears, manly independence, and stifling self-control is afraid of risking self-exposure and so she finally concludes: "The more I thought about it, the more hopeless it seemed: had he liked me, he would surely have made some suggestion that he might see me again?"<sup>19</sup> She wants and tries hard to believe that he will go on liking her, that he will phone but she admits that to protect herself she must be prepared for the worst as well.

The feeling of silent expectation never leaves Rosamund till the end of the novel. She finds herself trembling fearfully in the places where she might see him, she imagines romantic confessions being made, his visits, his phone calls, as she later reflects:

George, George, I thought of George, and sometimes I switched on the radio to listen to his voice .... I still could not believe that I was going to get through it without telling him, but I could not see that I was going to tell him either. I would have the odd two minutes when I would think of him, and such grief and regret and love would pour down my spine that I tried not to think.<sup>20</sup>

Even the mere reference to his name, makes her feel, as she confesses: "... the loud beating of my heart, the sudden burning of my face, and some weird interruptions of my breathing, which indicated to me the extent of my concern."<sup>21</sup> George never makes any sign of interest or concern, hardly ever hearing his name, Rosamund never dares to talk about him to anyone so that she finally remarks: "... had I not held the fruit of his existence in my arms, I would have thought the whole episode nothing but a dream."<sup>22</sup>

Being pregnant is both a hard test and a great challenge for Rosamund, it is a time of making choices, decisions, breaking barriers and unfortunately of withdrawal and escape. After learning that she is pregnant, she feels lost and overwhelmed by the sudden demand to deal with the physical aspect of her being, meaning the necessity of visiting doctors, facing her

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

family, friends, and students especially when her pregnancy becomes visible. Rosamund accepts all these hardships as the consequence of womanhood, never allowing them to interrupt either her teaching or her professional career. She is more efficient in her writing than ever, and as for her students, she leaves them to their own suppositions except for the Methodist minister for whom she pretends to be married.

Rosamund makes no attempt to inform either her parents or her brother about her situation. The only person with whom she is able to share a bit of her experience, is her sister Beatrice. Knowing that they were brought up and educated in the same way, Rosamund expects from her some understanding, sympathy and even admiration for her courage, self-reliance and her firm belief in being excellently self-sufficient. In the meantime, however, Beatrice has managed to reconcile successfully her family principles with her marriage and motherhood so that she always sang to Rosamund "the praises of motherhood and domesticity"<sup>23</sup> but in Rosamund's opinion she just made "a virtue of necessity".

Beatrice's letter disappointed Rosamund deeply. Knowing Rosamund very well and having in mind the problems she herself had to cope with, adapting herself to the role of wife and mother, she is sincerely worried not only about her sister but about the baby as well. Instead of praise and compassion, she writes the truth which Rosamund can never accept:

I just can't see you adapting yourself to the demands it would make on you, you've always been so set on your independence and having your own way. You can have no idea of what it means to have to think of someone else, twenty-four hours of every day, and not for a year or two but for ever more or less. However, it isn't just you that I'm thinking of. It would be bad enough for you but it would be far, far worse for the child. Through no fault of its own it would have to have the slur of illegitimacy all its life, ... . A baby isn't just something you can have just because you feel you ought ... . I know that ideally in a decent society, no child ought to suffer because of this kind of handicap, but this isn't a decent society, and I can't bear the thought of what your baby would have to go through, and what you would have to go through on its account.<sup>24</sup>

Beatrice also mentions how important the baby's father is which reminds Rosamund about George and makes her picture a baby like George. It also creates in her a desire to ring him up and tell him, which Rosamund can never bring herself to do, not even for the baby's sake. The only luxury, she permits herself is to listen to his voice.

Rosamund rejects Beatrice's arguments, trying to persuade herself that no adoptive parents can be as excellent as she will be. She does not even

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 766.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

consider the possibility that the child may suffer from the lack of a father and that she may not be able to act the double role of both parents throughout the rest of her life. She perceives the baby more as something than someone, still the baby, from the moment of its birth brings into her life sensation which she so seldom experienced and so often avoided. After the delivery she reflects:

... what I felt it is pointless to try do describe. Love, I suppose one might call it and the first of my life ..., I lay awake for two hours, unable to get over my happiness. I was not (much used) to feeling happiness: satisfaction, perhaps, or triumph, and at times excitement and exhilaration. But happiness was something I had not gone for for a long time, and it was very nice, too nice to waste in sleep.<sup>25</sup>

It is not for the first time, actually, it is for the second time that Rosamund is talking about love. Now, it is because she is proud and deeply impressed by "the superior beauty and intelligence" of the child. Back at home, Rosamund cannot so easily define her feelings a lot of things she cannot bear, like: breast-feeding or walking with a pram. Eventually, she concedes:

in many ways I thought that certainly I would prefer to be without her .... Things about life with a baby drove me into frenzies of weeping several times .... As so often in life, it was impossible to choose, even theoretically, between advantage and disadvantage, between profit and loss: I was up quite unmistakably against No Choice. So the best one could do was to put a good face on it .... I managed very well, and the general verdict was, Extraordinary Rosamund, she really seems happy.<sup>26</sup>

No choice signifies the sense of obligation and responsibility stronger than anything else in Rosamund's life, the power that makes her burst into hysterics when she fights for permission to visit Octavia after the surgery.

Ironically enough, Octavia seems to be the first to express love, as Rosamund herself says:

... gradually I began to realize that she liked me, and that unless I took great pains to alienate her she would go on liking me .... It was very pleasant to receive such uncritical love, because it left me to bestow love .... Indeed, it must have been in expectation of this love that I insisted upon having, or rather refrained from not having her.<sup>27</sup>

Rosamund instinctively feels strongly, inseparably connected with her daughter and struggles hard not to fail her, Rosamund herself needs to believe that she can live up to her own standards of being both excellent

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.



and self-sufficient in any role life may assign to her. Nevertheless, Rosamund is vaguely aware of her emotional poverty, not knowing what love really means she can only take the role, of a recipient, though she definitely prefers to be a donor in other spheres of life. During critical moments of Octavia's illness, Rosamund blames herself for an unknown sin up to the point when she muses: "I could not convince myself that sleeping with George had been a sin: on the contrary, in certain moods I tended to look on it as the only virtuous action of my life ...".<sup>28</sup>

The only sin, she commits but cannot acknowledge is her inability not only to express her own but, first of all, to ask for anybody's love. Her untold suffering increases her isolation, before Christmas she refuses all invitations (including Beatrice's) but meeting George on Christmas Eve has "an indelible beauty, like the beauty of fate itself."<sup>29</sup>

I tried to rise to my feet but my legs would not hold me – she says – so great was my amazement, so many my thoughts, so troubled my heart. I sat there dumb, and looked at him, and my mouth smiled, for I was terrified that he would go once more and leave me .... I wanted to say stay with me, but my mouth was so dry I could not speak.<sup>30</sup>

Again it is what she feels, and never puts into words. George is the only man that could break her seclusion, but George himself seems to be psychologically Rosamund's mirror image, therefore, in their conversation they withdraw into indirectness, reserve, lies and echoing each others' words.

Having lied about Octavia's age, Rosamund feels safely back in her old role of showing no concern, but subconsciously she is waiting for something from George when she says:

And he looked up at me and I had the sense that I so often had with him, that he was on the verge of some confession, some confidence, some approach that once made, could never be denied. I felt myself on the verge of tears and noise, and held hard onto the arms of my chair to prevent myself from throwing myself on my knees in front of him, to beseech from him his affection, his tolerance, his pity, anything that would keep him there with me, and save me from being so much alone<sup>31</sup>

"but she also has to admit: I was incapable of exposing myself thus far."<sup>32</sup> Neither of them proves to be able to be frank enough to show some concern. The only expressionless admission George makes is that he kept thinking that he would see her but he never did. Rosamund unable to read

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

its meaning, escapes into a rejoinder about the baby, and again to justify her retreat she concludes: "Like me, he veiled his intention until there was nothing of it left ... there may have been the same dependent, interlocking uncertain confusion in his head as in mine, and no enlightenment at all."<sup>33</sup>

During this final conversation with George, Rosamund comes to a crisis which she cannot resolve successfully herself. Overcome by muddled feelings, she struggles between her longing for love and the desperate fear of being rejected. Although Rosamund says about herself: "I am not generous. Fair but not generous"<sup>34</sup> at the moment when she lies to George about Octavia's age, she is too lost and miserable even to be fair. To protect herself from the sense of failure and to preserve her own self-confidence and self-respect she separates father and daughter, denying the significance of the affection which she might have never experienced herself. Rosamund is not to be blamed, however, she cannot cope with her split personality, overburdened with her obligations and responsibilities. Her invitation to George, her praises of Octavia and her final appeal to George: "There is nothing I can do about my nature, is there?"<sup>35</sup> are her dumb cries for help to escape her emotional aloofness, but George, lifeless, impersonal, dispassionate cannot or does not want to go beyond echoing her words: "No, nothing."

E. C. Rose referring to the most popular interpretations of *The Millstone*, says that: "not only most critics, but most women readers believe that Rosamund Stacey has achieved that desirable feminist synthesis, that by remaining single she has established her independence, while through her motherhood she has affirmed both her flesh and her bonds with humanity."<sup>36</sup> But, in fact, Rosamund does not seem to achieve any synthesis at all. She remains single because she is unable to confess any emotional need, there are no deep human bonds in her life, she just perceives that being forced to ask people for help she may find them kinder than she has expected. Nevertheless, she rejects all the Christmas invitations, her independence is not a sign of maturity, it is rather the result of her inability to communicate, to express her needs, desires and feelings in case she might not be accepted or she might be criticised.

Reflecting upon her life, Rosamund says: "In ignorance and innocence I built my own confines and by the time I was old enough to know what I have done, there was no longer time to undo it."<sup>37</sup> and she also admits: "I am an unhappy woman myself."<sup>38</sup> and confesses: "I who not even ask

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>36</sup> E. C. Rose, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>37</sup> M. Drabble, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

for love or friendship.”<sup>39</sup> Rosamund's own words reveal the psychological impairment caused by the principles ingrained through narrow upbringing. Not only does she lack a feeling of self-fulfilment and self-satisfaction but she suffers bitterly as well. Her feminist education deprived her of a balanced, wide-ranging view of life as a coalescence of inseparable, intertwined, equally important elements. Rosamund can cope successfully with two of these elements, namely her professional and intellectual life but her emotional life is in constant crisis.

Rosamund tries hard to keep going and to present herself as a happy, independent manager of her own life, but her greying hair, her crying episodes, and her worrying indicate that her image is as split as her personality. Her surface image of success does not correspond to the real truth of her life, touched upon, though not fully recognised in various moments of her narration.

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#### AKCEPTACJA I ODRZUCENIE W POWIEŚCI M. DRABBLE *THE MILLSTONE*

Przez narrację w pierwszej osobie Margaret Drabble koncentruje uwagę czytelnika na sposobie myślenia, percepcji i życiu uczuciowym narratorki i głównej bohaterki powieści – Rosamund Stacey. Wychowana w pseudosocjalistycznym i feministycznym duchu, Rosamund staje się negacją feminizmu.

Zewnętrzny obraz sukcesu i samowystarczalności, który Rosamund kreuje dla otoczenia jest tylko maską, skutecznie ukrywającą emocjonalną niemoc, podświadome pragnienie uczuć, paniczny lęk przed odrzuceniem i obsesyjne poczucie odpowiedzialności. Ludzie, którzy wywierają na nią wpływ, tj. rodzina i przyjaciele, również nie przejawiają żadnej emocjonalnej głębi.

Ostatecznie Rosamund przegrywa swą szansę przemiany wewnętrznej przez związek z Georgem i macierzyństwo. Nie uzyskując od niego żadnej pomocy, Rosamund ulega do końca lękowi i ucieka w coraz większe wewnętrzne rozbicie, zamknięcie i odrzucenie.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.