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Thesis

The Novels of Mary Webb

Submitted by

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for the degree of Master of Education.

1934

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For Mary Webb⁽¹⁾

Not hers the harvest of success,
The joyful reaping of renown;
Only the lonely wilderness,
Dark hill and windy down.

Yet her high soul retained its grace
For faith and love together twined
Garlands to deck a secret place
Of peace within her mind.

Now her true beauty stands revealed
While only birds about her sing
Where in some far gold-flowered field
She keeps eternal spring.

(1) K.Lee, poem, Bookman (London) 74:299 Sept. '28

The Purpose and the Plan of this Study

The purpose of this study is to interpret and to judge the novels of Mary Webb. She wrote poems, essays, short stories, criticism, and novels; but we are concerned here only with her five complete novels. Of these, the one best known is the fifth, Precious Bane. One of the prime interests of this paper is to place her other works in relation to this.

The first step has seemed to be to acquaint the reader with the outstanding facts in the author's life. This is always necessary when one discusses the works of any single author; it is doubly necessary when one is dealing with a writer about whom certain legends have sprung up.

Our second step will be to give a resume of each of the five works with which we are dealing. Then, having the materials before us, we shall proceed to relate the novels to the author's life and to analyze each of these larger pieces of fiction technically, trying to discover the strong and the weak points of each, noting the author's detailed successes and failures, comparing the novels, and finally making some generalizations about them.

Life of Mary Webb

1. Birth and Parentage:

The girl who was to become Mary Webb was born a Meredith and christened Gladys Mary; her name to the whole countryside where she spent her childhood was "Glad" Meredith. She was born March 25, 1881 in a Shropshire village named Leighton. Her father, George Edward Meredith, was a "churchman of the Evangelical school"⁽¹⁾ who took pupils in his home as so many English university men do. He was distantly connected with another George Meredith of greater fame; and more closely, his father, his grandfather, and an uncle were all clergymen of Welsh descent. Because he wrote, painted, and gardened, his daughter did the same; he was without doubt much closer to her than was her mother, who was "one of those earnest, high-minded women, who, whether they direct or actually perform the laborious tasks of life, do so faithfully and with an ardent sense of duty, yet frigidly withal, because their superlative practicality lacks the savour of human sympathy."⁽²⁾ She was the daughter of an Edinburgh doctor who bore the name and the blood, remotely to be sure, of Scott the novelist. We shall see both parents, modified, appearing in Mary Webb's books.

(1) Hilda Addison: Mary Webb, A short study of her life and work, page 5

(2) " " : Ibid., p. 5

2. Girlhood and Education:

Gladys Meredith was a child who loved the outdoors: she took long tramps; she ate out of doors almost habitually instead of on rare occasions only, as most children do. She showed great affection for animals, was somewhat obstinate, often untidy, always kind. We are told that "When Mrs. Meredith asked Gladys to water the flowers, she deliberately left them until the evening or later. It was not due to dislike of the task--she enjoyed it; but her obstinate independence rebelled when the request came from external authority. She liked to do the plant watering because she liked it, and when she was told to do what she liked, she did it at the most awkward time."⁽¹⁾ She gardened as we have said because her father (and mother too) gardened; in fact, she loved flowers so well that she "wrote about them, painted them, and grew them."⁽²⁾ She also studied botany later on in life.

For of course there were lessons to be learned, and the girl's governess and friend, very dear friend, was Miss E. M. Lory. The family had moved from Leighton to Much Wenlock, a village somewhat to the east of Shrewsbury. Here five brothers and sisters were born, and here they lived for about fifteen years, or until they removed nearer to Leighton, to Stanton-on-Hine Heath, about six miles north of Shrewsbury. While they were still living at Much Wenlock, however, Gladys Mary had attended Mrs. Walmsley's finishing school at Southport in

(1) Hilda Addison, op.cit., p.11

(2) I. Shipton, Childhood of Mary Webb, Bookman (London)

Lancashire; and she had made her acquaintance with much of the Shropshire countryside where she lived. In the vicinity was an old Cistercian Abbey, Buildwas, and the ancient Roman remains of Viroconium, the city that had marked where Watling Street, running west from Londoninium, had turned north into the land of the wild Brigantes. When Mary Webb died in 1927, she left unfinished a sixth novel, the setting of which was this ancient England.

When Mary (as she was now coming to be called) left the finishing school, she took up the duties of instructing her younger brothers and sisters. The weight of these and other petty cares wore upon her sensitive nature and caused some kind of nervous collapse, and she must have been physically ill as well because we are told that she had "Graves' disease" and a "Derbyshire neck".⁽¹⁾ Put into less euphemistic terms, this means that she had not only the common enlargement of the thyroid gland called goiter, but a more subtle goiter of the eyes which made them protrude and may even interfere with closing the lids and with sleep.

3. Later life and publications:

From her twentieth birthday to her thirtieth, her life was one varying struggle with ill-health; but, as is often the case, the enforced physical idleness led to great mental activity and to literary effort. The family had moved again, this time to Meole Brace, in the close environs of Shrewsbury.

(1) Hilda Addison, op.cit., p. 19

Here in 1909 her father had died, and here in the parish church she married Mr. H. B. L. Webb in 1912. His love for her, it is suggested, had done as much for her as that of Robert Browning had done for Elizabeth Barrett. He had even helped to nurse her when she was ill.

"By the time she was thirty a few poems had been published in the Sphere, the Vineyard, and the English Review, and she had written those beautiful essays--The Spring of Joy."⁽¹⁾

"Straightway after the ceremony, carrying away the blessing of her widowed mother and a not entirely negligible allowance which it is as well for us to remember at certain moments in her life-story yet to come, Mr. and Mrs. H. B. L. Webb left for Weston-super-Mare--",⁽²⁾ and Mary was out of her beloved Shropshire for the first time since her school days. But in 1914 they were back in the Salopian country at Pontesbury, a village ten miles southwest of Shrewsbury. Mrs. Webb had been unhappy at Weston-super-Mare, and perhaps out of sheer homesickness she had begun her first novel, The Golden Arrow.

Before it was published, the World War had begun to affect even quiet country people and it

"had affected her material position adversely: her husband, handicapped through ill-health, was now earning a hand-to-mouth living by coaching a few pupils, but the Webbs depended mainly on the small annual allowance that she received, in common with her brothers and sisters, from her widowed mother, who had gone to live at Chester since the death of Mr. Meredith. Mary Webb was not temperamentally equipped for economies, and as the cost of living increased she and her husband became very poor indeed. It occurred to her, therefore, that a little

(1) Hilda Addison, op.cit., p.22

(2) Thomas Moulton, Mary Webb, Her Life and Work, p.109

additional money might be made through the sale of the flowers and fruit in their garden at Rose Cottage.

"Not only for the sake of the money, though, did she seek to put the idea into practice, but because she would thereby regain her old close touch with the good earth.and, says Mr. Webb, 'although I don't think she earned more than five shillings before she set out in the evening on the nine miles' walk home, she was never dissatisfied. Indeed she came back looking much brighter; she felt she had done something beautiful.'" (1)

"It may even be believed that the real reason why Mary Webb set up that stall in Shrewsbury Market was the novelist's subconscious pretext." (2)

Mrs. Webb's The Golden Arrow was published in 1915, when her country was interested in bitter things. Her marketing was for only a short time (although since that time it has been much talked about), for in 1916 Mr. Webb was again teaching, this time at Chester, but Mary was so homesick that they returned nearly every week-end to a farmhouse near Shrewsbury. While she was in Chester during the week she could not write, but "as she crossed into Shropshire on Friday afternoons a remarkable new spirit seized upon her, and she would be in an exalted mood by the time they arrived at The Nills Farm." (3) Gone to Earth, her second novel, was thus soon finished and was published by Constable in the first month of the next year. In her closeness to Shropshire, Mary Webb strongly calls to our attention Emily Bronte's nostalgia for Yorkshire moors.

(1) Thomas Moulton, op.cit., pp.136-7
(2) Moulton, Ibid.,p.139
(3) Moulton, Ibid., p. 143

In September 1916, the Webbs had returned to Shrewsbury where Mr. Webb was to teach. He recognized that he must stay in Shropshire if his wife was to be content. And on Lyth Hill, the same Lyth Hill to which Mary had often gone early in the morning to write, they managed to build Spring Cottage. Part of the necessary money was advanced by Mrs. Meredith and part they raised on a mortgage. This cottage was to be their real home for the remaining eleven years of Mrs. Webb's life, although it is to be doubted if they were there as much as she may have desired.

The first four years after Spring Cottage was built were probably the happiest years of Mary's life, and it took her all this time to write her third novel, The House in Dormer Forest. It was published in 1921 about the same time that the Webbs ventured another excursion out of Shropshire, now to London. Mr. Webb obtained a teaching position in the suburbs; Mary looked forward to meeting certain literary people, among them Rebecca West who had praised Gone to Earth,⁽¹⁾ and she thought of the good that might be done in a charitable way in a large city.⁽⁴⁾ The war was now over; and quite naturally the placing of the third novel with publishers had directed her attention to London. Just how much she was "enticed away by editors"⁽³⁾, or just how much she would be moved by "advice of her doctors"⁽²⁾, we can not tell. In addition, I believe, she felt the need of broader contacts than Shropshire afforded; although I can fancy her forcing herself to take the step that

(1) Moulton, op.cit. p.186

(2) Moulton, op.cit. p.188

(3) W. Reid Chappell, The Shropshire of Mary Webb, p.122

(4) Addison, op.cit. pp.45-46

all writers about her seek to explain by one means or another, and that one at least (Miss Hilda Addison) cannot entirely comprehend. (1)

Of the placing of the manuscript of The House in Dormer Forest, and in view of all that has been said in regard to the cruelty of the financial difficulties of the author and the callousness of the world in not recognizing her, the following quotation from Mrs. Webb's most recent biographer is pertinent:

"That the publishers regarded Mary Webb as a novelist of great potentialities is shown in their attitude to the manuscript of The House in Dormer Forest. The firm of Constable had issued The Golden Arrow and Gone to Earth. But several other firms, including Hodder & Stoughton in London, and Doubleday in New York, entered into competition for her third novel, which was eventually secured by Hutchinson & Company in England and George H. Doran in the U. S. A. The amounts which these publishers paid on account of 'advance royalties' will surprise anyone who has been inclined to exaggerate the statement made publicly after her death by the Right Hon. Stanley Baldwin that Mary Webb was 'an author who had not attained sufficient recognition'. 'Sufficient recognition' is a relative term, and the facts are that her new English publishers made a preliminary payment of two hundred pounds for The House in Dormer Forest and assured her a similar advance on her next novel; also the firm who proceeded to publish her books in America advanced three hundred pounds for The House in Dormer Forest and agreed to pay the same amount for its successor. In order to make clear the significance of these amounts in relation to a novelist not yet 'established', it may be explained that advanced royalty of several hundred pounds on a single book is several times as large as the figure usually paid in similar circumstances before publication." (2)

Of course this does not alter the fact that the general public did not buy her books; they appealed to the discerning but not to the mass, and sold only about a thousand copies apiece. (3)

(1) Addison, op.cit., pp.45-46

(2) Moulton, op.cit., pp.186-7

(3) Moulton, Ibid., p. 217

The Webbs lived in Hampstead, a London suburb, about four months--from January to April, 1921; but there was much of disappointment in the city for Mary: living was expensive, London literary circles did not appeal to her, and she had another attack of her old illness. During the latter part of the spring, she returned to London and was, perhaps, somewhat happier, joining some authors' clubs and meeting many other authors, particularly Walter de la Mare and Edwin Pugh. Under these conditions, Seven for a Secret, her fourth novel, was written. It was published by yet other concerns: Jonathan Cape in England and Dutton in America. This change was made because of the small sales on her previous works, and because she was unselfishly but carelessly distributing what profits did come to her, to a labourer's daughter who wanted a piano or to a consumptive family in order that they might move to the seashore. (1)

Finally Precious Bane, generally accepted as Mary Webb's masterpiece, was published in July, 1924 by these same publishers. The book had been written partly in London and partly on Lyth Hill. The reviews were disappointing and, I venture to say, short-sighted, for in 1925 Precious Bane received the Femina Vie Heureuse Prize for the "best imaginative work in prose or verse descriptive of English life by an author who had not gained sufficient recognition." It was not until 1927 that Stanley Baldwin wrote the now famous letter to her telling her "with what delight" he had read the book, and it was not until April, 1928 that he spoke of Precious Bane at the Royal

(1) Hilda Addison, op.cit., p.52
also Moulton, op.cit., pp.216-7

Literary Fund annual dinner. By that time Mary Webb was "safe from their blames and praises";[†] she had died on October 28, 1927 at St. Leonard's-on-the-Sea where she had gone, desperately ill with pernicious anaemia and Grave's disease, to be nursed by her old friend Miss Lory. She is buried beneath a simple cross at Shrewsbury, and surely, surely, someone, when the "black frost" came, went out into the dull dew to tell the bees she had kept on Lyth Hill that "Maray's jead."

** Quotations such as these, unless obviously otherwise as in the case of Stanley Baldwin's letter on page 10, are from the writings of Mary Webb.

4. Mary Webb's Reading

While a study of the literary influences under which Mary Webb came in the course of her reading would be productive of much interesting material, little can be done here except to list those that her two biographers mention.

Both speak of the fact that her governess read Shakespeare by the hour to her⁽¹⁾ ⁽²⁾; and for this same governess, Miss Lory, she made an embroidered cover for a gift, The Sermon in the Hospital by Harriet Eleanor Hamilton.⁽³⁾

Housman and Shakespeare: these were the first among the abiding influences in the growth of Mary Webb the poet. Her mentality moreover, was not long in outgrowing the influence of devout books and such devotional exercises as that of attending her father's Bible-reading with the rest of the family each morning and evening. For she read polemical authors, notably Darwin and Haeckel, and the consequences were vital. One of her brothers attended her progress through The Origin of Species and The Riddle of the Universe.

'I was a very serious-minded youth,' he writes, 'and being seven years younger I followed her eagerly. In all my studies I was greatly helped by her. We had long discussions about everything under the sun, and when, later, I went out into the world, we continued our discussions by correspondence. Another book I especially recall in her reading is The Birth of Worlds and Systems, because we had lots of arguments about it. The result of all this proved to be a pagan one. Her God was Nature.'⁽⁴⁾

Her nature essays in The Spring of Joy were written under the influence of Richard Jefferies and "Fiona Macleod".⁽⁵⁾ "Fiona Macleod" was the pseudonym of one William Sharp who had written Where the Forest Murmurs. Richard Jefferies was more famous than Sharp, mainly because of the book The Story of My Heart.

(1) Hilda Addison, op.cit., p.17

(2) Moulton, op.cit., p.39

(3) Moulton, Ibid., pp.52-53

(4) Ibid., pp. 55-56

(5) Ibid., p.60

During the long illness of her twenties she must have read a great deal.

She read Shakespeare and the Bible with enormous zest. She knew the latter as few layfolk have ever done. She probably read it quite often during those years as a devotional book, but it is certainly true that she also read it with the keenest literary appreciation, and--as The House in Dormer Forest proves--with more understanding of its humour than most people. Among the novelists she was specially drawn to Hardy, and this loyalty she kept to the end. Her reading ranged from Sir Thomas Browne's Religio Medici to the moderns--in particular Evelyn Underhill, whom she met later and whose outlook greatly appealed to her. She knew of Lady Julian, the fourteenth-century anchoress of Norwich, though it was not until after her marriage that Mary read the Divine Revelations.⁽¹⁾

After her marriage,

The plays of J. M. Synge, works on Christian Mysticism, and Theodor Storm's short stories, may be picked out for special notice. She became very fond of Storm's little stories, and a careful comparison of them with her own novels will show that they appreciably influenced both her imagination and conception of "plot". Synge's musical fusion of the English tongue and the pure Irish dialect strongly appealed to Mary Webb, who, when she came to write the dialogue of her novels in the near future, emulated this feature of the plays, and created a "blend" by merging the singing speech of rural Shropshire with normal, every-day prose. Of the literature of Mysticism, the Revelations of Divine Love, by Julian of Norwich, sank deeply into her mind, and remained, though more cherished at certain periods than others, one of those subtle influences which, abiding gently in the heart, become at length indelibly outlined there.

(1) Hilda Addison, op.cit., pp.23-24

(2) Ibid., p.27

Summary of Part One

The following facts may well be listed as valuable connections between Mary Webb's life and reputation and works.

1. Her father's writing and gardening; her spiritual kinship to him.
2. What she evidently felt to be physical blemishes or peculiarities.
3. Her closeness to nature, especially to Shropshire.
4. Her invalidism.
5. Her belief in Love, second only to her love for nature.
6. Some little doubt as to the actuality, or at least the necessity, of her "poverty".
7. Recognition that did come to her in no insignificant degree while she lived.
8. Her reading: Synge, the Bible, Storm, Hardy
Lady Julian.

THE GOLDEN ARROW

1. The theme:

Mary Webb's first novel, written as it was shortly after her marriage, deals primarily with love. Its title is taken from the original stanza which appears as the only preface to the book. There is a dedication of the page before: "To a noble lover--H. L. W."

We have sought it, we have sought the golden arrow!
 (Bright the sally-willows sway)
 Two and two by paths low and narrow,
 Arm-in-crook along the mountain way.
 Break o' frost and break o' day!
 Some were sobbing through the gloom
 When we found it, when we found the golden arrow--
 Wand of willow in the secret cwm.

M.W.

At first this may seem like rough poetry, but it is really a song written to the tune of "God be with you till we meet again."⁽¹⁾ The "golden arrow" is symbolic of true love; it is fashioned only by two fires--"the red fire of physical passion" and the "white fire of love".** And although a thing of beauty and ennobling, it can be bitter sharp and cause mortal agony.

2. The characters:

The Golden Arrow is primarily the story of Deborah Arden and Stephen Southernwood. Deborah reaches intuitively for love in its entirety, but Stephen has entered "into half his heritage-- the physical glory of man. The other half was so far undreamed of." He brings to Deb first the joy that he "has chosen her from out the world", then the shame that comes because he doesn't

(1) Reid Chappell, *The Shropshire of Mary Webb*, p.94

** Unless otherwise stated, quotations are from the novel under discussion.

"approve of marriage", and even after he does marry her the aching lack that he is not the "lover of her soul". In fact, Stephen has to leave Deb and take a trip to America before he can find the arrow. He is the only character in the book--the only character in all Mrs. Webb's novels, I believe--that develops; all the rest are static. But Stephen does develop, although we see little or nothing of the actual process; he returns from America with the knowledge that

now neither the wilderness nor dark weather, devils, nor the infinite void, mattered to him in the least. His love for Deborah made him impregnable to terror, gave him a grasp of truth deeper than reason. He had found the golden arrow, to his own agony and ennobling.

Deborah herself is not a complex character. She is best described in the following paragraph:

She combed and pinned up her wing-like hair and took out her best frock--an old-fashioned purple delaine sprinkled with small pink poppies--and slipped it over her head. She was transformed from a pleasant girl into an arresting woman. The deep colour threw up into her gray eyes shifting violet lights, gave her transparent skin an ethereal look, burnished her hair. Dark colours were to her what rainy weather is to hills, bringing out the latent magic and vitality. This morning her dress might have been cut from the hills, their colours were so alike. Always dignified in the unselfconscious manner of those who live in the wilds, Deborah was even queenly to-day in her straight, gathered skirt and the bodice crossed on her breast.

She is not a complex character, but she is a very beautiful one. That she looks on life with quiet eyes, that she could become the disintegrated personality that she does only under the burden of Stephen's desertion (no other tragedy could have done it), is due to her spiritual kinship to her father, John Arden.

Mary Webb's own father was the prototype of this warm-hearted, far-seeing man. To me his portrayal is second only to

that of Prue Sarn in Precious Bane. Certainly no other man in these novels is even a distant approach to John Arden. Mary Webb's other masculine characters are either too young to have attained wisdom, too bewildered (like Stephen) to be discerning, or too much confined by idiosyncrasy or doctrine to be sympathetic. One writer says that John Arden "is perhaps too idealized to be thoroughly convincing...."⁽¹⁾, but anyone who knows the real richness of simple, kindly, apparently earth-bound bodies, knows also that they are idealistic. As a matter of fact, the same writer goes on to say:

He is one of the most valuable of her characters.She describes John's religion as 'deep, pantheistic Christianity'. Although he 'travelled into regions where thought stopped', there was something more definite than shadowy mysticism in his creed. Like Mary herself, John Arden centered his belief around the personality of Christ, often symbolized by him as the Flockmaster. He sometimes went to chapel services, but is plainly shown to be present there only in body. When Eli was admonishing the congregation, 'John was lost in contemplation. He was thinking of the radiant mornings on which he had felt--as some felt in Galilee a while ago--a Presence near him, and, as they did, "wist not who it was". He smiled at the transcendent beauty of the hills on those days, the wistful meaning in the cry of the sheep, the quiet messages of the rain.'

One memorable sentence will linger long in the minds of those who value this book and appreciate the character of John Arden. "He had no moral code," Mary says, and then adds her own characteristic corollary: "Those that dwell in the lands of the sun do not need fires."

John's faith is essentially that of a countryman, and if The Golden Arrow did no more than awaken custom-hardened, conventional Christians to a sense of the fresh, pastoral features of the Gospel, it would have achieved no small end. He was a shepherd who loved his animals. At

(1) Hilda Addison, op.cit., p.129

Christmas time he liked most to hear the carol, 'Good Christian men, rejoice,' because even dumb creation is included in this hymn. 'Ox and ass before Him bow.' That delighted John whose 'Christianity was earth, fuller flavoured or as natural or as rich as the Gospel story, if we knew it in its entirety. (1)

The antithesis of John Arden is Eli Huntbatch. We are introduced to him and his daughter Lily in the following passage.

As Deborah came with Eli and Lily along the sward, all the sheep, newly shorn and self-conscious, arranged themselves like a Bible picture, with the three figures as shepherds. The 'cade' lambs, remembering Deborah's punctual feeding, and feeling an aura of protection about her, pressed round.

'Dirty beasts!' said Eli, sweeping them back with his stick. 'Not but what that black 'un will bring a good price come Christmas.'

'Dunna clout 'em, Eli!' came John's voice from the threshold. 'I'd liefer they'd come round me than find the pot of gold under the rainbow. They be my friends, as you know well, and they'm not speechless from emptiness of heart. No, sorrowful and loving they be.'

'Meat, that's what they be,' said Eli.

'Deb!' whispered Lily, 'isn't he an old beast? I hate him more every day, and I wish I could get married--that I do!'

'Oh, Lily!'

'Not that I like sheep myself,' Lily continued, 'soft things! But as for him, he's always growling and grudging and taking on religious all at once.' Her lips trembled. 'I hanna got so much as a bit of ribbon, nor nothing,' she said.

Deborah stooped and gathered a red rose--the only one. 'There! that's nicer than ribbon, and Joe likes red.' she said with a smile.

Lily simpered. 'Where be Joe?' she asked negligently, hiding her wearing anxiety as to whether Joe would be present at tea or not.

Another passage about Eli is more direct.

This was worse than any of their homecomings, for her father had never before had a barn struck, and she had never been quite so daring in her attire. Eli's crafty face, with its downward seams from the mouth and nose, and the two long, yellow teeth over the lower lip, was dark red with passion. His plain living, long prayers,

(1) Addison, op.cit. p. 130

his loud confessions of sin, his harsh treatment of himself and his unquestioning meekness to the God he believed in (a vengeful, taloned replica of himself)--all these things had to be paid for by someone. Lily and the creatures at Bitterley Fields paid--Lily with some justice, for she was quite selfish and very irritating, the creatures with none. A few times in the year, when things had gone wrong, the lust of torture came upon Eli, and the contemplation of a deferred and somewhat problematical torment of the wicked (i.e. the not-Eli) in hell-fire could not slake it. At these times he exhibited all the subtlety of a woman in finding weak points wherein to stick pins--a subtlety inherited by Lily. The ironic remarks of everyday life--the commonplaces of rudeness--gave place to a caustic finesse which burnt like red-hot needles. He was at these times almost an artist, since he was exercising his chief gift; the secondary one of moneymaking was far below in intensity.

It is to Mrs. Webb's credit that she softens him a bit when he has raced his horse, Speedwell, to death and is probably as repentant as his type can be. But when he settles down afterward to doing nothing in order to give the Lord a chance to "deal with" him, we get again the sly laugh at his expense that we got when, after Lily has tried to shoot him, he grumbles: "She could make a darned sight better butter nor what she does, if she could shoot her feyther."

Eli Huntbatch is a person to pity, to despise, to laugh at, and to remember. If John Arden is idealized, Eli is overdrawn; but we must not forget that caricature is a perfectly legitimate kind of emphasis. Many lasting figures of fiction subsist on one or two traits and one or two reiterated phrases: we have only to think of Dicken's Mr. Micawber, Miss Ferrier's Dr. Redgill, or Capt. Marryat's Lt. Oxbelly.

Lily, Eli's daughter and Joe's wife-to-be, has been partially introduced in the two passages I have just quoted. Mrs.

Webb writes "the gospel of the grey-hearted had sunk into Lily's soul, which was meant to be a thing of colour and fragrance, but had been so frozen and stunted that only a poor little empty crevasse remained." Her intelligence is, perhaps, of the lowest kind: she can think, like a cat, only in concrete terms: children mean to her earthen mugs to wash, not motherhood; but even so, a future accouchement is not the discomfort that the present taste of Nancy Corra's abortient is. Naturally sex and love are to her identical, physical manifestations; she is "rapacious for the small-change of sex" and "the slave of sex rather than the handmaid of love." Lily does marry Joe, Deborah's brother, mainly to get away from her father's cruelty.

Joe is a common, but good and worthy, young man. He lacks the mysticism of his father and his sister, or as New England says, "takes after the other side of the house." Joe is like Mrs. Arden, for both are akin to the earth in a comfortable, homely way; Deb and her father are akin to it spiritually. On the other hand, whereas there is in Stephen, Deborah's husband, the eternal male that chafes at any confinement and "being tied down", there is in Joe the male whose horizon is so tangible that concepts like confinement and freedom do not appear upon it. Yet he is at the same time more unselfish, more self-controlled than Stephen. He has flashes of intuition; his masterful, sometimes short-sighted, vision will certainly not fail Lily, however undeserving she may be, as Stephen's groping and bewilderment will fail the more worthy of the two girls.

The only other character of importance is Mrs. Arden, Patty

Arden, tart, out-spoken, brisk, carrying with her "the reassuring influence of the commonplace." She tells Lily not to pick berries "all the while into Eve's basket"; she can go to a fair, punch a cow in the ribs and "announce with bonhomie to the owner: 'She won't be long!'" She is the neighborhood midwife and nurse; as such there is no sentimentalizing over Deborah either as a kept or as a married woman. "What's come to you," she says when first Deb comes home from meeting Stephen, "comes to all; and if it didna you'd fret." Something of her character derived from Gladys Meredith's own mother.

Besides these characters, there are only two which are even sketched: Lucy Thruckton and Nancy Corra. Lucy is fat, sluttish, and inert. Nancy Corra is a disreputable old woman--perhaps intended to be the opposite, on a lower level, of Mrs. Arden. A few other persons figure momentarily: Eli's housekeeper, and a group of men who come to Arden's cottage as bell-ringers on Christmas Eve.

In summary, the characters are notable chiefly for the admirable and enlightening contrasts and gradations that they reveal within their own group.

3. Dramatic Incident:*

With her father, Deborah goes to chapel where Stephen is to preach. She finds that she can not look at him and thinks, "What's come o'er me?"

* I have used "dramatic incident" rather than "plot" in order to avoid any connotative effect upon a reader's mind in the way of suspense or surprise endings of detective and mystery novels. This term does not imply that the incidents of the novel are episodic. Also, v.supra...p.13

Lily has been at chapel too, and on their way home Eli makes her take off the flowers with which she had decked her hat and trample upon them. Then as a punishment for leaving some milk to sour, she is to make it into milk cheese; since there is no cloth for strainers, she is to use her "ondecient bodice" of muslin. But when he cuts off her golden curls to remove "a temptation" and falls asleep over his Bible, she gets his rook-rifle and attempts to shoot him.

Joe arrives just in time to prevent a second shot. Both he and his father have sensed that Eli's rage boded no good for Lil, and he has come to take her back to the Arden cottage under the pretext of her going berrying the next day with Patty and Deb.

While the women are berrying, Stephen comes by and has his lunch with them. Lily tries, as she did before at the chapel, to attract his attention to herself, but he has eyes for none other than the plainer Deborah.

At the end of the day when Eli comes to fetch Lily home, Joe tells him that he is going to ask Lily to marry him. Eli insists that in return for "his dairymaid" Joe shall give him some occasional return in labor, such as handling the sheep and helping in shearing.

Joe starts immediately to prepare a home for his bride, but Lil is terrified at the thought of "this time next year". She even asks Joe if they can't "be just brother and sister", but he replies "all or nought". Mrs. Arden has come into the cottage just in time to catch the significance of their trouble,

and as she crept away unnoticed she says, "Poor Lil--it's bad to be like that, well, well!" But she decides that nothing matters if they only love each other and nods "at immensity as if she knew a thing or two not altogether to its credit."

Joe and Lil are married properly; Stephen and Deborah live together for sometime before they are. On their return from a day at a fair, they find that Mrs. Arden has left a note saying: "Had a call to Black Cwm. Father will wait to bring me back in the morning. Go to Joe's if lonesome." Deborah, since she has already promised Stephen to be his without a ceremony, attempts to hide the note, but he has already seen it. Even so, she cannot send him away, but calls him back from the gate; and later on, when he has gone out to sleep in the shippen, she calls him into the cottage.

That night Stephen comes back to ask Mr. and Mrs. Arden for Deborah. "Only we don't want to be married, because I don't approve of it." And although John sees that Stephen is not yet man enough to "keep a woman safe", there is nothing that he can do but give his consent. He sees Stephen, however, more clearly than Stephen can see himself; for Stephen proves to be inconsiderate of Deborah and selfish in his desires.

Eli, in his role of pseudo-minister, comes to make a call, read the Bible to them, and remonstrate with them for living in sin. Stephen has some humour and some patience, but he finally becomes angry and drives Eli from the house. Eli is furious and, standing up in his carriage, he hurls his Bible straight through the window. Then he lashes poor old Speedwell into a gallop and

continues to flog her all the way home, where she falls down to die.

Eli's daughter has not changed by becoming Mrs. Joe Arden: she still envies Deborah for having won Stephen; when she and Joe go to market, she not only flirts with a dealer but buys a collar for her dress with some of the butter money; and finally she plots to rid herself of Joe's baby by going to old Nancy Corra. She finds the medicine too repulsive to take, but Mrs. Arden visits their cottage just after Joe, driven to self-punishment by Lily's recriminations for the pain she will have to endure, has seared his hand three or four times with a red-hot poker. Nancy's bottle is brought from the cupboard instead of oil for Joe's hand, and Mrs. Arden not only recognizes it but warns Joe. In consequence he makes Lily promise not to lie or try to get rid of the baby again; in return, he says he will buy her a locket and "let her off the other five" children he had hoped to have.

Meanwhile all has not been going too smoothly with Deb and Stephen. He is lustful, but has finally done voluntary penance by sleeping on the floor for a week. The jutting black rock under which they live, called the Devil's Chair, is beginning to wear upon him; he feels that it is threatening, he feels that Deb ties him down, and wishes to get away. Deb is also to have a child; she too goes to see Nancy Corra, not from sordid motives but merely for verification of her surmise.

Lily still keeps her eye upon Stephen, and once approaches him by having him called from the mine where he works, Lostwithin,

out to the hillside to her. He, although disgusted by Lily's advances, needs only this small weight added to his excuses to make him act upon the idea of going to America. Although he plans to break the news of his desertion to Deborah through John, his plans miscarry (through Lucy Thruckton's inertness) and the news comes to her in his note delivered by a small boy.

Since John is not there to support her, she really goes out of her mind, piles the furniture outside the house, and burns the place. She even forces Nancy Corra, who chances by, to help her. The next morning John finds her on his doorstep unconscious, takes her in, and nurses her for weeks. But not long after the child is born--and even this does not awaken Deborah to anything like her old self--Stephen returns. He has been ill, has worked his way home on a tramp steamer, and has learned his lesson.

And John says,

"I'm thinking it's the shippen for you and me tonight, while cut love's mending."

....."Shanna I kindle a bit of fire for 'em, and light the lamp?" asked Patty.

"There's no need, mother. D'you mind the tale of them that found the Golden Arrow, and went with apple-blow scent round 'em, and a mort o' bees, and warmship, and wanted nought of any man? There's no need of fire or can'le for them, my dear, for they'm got their light--the kindly light--and the thorn's white over."

The very fact that lovable, discerning John believes in their ultimate happiness makes it perfectly plausible.

Summary, or evaluation of incidents:

Based upon contrasting characters, the incidents are also well contrasted. The self-inflicted penances of both Steve and Joe show this contrast of incident. Mrs. Webb wisely leaves out the wedding of Joe and Lily. There are, however, small flaws that are somewhat irritating. Why should not Stephen start walking home, even in the middle of the night, instead of stopping to sleep in the shippen? Why should Deborah visit Nancy Corra at all? why does she not go to her mother? And how does it happen that Lily is so fortunate as to get her curls to have them made into a switch? We are told that Eli is almost surprised to see them lying on the floor the morning after their quarrel.⁽¹⁾ Can it be that he would allow them to lie there? I think he would destroy them, venting his rage at sight of them by burning them probably.

There are also several near-coincidences, not noticeable at the first reading perhaps, but which do mar the whole. Mrs. Webb was painting no mural; she was working with a small group of people. She could have written less hurriedly and have come nearer than she did to perfection. Lily's bonnet flies off to reveal that her golden curls have been shorn; Mrs. Arden overhears opportunely both quarrels that Joe and Lily have. Somehow we are inclined to excuse such matters merely because the confines of the group and the setting are as small as they are.

Occasionally too, a poetic or symbolic speech is put in the mouth of a character whom it does not fit. Such an instance is Lucy Thruckton's "He's stuck as many hard words into me while

you was at church as cloves in a Christmas apple." Surely Lucy's mind is not the type to see that relationship--unless, of course, it is a familiar saying in that region.

In the main, despite these flaws, the incidents are the logical outcome of the characters and the position in which they find themselves.

4. Setting and Symbolism:

Mary Webb is never far away from Nature in any of her writing; perhaps she is in this first novel as much as she is in any unless it be Seven for a Secret. The novel is set, of course, in the author's native Shropshire. The Devil's Chair, which is not only a part of the setting but is also symbolic of Stephen's unrest and the impending tragedy, is an actual feature of the vicinity.

Behind the Longmynd Hills, through the wild country on the Welsh frontier, stretches the range called the Stipperstones (1800 ft.), so named from the curious rocks on its highest ridges. 'There is not perhaps a more singular feature in the physical geography of England than the Stipperstones. These rocks are made up of a number of broken and serrated ledges, jutting out to form the summits of the hills which flank the volcanized mining district of Shelve, at heights varying from 1500 to 1600 feet above the sea. They stand out on the crest of the hill like ragged cyclopean ruins, some of which are 50 or 60 feet high, and from 120 to 130 feet in width. The slopes of the elevated moorlands from which they protrude are covered with coarse detritus of the same rock.'

The highest rock is known as 'The Devil's Chair'. It is so-called because when the Devil was coming from Ireland with an apron full of stones to fill up Hell Gutter (Shropshire for ravine) at the side of the hill, he sat down to rest, and as he got up, his apron-string broke and all his stones fell down, and there they are to this

day, strewn around the Devil's Chair. Another story about the chair narrates that of all countries the Devil hates Protestant England most. Now if Stipperstones sinks into the earth, England will perish; so, whenever the Devil has nothing to do, he comes and flounces down in his chair, in the hope that his weight will sink the Stipperstones. (1)

This is doubtless a good description and a good story if one can imagine the Devil "flouncing".

Lostwithin Spar Mine is also an actual place in the Shropshire hills. Pictures of both this and the Devil's Chair are to be found in W. Reid Chappell's The Shropshire of Mary Webb.

There is not a great deal of description in this novel; the great descriptive powers are here in embryo but they are undeveloped. There is great feeling for the countryside, but sometimes the technical presentation of it is definitely poor. The following passage shows a simile in nearly every sentence, and a packing-in of images that is over-done. It comes between two better passages, which I purposely omit. The effect of this in the middle, however, tends to make the reader doubt the whole.

It* stretched away, broken by sudden mountainous masses, like a stormy green sea, where the ridges were breakers and the woods black froth. In the centre of the semicircular horizon, blue with distance, fronting the Devil's Chair like the throne of a rival potentate, was Cader Idris; on either side lay mountains like cones, like clenched fists, like recumbent goddesses and crouching beasts. Above was a grey and white welter of shredded cloud, massed here and there like fleeces of giant sheep, but mostly strewn like dove-coloured and lavender feathers till the sky looked like the eyrie of a bird of prey. (2)

If all these little flaws may come under the head of "craftmanship", the following is a good summary of the novel:

(1) Augustus J. C. Hare: Shropshire, pp.93-94

(2) The Golden Arrow, p.178

* --The scene, a somewhat remote reference.

Except in the matter of craftsmanship, which is perfected only with experience, Mary Webb did but one better thing in her career as novelist than The Golden Arrow, this tragedy of lovers who sought that emblem of true love, and after they found it, 'clung to it fast though it met wound them sore. And nought will part 'em, neither in the flower of life nor in the brown winrow. (1)

(1) Moulton, op.cit., p.132

GONE TO EARTH

1. Theme:

In The Golden Arrow Mrs. Webb had told a love story with a happy ending without being conventional; in her second novel, Gone to Earth, she dealt with a triangle situation and stark tragedy. When such books are thus reduced to their lowest common denominator along with many novels of the month and movies of the week, one can see how far above mere triteness Mary Webb's work is. Suffice it to say here that while reading the novel, one does not think of the "triangle" as trite; and that the theme, a philosophical idea, or an attitude toward life, is what makes a large part of this difference.

The theme of Gone to Earth is that vicarious suffering and suffering inflicted for sport or pleasure is unnecessary and uncivilized.

For civilization as it now stands is based solely on this one thing--vicarious suffering. From the central doctrine of its chief creed to the system of its trade; from the vivisection-table to the consumptive genius dying so that crowds of fat folk may get his soul in a cheap form, it is all built up on sacrifice of other creatures.

2. Characters:

The character about whom the whole story centers is Hazel Woodus. She appears on practically every page of the novel, and thus it is her story; but it is well to remember that it is not simply her story because she is there as an embodiment of deeper things than mere personality. She had "made a compact with all weak things"; her religion is a gentle kind of Druidism, partly

derived from her gypsy mother, long since dead. Foxy, her pet fox cub, is more like her than any human.

Hazel had her mother's eyes, strange, fawn-coloured eyes like water, and in the large clear irises were tawny flecks. In their shy honesty they were akin to the little fox's. Her hair, too, of a richer colour than her father's, was tawny and foxlike, and her ways were graceful and covert as a wild creature's.

....The fox, wistfulness in her expression and the consciousness of coming supper in her mind, gazed obediently where her mistress gazed, and was touched with the same fierce beauty. They stood there fronting the crimson pools over the far hills, two small sentient things facing destiny with pathetic courage; they had, in the chill evening on the lonely hill, a look as of those predestined to grief, almost an air of martyrdom.

A little farther on we read:

....Hounds symbolized everything she hated, everything that was not young, wild, and happy. She identified herself with Foxy, and so with all things hunted and shared and destroyed.

....In her schooldays boys brought maimed frogs and threw them in her lap, to watch, from a safe distance, her almost crazy grief and rage.

Hazel is "as sexless as a leaf"; and although she becomes Edward's wife and Jack Reddin's mistress, she is a wild childlike creature, unawakened until, possibly, the very end of the book. She believes implicitly in certain charms bequeathed to her by her mother, and certain legends--notably one of the Black Huntsman who rode with a death pack of phantom hounds.

Reddin, one of the corners of the triangular situation, embodies this hound-and-huntsman idea in a vague way that Mrs. Webb is too wise to more than suggest, for if she did more, the whole elaborate symbolism would fall, for Hazel is attracted by Reddin, doubtless in the same fashion that some fox-hunters tell us that the fox "likes the chase" with a yarn about a wise old

fox sitting on a stonewall laughing at the foolish hounds.

Reddin of Undern cared as little for the graciousness of life as he did for its pitiful rhapsodies, its purple-mantled tragedies. He had not time for such trivialities. Fox-hunting, horse-breeding, and kennel lore were his vocation. He rode straight, lived hard, exercised such creative faculties as he had on his work, and found it very good.

Another passage reveals his relation to Hazel:

But when she lay down she could not keep her mind clear of Reddin; during each meeting with him she had been more perturbed. His personality dragged at hers. Already he was stronger than her fugitive impulses, her wilding reserve. He was like a hand tearing open a triplet of sorrel leaves folded for rain, so strong in their impulse for self-protection that they could only be conquered by destruction. She was afraid of him, yet days without him were saltless food. There was a ruthlessness about him--the male instinct unaccompanied by humility, the patrician instinct unaccompanied by sympathy, the sportsman's instinct unaccompanied by pity. Whatever he began he would finish. What had he begun now?

Edward Marston, the young minister whom Hazel married, is the antithesis of Reddin. Awakened by Hazel's beauty and elvish grace, he believes that he sees the real Hazel--the spiritual Hazel. He resolves to put aside all his desires of the flesh, mistrusting them as one who "had always been naturally religious,

taking on trust what he was taught; and he had an instinctive pleasure in clean and healthy things.

And then the stern hour of crisis rode him down, and a great voice cried, not with the cunning that he would have expected of a tempter, but with the majesty of morning on the heights:

"Take her. She is yours."

He knew that it was true. Who would gainsay him? She was his. In a few hours she would be his wife, in his own house, given him by every law of creed and race. In fact, by not pleasing himself he would be outraging creed and race.....He was an ordinary man, loving ordinary things. Neither was he effeminate or a celibate by instinct, though he had not Reddin's fury of masculinity. Sex would never have awakened in him but at the touch of spiritual love. But that touch had come; it had awakened;

it threatened to master him.

....What stood between him and his desire was Hazel's helplessness, her personality, like a delicate glass that he would break if he stirred. What were the race and public opinion to him compared with her spirit?---- All that mattered was himself and Hazel; his passion, Hazel's freedom; his longing for husbandhood and fatherhood, her elvish incapacity for wifehood and motherhood. He suddenly detested himself for the rosy pictures he had seen. He was utterly abased at the knowledge that he had really meant at one moment to enforce his rights. ...The selfish use of strength always seemed to him a most despicable thing.

Hazel, Jack Reddin, and Edward are the only major actors in the tragedy; but Edward's mother and Reddin's servant, Andrew Vessons are interesting and adequate as secondary characters. Both are somewhat caricatured, but in the structural symbolism of the story, Vessons is the more important of the two. He is the personification of celibacy: it is his one belief and his religion. In other respects, too, he is a negation, with his inverted sentences "Never will I" and "Never shall he."

When Reddin called him, he rarely answered, and only deigned to go to him when he felt sure that his order was going to be reasonable.

Everything he said was non-committal, every movement was expostulatory. Reddin never noticed. Vessons suited his needs, and he always had such meals as he liked. Vessons was a bachelor. Monasticism had found, in a countryside teeming with sex, one silent but rabid disciple. If Vessons ever felt the irony of his own presence in a breeding stable, he never said so.

But to Undern itself he was not indifferent. Ties deep as the tangled roots of the bindweed, strong as the great hawsers of the beeches that reached below the mud of Undern Pool, held him to it, the bondsman of a beauty he could not understand, a terror he could not express. When he trudged the muddy paths, "setting taters" or earthing up; when he scythed the lawn, looking, with a rose in his hat, weirder and more ridiculous than ever; and when he shook the apples down with a kind of sour humour, as if to say, "There! that's what you trees get by having apples!"-- at all these times he seemed less an individual than a blind force. For though his personality was strong, that of the place was stronger.

Mrs. Marston is a surprisingly placid and unstereotyped mother-in-law; her placidity is in direct contrast to Hazel's wildness.

It was restful to sit and look at her kind old face, soft and round beneath her lace cap, steeped in a peace deeper than lethargy. She was one of nature's opiates, and she administered herself unconsciously to everyone who saw much of her. Edward's father, having had an overdose, had not survived. Mrs. Marston always spoke of him as "my poor husband who fell asleep," as if he had dozed in a sermon. Sleep was her fetish, panacea, and art. Her strongest condemnation was to call a person a "stirring body". She sat to-day, while preparations raged in the kitchen, placidly knitting. She always knitted--socks for Edward and shawls for herself. She had made so many shawls, and she so felt the cold, that she wore them in layers--pink, grey, white, heather mixture, and a purple cross-over.

Whichever shawl was uppermost was an index to her well-hidden feelings of the moment. Hazel sums her up deliciously the first time she ever sees her--in the chapel at a concert.

"Dunna they look funny!" said Hazel with a giggle. "All sleepy and quiet, like smoked bees. Is that the Minister? Him by the old sleepy lady--she's had more smoke than most!"

Instead of fighting Edward's marriage to Hazel or even considering whether it is likely to succeed as a marriage or not, she believes that

Hazel would be absorbed into the Marston family like a new piece of furniture. She would be provided for without being consulted; it would be seen to that she did her duty, also without being consulted. She would become, as all the other women in this and the other families of the world had, the servant of the china and the electroplate and the furniture, and she would be the means by which Edward's children came into the world. She would, when not incapacitated, fetch shawls. At all times she would say "Yes, dear" or "As you wish, Edward." With all this before her, what did she want with personality and points of view? Obviously nothing. If she brought all the grandchildren safely into the world, with their due complement of legs and arms and noses, she would be a satisfactory asset. But

Mrs. Marston forgot, in this summing up, to find out whether Hazel cared for Edward more than she cared for freedom.

And as much as Vessons' religion is celibacy, so much is Mrs. Marston's quietness.

"Quietness is the secret of good manners. The quieter you are, the more of a lady you'll be thought. All truly good people are quiet in manners, dress, and speech, just as all the best horses are advertised as quiet to ride and drive, but few are really so."

"Hav you got to be ever and ever so quiet to be a lady?"

"Yes."

"What for have you?"

"Because, dear, it is the proper thing. Now my poor husband was quiet, so quiet that you never knew if he was there or not. And Edward is quiet, too--as quiet as--"

"Oh! dunna, dunna!" wailed Hazel.

"Is a pin sticking into you, dear?"

"No. Dunna say Ed'ard's quiet!"

Mrs. Marston looked amicably over her spectacles.

"My dear, why not?" she asked.

"I dunna like that sort."

"Could you explain a little, dear?"

"I dunna like quiet men--nor quiet horses. My mam was quiet when she was dead. Everybody's quiet when they're dead."

"Very, very quiet," crooned Mrs. Marston. "Yes, we all fall asleep in our turn."

"I like," went on Hazel in her rather crude voice, harsh with youth like a young blackbird's--"I like things as go quick and men as talk loud and stare hard and drive like the devil!"

This last passage reveals Mrs. Marston, but not her alone; it also reveals Hazel. There are her simple, inane questions; there is her acknowledgement that she likes the "men as talk loud and stare hard and drive like the devil", but she goes on to buy her wedding dress and begin life with Edward. She is, in fact, the only one of Mrs. Webb's heroines that can in no way be considered very sensible.

Abel Woodus, Hazel's father, is not important to the story except in so far as he is a father whom the girl is glad to leave.

He makes his living as a bee-man and coffin-maker and harpist. He can not understand Hazel's mysticism "for the art in him was not that warm suffering thing, creation, but hard, brightly polished talent."

Sally Haggard, Reddin's former mistress and the mother of his several children, is not a complete portrait by any means; neither are the two Misses Clomber of Reddin's own yeoman class, each of whom would like to go to Undern as his wife. Martha, Mrs. Marston's servant, is a bit more fully drawn but unimportant. The only other characters who are not out and out supernumeraries are Mrs. Prowde and her son Albert, Hazel's aunt and cousin. There also appear people at the fair, in church, at the fox-hunt.

Summary: In Gone to Earth, Mary Webb has concentrated her attention primarily upon Hazel and her relation and reaction to each of the two men. She has, however, used sufficient characters to give verisimilitude to the whole story and to offer again good contrasts to the main characters. If anything were to be questioned it would probably be as to whether Hazel would be as naive as she is painted, or whether Mrs. Marston would persist in her slowness to give important news to Edward.

2. Dramatic Incident:

When Hazel Woodus went to Silverton to get a new dress, her Aunt Prowde did not allow her to stay the night because Cousin Albert showed himself altogether too much interested and

attracted. Hazel started out on the long road home, but was given a lift by Jack Reddin, yeoman, and stayed the night at his home, Undern.

Her father didn't mistrust that she had stayed anywhere but at Silverton, and in discussing Albert, he was pleased to inveigle her into taking an oath to marry the first man that asks her. Meanwhile Reddin is looking all over the countryside for her, because she had left before he was up in the morning, after sleeping all night locked in Vessons' room to avoid Jack's attentions.

At a concert, Edward Marston, the new minister was attracted to her. Having been told by her of her oath, he determined to be the first one ask her to marry. She was bound to accept, and soon made another trip to Silverton with Mrs. Marston to buy wedding clothes.

The next day she and Edward attended the fair, and there Reddin, riding in a race saw her at the side of the track and threw the race in order to speak with her and make sure he had found her at last. When Edward went home early, she stayed to dance with Reddin. Soon after, her wedding to Edward was celebrated, but Reddin did not stop pursuing her. He gave over all else, seemingly, but standing about near the minister's house waiting to catch her alone.

After meeting her several times in the woods, he finally met her one Sunday afternoon in Hunter's Spinney, (a meeting to which she had come only after working successfully three of her mother's charms), and there took what Edward had forced himself

to forbear taking. After seducing her, and weeping afterward, he set her in the saddle and took her to Undern where she stayed for some time, not abjectly unhappy certainly. While she is there, however, there are three incidents that are important in view of the theme. Just as she had been freeing from a snare a little rabbit when Reddin first found her on the road from Silverton, while she was at Undern she first protected a hedgehog that Jack had brought home to see the dogs kill, then tried to prolong the lives of some bees that otherwise might be chilled to death, and has to endure a terrible day when Vessons shoots nearly every bird on the place. She also put to rout the two Misses Clomber when they called, first by directing the hedgehog under the skirts of one and then by calmly informing them that she doesn't leave because "He wanna let me."

Vessons decided to tell the Marstons where Hazel was, and Edward went to Undern to get her. Although Jack and Edward had a fight in which Edward was worsted, he did thereby win Hazel's sympathy as the underdog, and Bessons drove the two of them back to God's Little Mountain. But there Hazel could not endure the slurs and meanness of Mrs. Marston and Martha, and eventually returned of her own accord to Undern. Vessons determined to play a trump card by getting Sally Haggard to call with her children, and Sally was the one first to reveal to Hazel that she too was to become a mother. After vainly trying to save the rabbits that the Undern reaper is driving out of the small square of grain in the center of the field to be killed by the men, she fled again to Edward.

Upon this second return, both Mrs. Marston and Martha leave the young couple to their own "evil" devices. It seems almost as if the pitiful couple may find some happiness together when the next morning the parish committee call upon Edward. He told them that he was determined to keep Hazel and to protect her and that he was equally determined to give up the church. While they were there, Hazel's pet of pets, Foxy, left the house and her scent was picked up by the pack of hounds behind which the Clombers, Reddin, and others are that day hunting. In her supreme effort to save the little fox, and blind to the aid that both Edward and Reddin try to give her, she goes over the edge of the quarry. Mrs. Webb does not tell us whether it was Reddin or Edward who "with the voice of a soul driven mad by torture" cries

Gone to earth! Gone to earth!

Summary: Although to a degree the characters of both Edward and Hazel are hard to understand, it is again in her invention of completely logical incidents that Mrs. Webb's greatest weakness appears. Is not Edward pictured as almost too fine and honest to ask Hazel to marry him when he knows she is oath-bound to accept? Is not Hazel too naive in telling him of the oath? Where is the country girl's usual shyness? Where is Hazel living from the time of the trip with Mrs. Marston until her marriage? Here the sequence of placing her is not clear. Evidently in an effort to keep the story within as small a time limit as possible, Mrs. Webb has forgotten the place element of the story. Would

Foxy really have entered a church full of people even at the heels of her mistress? Would three charms work in succession? More to the point, were three charms necessary to the story? One of these charms required Hazel to hear the music of a harp at midnight (her father on the way home from an engagement); the second, to see a flaming specter (a phosphorescent tree suffices); the third, to find a blue petal on her out-spread smock (a petal loosened unwittingly by her own hand).

One of her biographers has this to say about certain discrepancies in her attempt

to paraphrase the customs of the Established Church against what she conceived to be a Non-conformist background.

It would be a rare sight indeed to discover a dissenting village congregation on its knees! This external knowledge also leads her astray when she makes Mrs. Marston in Gone to Earth "look up, like fowls after a drink" when the "Amens" occur, and realize when another is due. Evidently Mary was not over-familiar with the long extempore prayers of chapel services. The Nunc Dimittis with which Edward takes leave of his deacons is also rather unprecedented! Then, too, he possesses a little black bag in which he takes the Lord's Supper to his people. This again is not in line with Nonconformity, especially on the Welsh borders. (1)

We find too that Mrs. Webb, not being able to express certain generalities through the mouths of any of these characters (for Hazel is not on an intellectual level with the other heroines) breaks in to give the author's observations upon art, and the world. (2) The tone of the novel is in these passages disgruntled, as her treatment of the church and religion is ironic. We must conclude that the theme and the climax of the novel are wonderfully beyond the details that make up the story. The story does, however, seem to know where it is going; and in this re-

(1) Hilda Addison, op.cit., pp.174-5

(2) Gone to Earth, pp.191, 59, 162-3.

spect it is like only Precious Bane of the five novels. In its large elements, in its entirety, the novel is one never to be forgotten; in its details it is exasperating. Thus we may consider the conception of the novel as a stroke of genius, but it needed to be licked into shape as the she-bear does its cub, as Gellius said of Vergil.

THE HOUSE IN DORMER FOREST

1. Theme:

For the more a soul conforms to the sanity of others, the more does it become insane. By continually doing violence to its own laws, it finally loses the power of governing itself.

* * * *

'You're not angry with me because I don't believe in God,' he said, 'but because I'm different from you.'

* * * *

'Obedience is a vice,' shapped Jasper. 'It is a pet vice of stunted personalities who can't act for themselves, having no ideas, and who claim merit for copying the ideas and actions of others.'

These three quotations from The House in Dormer Forest reveal its theme as a glorification of the individual rather than the herd. Whereas the themes of The Golden Arrow and Gone to Earth are easily and generally accepted, it will probably be a long time before any such theory is generally acknowledged as it is stated in this book. In the novel itself, however, its application is made only to religion; in that field, those who believe that a man's religion, or lack of it, is his own affair may take refuge. Many people will resent and will discard as foolish the sweeping statements made in the first and third quotations. (1)

(1) Dr. Joseph Collins, Taking the Literary Pulse, Chapter 12

Mrs. Webb evidently intended the theme to be accepted as true and set out as best she could to prove it. Her attitude toward the characters plainly puts those who hold the view expressed in the theme as the protagonists.

2. Characters:

Amber Darke is already familiar to us as Deborah Arden; they have much the same personality, Deborah being perhaps the more pretty, Amber the more far-seeing.

Amber.....was in no way a success according to Dormer standards. Her manner, when she was at ease, had charm, but it was spoilt by shyness. Her hair was of an indeterminate brown, and her complexion was ruined by ill-health, due to the perpetual chafing of the wistful mind longing for things not in Dormer.

She herself would have been willing to assent to any dogma for the sake of one she loved, for she felt that to sacrifice the human being who was dear to her for a creed, an idea, would be criminal.

She becomes beautiful only when her face is alight with spiritual beauty; she was "something of a mystic, though not exactly a religious mystic, nor that wilder, sadder creature, an earth-mystic." She is almost the only person in Dormer who has any humour left; if the others have any, it is unconscious.

The person about whom the struggle of the theme is centered is one of Amber's brothers, Jasper. The second and third quotations on page 41 of this thesis are spoken by him. Further than that, and his love for Catherine Velindre, he is not clearly delineated. Amber's silent sympathy for him is more important than his creed or his character.

But this Catherine, unworthy of Jasper's love, is the embodiment of tradition, obedience, and the herd instinct. The others in the book who persecute Jasper are the elders of the Darke family. She is a distant relative who lives at Dormer as a paying guest; she is beautiful, "religious", and wicked.

By one of the ironies of things, Catherine's religious words and looks were acceptable, not because they were real, but because she looked and spoke with the eyes and lips of a courtesan. Not that Catherine was anything but innocent and ignorant; she was virginal to the point of exasperation; but there was something cold in the allure of her eyes, something knife-like in her smile, that recalled the loveless sisterhood.

Not only is she definitely sarcastic, but she stores up stray bits of information for use as ammunition. She is the only one of Mrs. Webb's women who is hateful and vicious; she has qualities in common with old Eli Huntbatch, but she is not, as he is, sometimes laughable. When Ruby, Amber's sister, speaks of wearing white satin and a veil for her bridal dress,

"Is white satin suitable to a country girl?" asked Catherine non-committally. She had a way of managing people through these vague questions. "Why not muslin?" she added.

Ruby herself is a "tall, plump, pretty girl of eighteen" who sees in her wedding only "things like dresses and rings."

Then they would drive away, and she would have 'done well for herself.' She would be a success according to Dormer ideas. It did not occur to her that this conception of marriage was like an elaborate box with nothing in it.

Peter is the fourth child in the Darke family. He is described negatively at some length in the following passage, but he is never clearly characterized as a vital personage of the story. As Ruby is driven into her marriage "because they all

want it", so Peter is driven into a marriage because none of them want it.

Peter looked older than his years. His rather hawk-like and fierce face had lost its round boyishness, and his quick, imperious dark eyes were those of the born adventurer. Brought up in an atmosphere of things outworn, sent to a school where the same atmosphere brooded, he could find no outlet. He was possessed of the same passion as his mother for impressing his personality on something or somebody, only his mind was not yet warped.Peter would have made a martyr for any cause that had enough life in it. He was full of the defiant 'I will,' which, in unity with 'I love,' moves mountains.

Michael Hallowes is hardly to be distinguished from the Kester Woodseaves that Mary Webb was to create in Precious Bane. The elements are all here in The House in Dormer Forest, but I dare say that we would not recognize them as quite as beautiful as they are unless we knew Kester also.

Michael brooded on the leafy layers below them, on the glow-worm lights which were all of the world that he could see. While she groped intuitively, he saw the situation starkly and clearly. The temptation to let this moment pass, to let the crisis remain unspoken, to let their lives go on with the important things tacit, unexpressed, took hold of him fiercely. But he had never treated life in this way. He took a little medallion out of his pocket, and striking a match on his boot, held it before her.

'That?' he asked.

'Yes, Michael.'

'In poverty and discomfort? In crude places beyond the sea? In the squalour of big cities?'

'You make it all very hard, Michael.'

'Life is hard.'

'Well, then, yes!'

'Risking death?'

'Michael, Michael! Let us be happy to-night! Let me!'

She was crying.

'Risking death?' His voice was harsh. 'Do you think I shall let you say "Yes, yes!" in your eager way, without first making you realize?'

'There are some things in life that cannot be bought except at that risk, Michael. They are worth it.'

Her voice sank in the purple silence. The little medal-

lion of the Madonna and Child slipped from her lap.

'Don't think I care about it at all, Amber.'

'No?'

'I'd just as soon--not.'

'What a dreadful lie, Michael!'

He looked up with the shyly guilty air of a small delinquent. She loved that look.

'And so brazen!' she added, stroking his hair. Michael knelt on the moss with his arms about her. He was silent, but the forest, with a deep and solemn murmur, spoke, his heart.

The girl whom Peter marries is Marigold Gosling, a maid at Dormer, pink, and white, and golden. She is a mere pawn in the story.

Ruby's husband is Ernest Swyndle, a hypocritical clergyman with a "bedside manner".

Punctually almost to a moment, Ernest came pedalling up the drive. As he entered he said: 'Peace be to this house,' and raised his right hand. He was tall and stout. 'A mountain of a man,' according to Sarah. He was florid in complexion.

'Yes, his eyes are crafty,' thought Amber, peering over the banisters. His hair was very fair, and his head dome-shaped. The sparseness and paleness of his hair helped on the oviform effect. Peter and Jasper had been known, in their youth, to rush kitchenwards at Ernest's arrival, shouting, 'An egg-cup!' This joke was greatly appreciated by Sarah, who always flung her apron over her head, placed one hand on her heart and one on her diaphragm, and rocked in an agony of laughter.

Ernest rather waived the clerical in his dress. It was a discreet blend of the ecclesiastical and the sporting. On the expanse of his waistcoat shone a Maltese cross, inscribed with the cryptic remark: 'All in One.' Why he wore this, what it meant, who first thought of it, were mysteries. Probably the phrase pleased him because of its crowdedness. He was, as he often said, 'Gregarious, friend, gregarious!'

The Sarah mentioned is the family housekeeper. She is an in-teresting personage, but not an easily acceptable one when assembled. Mrs. Webb has seen fit to heap her with so many idiosyncrasies and peculiar doings that she is like nothing hu-

man. She does not, moreover, figure intrinsically in any important part of the action. She pursues Enoch, the hired man, and calls him 'her intended'; her one avocation is the decoration with glue and broken bits of china of various objets d'art; this china she obtains by smashing the treasures of those who offend her; and her religion seems to be bounded by lugubrious meditation of her "one picture--the photograph of the grave of

a little girl (unknown to Sarah) who had distinguished herself by dying from the effects of pushing a bead into her ear. 'Ah! poor thing! It was to be. 'Im above was 'ware of that bead afore ever it was blowed. Some met think it was for this. Some met think it was for that. But 'E knowed as it was for Jemima Onions' ear and a summons to glory!'

Smile at this and at Sarah we may, but we never accept her and we are bored by her.

Enoch Gale is akin to Jasper, Amber, and Jasper's friend Michael Hallows. He is what Mary Webb would call an "earth-mystic"; he is not religious in the common sense of the word and avoids family prayers as Jasper does.

Anyone who cared to study Enoch came upon a mystery, discovering a being so near the animal world that he could easily interpret the vague half-thoughts of a sheep or a cow, yet so far advanced along the road of psychic development that most of the other inhabitants of Dormer were pigmies compared with him. None of them, except Jasper and perhaps Amber, were conscious of their own souls; they were still asleep, and in their sleep they mouthed the old righteousness of their forefathers. Enoch was awake. Though he had not been roused by the sharp, clear trumpet of intellect, he had heard in the twilight of semi-consciousness the drowsy bell of intuition.

The older generations at Dormer are not lovable, but they are as interesting as Sarah and are drawn with more restraint. Solomon Darke is a silent man, "considered a good Churchman, and

a good business man." When he says "God's God", he expresses not only his religion but his whole character; he would not dream of considering his statement either indefinite or dubious.

The young people's mother is as stern and as definite as their father.

Mrs. Darke went in and out like a stranger, leaving no impress on anything in the house, for the desire for artistic self-expression comes of healthy individualism and not from the disease of egotism, which is stunted development. Mrs. Darke was quite unindividual. She was a part of her class and creed, just as a bit of meteorological stone is part of a sun or a star. But it will never be a world unless it has movement. Nor would Mrs. Darke ever be an individual, because she had no living impulses. Her longing to be bowed down to, her greed of power, were also the results of this lack of growth.The outer form was all in all to her. She was one of those for whom ceremonial is made. She had always done her duty by her husband and children.

Mrs. Darke's mother is the best portrait in the whole novel until her unreasoned actions at the end of the book when she sets fire to the house.

She was grotesquely like her daughter. She had the same close-set black eyes, long pale face and lined forehead; but her eyes had no expression. If one penetrated them, there seemed to be something stealthily in wait behind them.There was a ghost hiding in Mrs. Velindre's eyes--a cadaverous, grisly thing which had looked at her out of other people's eyes when she was a child; slowly possessing her in womanhood; finally absorbing her whole personality--eating into it like a worm into a rotten fruit.As a young woman she had known generous instincts, but now, at eighty, she could have refused without a qualm the request of a dying man, if he disagreed with her religious views.

'You're not so deaf as you sometimes seem, grandmamma,' said Catherine.

'Heh?'

'You're not deaf, mamma!' said Mrs. Darke coldly.

'At least, you're only deaf when you wish it.'

'The wind bloweth where it listeth!' quoted Mrs. Velindre airily. She had a gift for apparently pointless quotations

which, by their very inappositeness, quelled her adversary, and were usually found, on examination, to have a sardonic fitness.

At the first of the book she is always echoing what other people say; at the end, Mrs. Webb has either forgotten this amusing trait or has not time for it.

'Don't say "Howd yer!" like any old waggoner, Solomon!' Mrs. Darke spoke with exasperation.

'Waggoner, Solomon!' echoed a less irritated, thinner, more tiresome voice, that of Mrs. Darke's mother, Mrs. Velindre.

Filling in momentarily are the usual quota of a novelist's momnets. There are Philip Arkinstall, who finally wins Catherine, and his sister Anne, their father; there is Marigold's mother, Mrs. Gosling, who sees mainly either "a beautiful corpse in the coffin" or "a grand bird on the table, mum." Then there is the rector, and his cousin, Mrs. Cantlop; and Mr. Cantlop.

Summary:

The characters are drawn with the pen of caricature with which we are by now familiar, but in this novel for the first time the sketching is overdone. The characters that Mrs. Webb does not deck out with a special trait or two are mainly Amber, Jasper, Michael, and Catherine; and of these Jasper is none too clear. Catherine and Ernest are as clear as any of the actors, partially because Amber is becoming identified with a type of heroine that Mrs. Webb has used in each previous novel. Michael is the first fine, all-understanding man that she portrayed; he was to be followed by Robert Rideout in Seven for a Secret, and more importantly, by Kester Woodseaves in Precious Bane. On the

whole, and apart from the difficulty inherent in her theme, the author might have been more successful had she not tried to characterize so many persons. We sense this when we are introduced to the family at supper, and meet seven individuals on the first page of the second chapter with more to follow in rapid succession.

3. Dramatic Incident:

Jasper Darke was returning from college under the pall of expulsion for blasphemous utterance. The whole Darke family was unsympathetic with the exception of his sister Amber, although Jasper did not sense this and expected to obtain sympathy from beautiful but flinty Catherine. That night Amber took a lunch to his room for him because no one else troubles even to feed him.

In the morning after he had absented himself from family prayers, his father told him that he must start training for a land agent if he expects to live at Dormer. Ernest Swyndle, a distant relative who has taken the curacy in the neighborhood, arrived that same day; and his reception was far different from that accorded to Jasper the night before.

Ernest almost immediately proposed to Ruby and was accepted. At their wedding reception Peter, Jasper's brother, danced in the butler's pantry with Marigold, the pretty servant girl. Catherine was spying and told Grandma Velindre "Cheesecakes in the pantry" so that the old lady would discover the dancers. Catherine also saw Ruby escape that night from the bridegroom

and the bridal chamber, and saw her led back by Mrs. Darke on one side and Ernest on the other.

None of the women believed Marigold, and none of the men believed Peter when they denied any "sin". Peter decided for the game as well as the name and invited Marigold on her last night at Dormer to the Grotto to spend the night. Enoch Gale, the hired man, in love with his cousin Marigold, watched them; but he did not interfere for fear he would kill Peter in his rage. He insisted later upon a marriage between Peter and Marigold.

Soon after Marigold left Dormer, Amber and Catherine, on a walk found a little Jersey cow called "Hetty" gored by some other cattle. Catherine refused to hurry to fetch aid and was nearly an hour in bringing Philip Arkinstall and Jasper to put the beast out of her misery. Although Amber held this up to Jasper as an example of Catherine's calloused nature, he can see no wrong in the latter's beauty.

A short while afterward, Amber met Michael Hallowes, a friend of Jasper's who held much the same beliefs that Amber and Jasper did. She immediately fell in love with him; he with her; Catherine also fell in love with him; and Jasper senses it and is jealous. Catherine, to prevent Amber's seeing Michael and secure in the knowledge that Amber would not dare to visit him unless accompanied by Jasper, wrung from Jasper a promise that he would not go to Michael's. But when Michael sent a note to Amber, all Catherine's intriguing was put at nought.

Peter meanwhile has secretly married Marigold and has visited her frequently; finally a letter came addressed to Peter.

Enoch got it from the post office; Sarah recognized the writing as Marigold's and opened it. The letter tells of the birth of Marigold's child. Catherine came by opportunely, and told the grandmother something which would take her to the kitchen to find it. Taken before a family council, Peter determined to dare all and live with Marigold.

When Amber has gone into the woods to meet Michael, Catherine waited to intercept him and win him. She had stopped in front of the Grotto; and Jasper, who was in there asleep, overheard her trying to make Michael forget Amber. In his rage and grief at losing her love, and seeing her make advances to his friend, he jumped into the stream.

Philip Arkinstall came out from behind a tree just in time to compromise Catherine in the eyes of Sarah. That night late, Amber accused Catherine of being the cause of Jasper's suicide, but was told by her that Jasper had been pushed into the stream by Michael. She further told her that Ernest will corroborate her story. But Amber had the courage and the faith to refuse to believe these lies, and left Dormer the next morning to go to Michael.

The Darke family did not miss her but started preparing for the funeral and dragging the stream for Jasper's body. When Michael and Amber came back to Dormer together, arm in arm, Catherine immediately spit out the words, "He pushed Jasper in!" And she had just asked Ernest to corroborate her (having previously threatened to tell what she had seen on his wedding night) when Jasper himself appeared at the window. Catherine avoided a bad

situation by fainting, and we are left to guess what Ernest might have said.

The long absent Mr. Cantlop had by this time returned, poor as ever, although he was supposed to be after gold in California. When Amber and Michael were married he presented the bride with a bag of stones for a necklace. The rector immediately recognized the stones as diamonds of fabulous wealth; Cantlop had a whole bag more, and with the proceeds he was well able to send Peter and Marigold to America, to return Jasper to his studies, and to lend Michael and Amber enough money to establish their home.

That night old Mrs. Velindre for some unknown reason decided that she was crowded by the many things in her room and set fire to the house in Dormer Forest. This was her last act, for when Mrs. Darke started shaking her and telling her she'd "lock her up", she found her to be dead.

Summary:

Actions and people are so closely allied that it almost goes without saying that if the characters of a book do not seem real, the events do not either. Frankly, and it seems to me obviously, Mrs. Webb had attempted too many characters, too difficult a theme; and the events ran away with her. Her problem should have been to let the situation and the characters work out toward an end shaped into satisfactory form without the obviously extraneous character of Mr. Cantlop. From the ending, one might almost suppose that she had taken as her theme "Money overcomes all

difficulties"--a sentiment with which we know her to be totally unsympathetic. One of the beauties of The Golden Arrow and of Gone to Earth lies in the fact that each novel was worked out without outside help. In these first two novels, Mrs. Webb had not found it necessary to use any deus ex machina; she had not found it necessary to go into a court room to solve her problem as Galsworthy often did.

Of the discrepancies, I shall mention only a few: Am I right in believing that Mrs. Webb implies that the diamonds came from California? Would Enoch--could he wait outside the Grotto for Peter and Marigold? Would Mrs. Velindre--contrary to the feelings of most old ladies--get a sense of being crowded by her possessions?

It may be that Mrs. Webb should have ended The House in Dormer Forest with the last love-scene between Michael and Amber; that is the only gripping piece of writing in the book. I have quoted it on page 44 and 45. Much of the description seems out of place and lengthy; it does not fit the theme as it did in Gone to Earth, nor as it will in Precious Bane. Another point is that there is not the dramatic quality inherent in The House in Dormer that there was in the earlier novels. It might have been more effective had it had the treatment of Bronte's Wuthering Heights and Butler's Way of All Flesh combined--(both of which novels it somehow approximates). I feel that Mrs. Webb was trying to make her novel conform (in spite of the theme) with some of the currents of the English novel. That she failed is, perhaps an argument for the theme. But certainly her story would have been more effective had it been written with both theme and love interest centered throughout in Amber.

SEVEN FOR A SECRET

1. Theme:

For the first time in Seven for a Secret, Mrs. Webb seems to have had no theme. The best that one can say is what one often has to resort to with lesser novelists: "it is the story of so-and-so." Seven for a Secret, then, is the story of Gillian Lovekin and Robert Rideout. If The House in Dormer Forest was an abortive attempt to prove too generalized a theory, Seven for a Secret is doubly unsatisfactory in trying to fit a theme to a story after the story is all finished. For the first time since Golden Arrow Mrs. Webb had kept away from much description; she had occupied herself with telling the story, but she had at the same time endowed the "little gyland" with a character or personality of its own just ~~was~~ as she had Hunter's Spinney and the Quarry in Gone to Earth, just as she had the Devil's Chair in The Golden Arrow. But the lack of theme, and the ending that begs the whole question cynically is unbelievably bad.

But the reader wants to know about the title of the book, and about the secret. Was it Robert's love for Gillian, or Gillian's for him, or Ailse's, or her hidden story? But all these have been told. Is there more? Out in the early summer morning, listening to the silence, you know that there is more, that in and beyond the purple earth and silver sky there is a mystery so great that the knowledge of it would be intolerable, so sweet that the very intuition of its nearness brings tears. Every sigh of the mystic, every new word of science, is fraught with it. Yet its haunts are further away than time or space or consciousness. It may be that death reveals it. Certainly life cannot, for if we learnt that secret, such is its glory and piercing beauty that it would kill us.

Maybe it was not Gillian, in all the tremulous yet triumphant beauty of wifehood and motherhood, not even Robert in the glory of manhood and poetry and courageous love that came nearest to this mystery, which decreed that those who are all love, as Ailse was, must suffer,

while those who are selfish, like Gillian, are redeemed. Perhaps it was Ailse's compensation, as she floated downstream to eternity in the water-lily of a pure and unrewarded love, that she understood before them all the secret that's never been told.

Here is the theme! There is the story! But it is a Hollywood marriage headed for a Reno divorce. This final twist is bewildering to the reader; instead of laying the book tenderly to one side as he would Gone to Earth, instead of smiling and thinking the whole story over, he will be likely to toss Seven for a Secret on the divan, shrug his shoulders, and believe that he has been betrayed into reading trash.

2. Characters:

However side-tracked the theme may be, the characters are well-handled. There is not the exaggeration of The House in Dormer Forest and there is much of clever portrayal as we found it in Golden Arrow, and Gone to Earth.

Robert Rideout was that rare type of man whom everyone, men, women, animals, love and trust.

Horses never worked so well for anyone as for Robert. When he milked the cows, they gave more milk. No ewe, it was said, would drop her lambs untimely if he were shepherd. The very hens, obliged by hereditary instinct to 'steal their nesses,' would come forth with their bee-like swarms of chicks when Robert went by, revealing their sin and their glory to his eye alone.

He exemplifies what Mrs. Webb had said in a previous novel to the effect that strong men pity best.

Robert spoke lightly to hide the almost unbearable desire to weep that this creature brought. He had never felt like that before--never so much like that. The dreadful grip of Pity, more clinging, more lasting, than the grip of Terror; the immense, wild pity that drove Christ to Calvary and has driven men mad, was upon Robert

Rideout as it had not been ever in fold nor lambing shed. He had felt it there. He had felt it through all the dark, bitter things that are beneath the pleasant life of farms as they are beneath the pleasant life of the world. But he had not seen anything like this woman before. She had, as it were, rolled up into herself the endless, silent agony of dumb creatures.

The woman who calls forth this great-hearted pity from Robert is poor dumb Rwth, who obeys the slightest word like a well-trained (but frequently whipped) dog.

She sat down in the place indicated. Her heavy, stolid, rather dazed expression did not alter. She did not attempt to warm her blue hands at the fire. He noticed that her teeth were chattering. Yet she sat, erect and constrained, exactly where he had said. It was unbearable.

She was, as Elmer said, feckless. She was pelrollicky. Her dark, wispy hair hung about her face forlornly. But her face! Carved in some fiercer mould than the faces he knew, carved out of dark, riven granite, tortured, grim and wild--yet somehow beautiful. And yer eyes! Yes! There lay the secret. It was in her eyes. Black; not velvet-black, but that rarer thing, clear luccent black, like moonlit ebony water in a mill-race. Clear black, with the pupils like velvet, lashed heavily with coarse lashes, thickly and heavily browed, and much too large for her colourless face. Such was the savage, the anguished savage, who went by the commonplace title of Elmer's housekeeper,.....

"Elmer" is Ralph Elmer, and is Jack Reddin over again. But Mrs. Webb cannot resist giving him a touch of mysticism--place-mysticism--which may or may not be out of place.

There, lower than the inn, one field away from the browny-white ribbon or road, lay the unket place--a long inky smudge with a long silver streak of water below. He stiffened a little, like a dog at a new scent, pricked his ears slightly, stared. And out of nowhere, like the faint lament of a sheep from cloudy heights, came the knowledge that this place was prepared for him, had always been waiting for him, quietly and unobtrusively, and would not let him go until what must be had been accomplished.

The principal woman in the book is Juliana, or more commonly Gillian, Lovekin, over whom Ralph and Robert have a silent

struggle.

Gillian was not sufficiently interested in Robert even to laugh at him. She had seen, in her childish fashion, the vision desired by all humanity--the vision of a secure small nest of immortality built in the crumbling walls of time. She wanted to go on being herself even when she was dissolved in nothingness. She wanted to make men and women hear her, love her, rue her..... Gillian built up this dream, in which she was always in the foreground, bathed in light, and masses of vague faces filled the background.

She was neither tall nor short, neither stout nor very slender; she was not dark nor fair, not pretty nor ugly. She had ugly things about her, such as the scar which seamed one side of her forehead, and gave that profile an intent, relentless look. Her nose was much too high in the bridge--the kind of nose that comes of Welsh ancestry and is common in the west. It gave her, in her softest moods, a domineering air. But her mouth was sensitive and sweet, and could be yielding sometimes, and her eyes had so much delight in all they looked upon, and saw so much incipient splendour in common things, that they charmed you and led you in a spell, and would not let you think her plain or dull.

The other characters are not of great importance to the story. Most of them we have met before under other names. There is Aunt Fanteague, the large, breezy, coach-at-full-tilt that was Mrs. Sexton in Precious Bane. Her one new trick is saying "What you want, Juliana, is control." Then there is Fringal, Elmer's odd man, not to be distinguished in outline from Vessons; there is also Mr. Gentle, who is merely what his name implies. Gillian's father is a stolid, commonplace yeoman whose strength (somewhat like Samson, but no pun intended) lies in his "Ha!" Robert's mother, Mrs. Makepeace, is another Mrs. Arden, Mrs. Beguildy, or Mrs. Prowde. But Jonathan Makepeace, Robert's step-father, is worth a word or two. He is full of legends which enliven the whole book; he is the prey of all inanimate matter.

For the tragedy of Jonathan Makepeace was that, since he had first held a rattle, inanimate matter had been his foe.Jugs flung themselves from his hands; buckets and cisterns decanted their contents over him; tablecloths caught on any metal portion of his clothing, dragging with them the things on the table. If he gathered fruit, a heavy fire of apples poured upon his head. If he fished, he fell into the water. Many bits of his coat, and one piece of finger, had been given to that Moloch, the turnip-cutter.

But Jonathan is not important to the story, even though he may be a more interesting man than two others who have slightly more to do with that. They are Gipsy Johnson and Gruffydd Conwy, a Welsh poet and singer. They are, however, merely sketches whereas Jonathan is a real person, for although Conwy may be admirable in all respects, he is not vivid.

3. Dramatic Incident:

When her Aunt Fanteague came to Gwlfas for a visit, Gillian Lovekin determined to obtain from her an invitation to Silverton so that she might get at least that far toward London, singing, and fame. She had been snaring conies for some time to get money for music lessons, and when she learned that she could go to Silverton she killed the "slatey drake" to bedeck herself.

Robert, her father's cowman-shepherd, took her to the train, and she had him lifted onto the train by two porters so that he might accompany her and have a bit of a "randy" at the Junction. Robert feared that she might get into mischief unless guarded and he therefore wrote to Gipsy Johnson to keep an eye on her. At the same time he wrote to Gruffydd Conwy seeking instruction in verse-making.

When he went across the border from Shropshire to Wales to see Conwy, he met Ralph Elmer, who returned with him late that night to see about buying the inn near Gwlfas, The Mermaid's Rest, or more improperly, The Naked Maiden. Soon word came to Robert from Gipsy Johnson that Gillian had enticed one Mr. Gentle onto the Severn for a boat ride, that Mr. G. had caught a fatal cold, and that in consequence she was in disgrace with her Aunt Fanteague and her Aunt Emily, whose friend the deceased had been. Now, Gipsy said, Gillian had made plans to steal away to London while the rest were at the funeral.

Robert reached Silverton in time to prevent Gillian's going to London, took her home, and forced her to make a wreath for Mr. Gentle's grave as a proper penance. Elmer found her out right away, and, acting upon a hint from her father, who rather fancied him as a son-in-law, wooed her by riding bareback up and down before her house. Ralph, not to be outdone, did the same on an unbroken colt. But Ralph Elmer won her, not only because as a cowman-shepherd Robert was ineligible anyway, but because Elmer had Fringal take to her every morning some gift from the inn. Finally on a trip to the fair at Weeping Cross, he kept her over night at a public house and at Mr. Lovekin's insistence married her.

After her marriage, at Robert's suggestion, she taught the dumb housekeeper at the inn, Rwth, to write; and Robert sent to Gipsy Johnson for some gipsy songs and lullabies. Then in a test scene, Gillian played the songs and Rwth wrote on a blackboard all that the songs made her think. She wrote her real

name, Ailse, and her mother's name, Estrellita, which proved that she was really Gipsy Johnson's daughter; she also wrote that she was Elmer's wife.

Gillian, at the piano, had not seen what Rwth, or Ailse, wrote; but she made Ailse promise to tell her all the next day in spite of Ralph. But Ralph, out with a gun, shot Ailse while she was gathering sticks in the little gyland, the unket place. Robert found this out, and, believing that Gillian loved Ralph (although she had said so only to prevent trouble) wrote a confession of the crime. That night, feeling hostility about her, Gillian went to Robert, found the confession, knew that he could not commit murder, sensed that he has said so to save Ralph and her, and finally awoke him with, "Please to let me love ye, Robert Rideout!"

The next chapter is extremely amateurish. Not only does the novelist discuss her theme as quoted in this thesis* but she goes on to discuss her story.

But the reader must by this time be indignant. What is the explanation of the title? Why has everything gone to pieces like this? Why are Robert and Gillian sitting all alone in Robert's cottage at half-past seven in the morning? What has happened to Johnson and Elmer and Fringal? Has nobody missed Rwth? Where are the police? Has not Robert remembered that it is past milking time and that the fowls are still shut up and complaining bitterly? Did the butcher come? Did it go on raining always? Did the thaw last? Did not Isaiah and Mrs. Makepeace ever return to their respective homes? Who has, in this uncalled-for manner let eternity into the cottage and spoil the plot? Reader, that is how things happen! When Love, the scarlet-mantled, comes in, can the author help being dazzled?

But things did happen almost as they should in a well-regulated novel. Johnson had found out everything, and he went to the 'Mermaid's Rest' that very morning, only to see an empty stable, an empty cash-box and signs of hurried departure.

* v. supra., pp.54-5

There seems to be only one explanation of such a final chapter. Mrs. Webb had become annoyed with the novel; she had thrown up her hands in despair. Not only has she committed the artistic crime of "showing how the skeleton works" but when she says "Reader, that is how things happen!" she has used the poorest excuse possible. This time, as in The House in Dormer Forest, she was not able to control her own creation, but this time it was in the incidents and not in the characters that she failed. It was her duty to create an illusion of reality. This Mrs. Webb had done; had she either stopped without excuse, or had she continued for several more chapters, she would have done a more satisfactory piece of work. Better still, had she worked out the theme that she evidently had in mind when she began the novel--Gillian's ambitions--she might have arrived somewhere. In fact the only excuse for not keeping strict silence about Seven for a Secret is in the other novels. One critic, writing before Precious Bane appeared, says, "It might almost be said that steady retrogression marks the course of her five* novels, all published within seven years." (1)

(1) Dr. Collins, Taking the Literary Pulse.

* Dr. Collins apparently considers Spring of Joy as one of the five.

PRECIOUS BANE

1. The theme:

Precious Bane is in theme more like The House in Dormer Forest than it is any other of Mary Webb's novels, because it deals primarily with something besides love. The first two novels are concerned with little but the difference between true love and physical passion; and in Seven for a Secret the same thing is true although not so obvious. Precious Bane takes for its theme, its abstract principle which it will put into concrete terms, the idea that there are more important things in life than material riches. The most important thing may still be love, but it is now a love thwarted by passion for riches and position rather than by lust. In fact, it offers theme and sub-theme.

The following passage is one of the few (it is interesting to note that the theme of The Golden Arrow was stated again and again) in which the "precious bane" is mentioned and explained. Gideon Sarn has just renounced the privilege of taking care of his loved one, Jancis, and his sister Prue is the person telling the story.

He took a step towards Jancis, and I made to go out, for I thought he'd take her in arms and all be well. But all of a sudden he muttered "No, no!" and drew back.

Then he said--"There'd be no satin gown for ye to dance Sir Roger in at the 'unt Ball then, Jancis, You'd be sorry for that."

"Ah."

"Well, if you go for a dairymaid or summat you'll be yearning for it as well as me. Three year inna long. By the end of three year all the ploughland should be bearing well, and us'll be reaping what we've sown."

"Dear Lord forbid," I says.

Gideon fell into a rage, though why I never could think, and burst out--

"Why that, now? Why that? I'm well content to reap what I sow."

"But not if it's the bane, Gideon? Not if it's the precious bane as I read about in the book of the Vicar lent me? You dunna want that amid the corn, lad, what grows in hell?"

"Whatever it is," he says, "if I sow it and it brings me the things I'd lief have, I'll welcome it."

There came a little sobbing sound from Jancis, and when I looked at her I saw beyond her golden head the spring day all o'ercast and the thorn tree lashing in a sudden wind.

"You'd best be going home-along, my dear," I says. "There's tempest brewing."

2. Characters:

Gideon Sarn may be the moving force behind the story, but we could never think of anyone but Prue, who tells the story in vindication of herself and at the advice of her pastor, as the main character. She ranks with John Arden of The Golden Arrow as the finest of all Mrs. Webb's creations, and of course it is she that most people immediately think of when they think of Mary Webb's work. She is clearly portrayed by self-revelation, by what other people say about or to her, and by her behaviour.

So soon as I'd milked, Gideon being still hard at it in the meadow, I went upstairs and put on my black, and my mob-cap. I never wore it to work in, to save washing, and folk thought I was a heathen, pretty near, what with no mob-cap and no shoes or stockings most of the time, but bare feet or clogs. Gideon could whittle a clog right well, and they be grand for doing mucky work like I did. I'd made me a sacking gown, too, short to the knee, for cleaning the beast-housen in. I know everybody called me the barn-door savage of Sarn. But when I remembered the beautiful house at Lullingford that was to be, and the flowered gowns and dimity curtains and china, I didna take it to heart much.

Her poor mother wrung her hands because Prue had a harelip, and she wrung her hands because Prue "grew as lanky as a clothesprop",

but as old Beguildy the wizard said, "Prue's headpiece be right enow." And Gideon told her, "You be strong. You can pretty near dig spade for spade with me."

No description nor comment would portray Prue's real self, however, in the way that her telling of her refuge in the attic does.

I fell to thinking how all this blessedness of the attic came through me being curst. For if I hadna had a hare-lip to frighten me away into my own lonesome soul, this would never have come to me. The apples would have crowded all in vain to see a marvel, for I should never have known the flory that came from the other side of silence.

Even while I was thinking this, out of nowhere suddenly came that lovely thing, and nestled in my heart, like a seed from the core of love.

The attic was close under the thatch, and there were many nests beneath the eaves, and a continual twittering of swallows. The attic window was in a big gable, and the roof on one side went right down to the ground, with a tall chimney standing up above the roof-tree. Somewhere among the beams of the attic was a wild bees' nest, and you could hear them making a sleepy soft murmuring, and morning and evening you could watch them going in a line to the mere for water. So, it being very still there, with the fair shadows of the apple trees peopling the orchard outside, that was void, as were the near meadows, Gideon being in the far field making haycocks, which I also should have been doing, there came to me, I cannot tell whence, a most powerful sweetness that had never come to me afore. It was not religious, like the goodness of a text heard at a preaching. It was beyond that. It was as if some creature made all of light had come on a sudden from a great way off, and nestled in my bosom. On all things there came a fair, lovely look, as if a different air stood over them. It is a look that seems ready to come sometimes on those gleamy mornings after rain, when they say, "So fair the day, the cuckoo is going to heaven." Only this was not of the day, but of summat beyond it. I cared not to ask what it was. For when the nut-hatch comes into her own tree, she dunna ask who planted it, nor what name it bears to men. For the tree is all to the nut-hatch, and this was all to me. Afterwards, when I had mastered the reading of the book, I read--

His banner over me was love.

And it called to mind that evening. But if you should have said, "Whose banner?" I couldna have answered. And even now, when Parson says, "It was the power of the Lord working in you," I'm not sure in my own mind. For there was nought in it of churches nor of folks, praying nor praising, sinning nor repenting. It had to do with such things as bird-song and daffadown-dillies rustling knocking their heads together in the wind. And it was as wistful in its coming and going as a breeze over the standing corn. It was a queer thing, too, that a woman who spent her days in sacking, cleaning sties and beast-housen, living hard, considering over fardens, should come of a sudden into such a marvel as this. For though it was so quiet, it was a great miracle, and it changed my life; for when I was lost for something to turn to, I'd run to the attic, and it was a core of sweetness in much bitter.

Though the visitation came but seldom, the taste of it was in the attic all the while. I had but to creep in there, and hear the bees making their murmur, and smell the woody, o'er sweet scent of kept apples, and hear the leaves rasping softly on the window-frame, and watch the twisted grey twigs on the sky, and I'd remember it and forget all else. There was a great wooden bolt on the door, and I was used to fasten it, though there was no need, for the attic was such a lost-and-forgotten place nobody ever came there but the travelling weaver, and Gideon in apple harvest, and me. Nobody would ever think of looking for me there, and it was parlous and church both to me.

Gideon Sarn, Prue's brother, is a stern fellow with a "having spirit"; he is ambitious and to his ambition he sacrifices everything that stands near to him and should demand and receive his protection. He makes a drudge of Prue by using her disfiguration as an argument in favor of his plans; he thrice rejects his loved one, Jancis; finally he poisons his mother when she is so worn out as to be of no more value to him.

As his body set, his mind set with it, harder than ten-days' ice. He'd no eye for the girls at market though there was a many looked at him.There was no doubt he was a very comely man, and it used to seem to me unfair that it was me, and not Gideon, that was born after the hare looked at Mother.

....It was but seldom Gideon sat still, and very seldom he gave his mind to any thought but the thought of mak-

ing money. But the name of Jancis would often quieten him, and when he fell into one of his silences he would make me think of a tranced man that was once brought to Beguildy to be awakened.

.....For Gideon was a driver if ever there was one, and what he drove was his own flesh and blood. It seemed a pity to me that a young man should be so set in his ways, and have no pleasant times, for I was mightly fond of Gideon.

.....He was a good-hearted lad, in spite of all, and if he missed to do a kindness it was only because he didna think of it, or because his mind was so set on one thing.

The portrait of Gideon is remarkably complete; it is the most complete of any man except John Arden. But it is also the character nearest to a villian of anyone that Mrs. Webb created unless it was Catherine. Even Reddin is not convincing as a villian for he did after all have elements of kindness in his attitude toward Hazel; neither is Ralph Elmer so convincingly calloused as is Gideon. There is wonderful insight in Mrs. Webb's portrayal of Prue's attitude him. What could be more sisterly than her lack of recrimination?--than, in fact, her statement that Beguildy "was the villian of our piece"?

Prue cannot, however make Beguildy all bad; she calls him only "empty of good".

It it hadna been for Mister Beguildy I never could have written down all these things. He learned me to read and write, and reckon up figures. And though he was a preached-against man, and said he could do a deal that I don't believe he ever could do, and though he dabbled in things that are not good for us to interfere with, yet I shall never forget to thank God for him.

... "Father's dead, Mister Beguildy," I said.

"So, so! What's that to me, dear soul?" He was a very strange man, always, was Beguildy. "Tell me what I knew not, child," he said.

"Did you know, then?"

"Ah, I knew thy feyther was gone. Didna he go by me

ona blast of air last Sunday evening, crying out, thin and spiteful, 'You owe me a crown, Beguildy!' Tell me summat fresh, girl--new, strange things. Now if you could say that the leaves be all fallen this day of June, and my damsons ripe for market; or that the mere hath dried; or that man lusteth no more to hurt his love; or that Jancis looketh no more at her own face in Splash Pool, there would be telling, yes! But for your dad, it is nought. I cared not for the man"

And taking up his little hammer, he beat on a row of flints that he had, till the room was all in a charm. Every flint had its own voice, and he knew them as a shepherd the sheep, and it was his custom when the talk was not to his mind to beat out a chime upon them.As the notes tinkled out, I knew it was useless to argle any more. For as there was no power or sweetness in his flinty music, such as there is from harp and fiddle, so there was none in his soul. It gave a small and flinty music because it was a small and flinty thing. He'd got no pity because he'd got no strength. For it inna weaklings and women that pity best, but the strong, mastering men.

Jancis Beguildy, who looks at her own face in Splash Pool, is likened to a beautiful golden and white water-lily.

Jancis was a little thing, not tall like me, but you always saw her before you saw other people for it seemed that the light gathered round her. She'd got golden hair, and all the shadows on her face seemed to be stained with the pale colour of it. I was used to think she was like a white waterlily full of yellow pollen or honey. She'd got a very white skin, creamy white, without any colour unless she was excited or shy, and her face was dimpled and soft and just the right plumpness. She'd got a red, cool, smiling mouth, and when she smiled the dimples ran each into other. But I could almost have strangled her for that smile.

She'd got a way of saying "O" afore everything, and it made her mouth look like a rose. But whether she did it for that, or whether she did it because she was slow-witted and timid, I never could tell.

We recognize the type; Mrs. Webb is plainly a firm believer in the "beautiful but dumb" classification. We accept her generalization, made in each of her books, that the beautiful of face is likely not to be the beautiful in spirit; or better--that true beauty is in inward being rather than in outward seeming.

Precious Bane has rather a large number of minor characters, especially when we compare it with a book like Gone to Earth. All are interesting; all are well pictured, often caricatured and so enlivened. There is poor tragic old Mrs. Sarn.

Mother's voice clings to my heart like trails of bedstraw that catch you in the lanes. She'd got a very plaintive voice, and soft. Everything she said seemed to mean a deal more than the words, and times it was like a person fumbling in the dark or going a long way down black passages with a hand held out on this side and a hand held out on that, and no light. That was how she said, "Could I help it if the hare crossed my path--could I help it?"

Everything she said, though it might not have anything merry in it, she smiled a bit, in the way you smile to take the edge off somebody's anger, or if you hurt yourself and won't show it. A very brief smile it was, and always there.

...Suddenly she'd give over spinning, and wring her hands, that always made me think of a mole's little hands, lifted up to God when it be trapped.

Perhaps, poor little thing, she is never more pitiful than when the ardent reader of Mary Webb reads for the fifth time the passage that tells of her one day of enjoyment. Nothing can so grip one with pity unless it be meeting such a shred of pathos on a city street. But then one only suspects tragedy, and brushes it aside to protect himself from unwelcome emotion. When one sees poor Mrs. Sarn's tragedy all the way through and then returns to look at her one happy moment, it becomes so pathetically sacred to her that one sees, somehow, deep into life.

"It's been a grand day. A day to think on and talk over. Not wrong neither, for if we be still in our blacks, it was a kindness we were doing. None can blame for a kindness. Did I demean myself well, Prue?"

"Why, yes, Mother, no danger!"

"Did I spin well?"

"You spun grand."

She ever had this way of asking, like a child, and she wound herself round your heart like a child, too.

For others in the book, there are Tivvy, the Sexton, Sexton's missus, Felena, Mrs. Beguildy, Kester Woodseaves, and Mrs. Miller.

Missis Miller was a poor creature, like a meal worm, but very pleasant-spoken. Sexton's missus was just the opposite. She always made me think of a new-painted coach, big and wide, with an open road, and the horn blowing loud and cheerful, and full speed ahead. She was as gay in her dress as a seven-coloured linnet, and if she could wear another shawl or flounce or brooch, she would. She wore so many petticoats it was a wonder she could walk, and once Tivvy said to me that to watch her mother undress was like peeling a big onion down to the core. Tivvy wasna one ever to make a joke, so it shows what a great thing it must ha' been to watch.

Tivvy is something of a second Lucy Thruckton from The Golden Arrow, but she does have enough personality to try to win Gideon and to make bad matters worse toward the end of the story. Her father, the Sexton, is notable chiefly because all his reading from the Bible sounds "like a bee in a bottle". Felena's purpose in the story is to give authority to Prue's opinion of Kester Woodseaves as a man in a million. She is an experienced lady, and so Kester does appear not only as Prue's ideal but as the ideal of all womankind. He and Michael in The House in Dormer Forest represent this ideal man, strongly beautiful of body and soul; Kester, since we see a little more of him, is a bit more vivid than Michael. They are both the understanding, superb type that John Arden, although older, was. Mrs. Beguildy is essentially either another Mrs. Makepeace or another Mrs. Arden; but she is none the less interesting, however, as she is newly clothed with detail and environment.

Figuring momentarily are Squire Camperdine, his son, and his daughter Dorabella, who would also spare a glance or two at

good-looking Gideon. Messrs. Grimble and Huglet are commonplace, and intended to be so.

Summary: In Precious Bane we find again that the characters are consistent within themselves. Some of the types are cast in familiar moulds, but that is not a very great fault. The many subsidiary actors in this novel, moreover, do lend credence to the whole because even if the terseness of Gone to Earth did produce a remarkable concentration of effect, the critical reader somehow felt a departure from reality in the very lack of people who touch Hazel's life. I feel no doubt in my own mind that in The House in Dormer Forest, Mrs. Webb was deliberately striving to handle a larger group of people than she had up to that time--perhaps at the suggestion of someone else. She was also, perhaps, deliberately striving in that work to bring her novels into closer touch with some of the currents of the English novel and its development. In Precious Bane it seems as if she has profitted from both her failures and successes.

3. Dramatic Incident:

Gideon and Prue were sent to church by their father, but Gideon wanted to play truant, find Jancis, and play in the wood. When they returned to Sarn, their father awaited them; the parson had been there and Gideon's attempt to tell about the sermon failed. When Mr. Sarn started to punish him, Gideon butted him in the stomach with his head and partly perhaps from anger, or from the blow, the man died.

Gideon immediately gathered the farm to himself. He told the bees of the death, and immediately started laying plans for the future. At the funeral, and this he evidently had planned beforehand, he became the sin-eater, taking upon himself all the sins of his father. In return Mrs. Sarn turned over to him the whole farm.

His next step was to exact from Prue the promise to slave for him until they should win through and be able to go to Lullingford to live in style and riches. Poor Prue was easily convinced that she wouldn't be able to marry because of her hare-shotten lip, and was partially bribed, perhaps, by the suggestions that she learn from old Beguildy how to write, and that possibly some cure might be found with the aid of the wealth they would win to cure her lip.

Prue was strong, but at times wretched until she found peace and spiritual aid in the quietness of the attic. When she and her brother went to market at Lullingford, however, this peace was broken by her finding out how the world looked upon women with hare-lips--as part witch and in league with the devil.

There she was insulted by Dorabella Camperdine; there Gideon took her to see the house of his dreams. But the big house with the wandering light that went to and again through the rooms like a lost soul did not appeal to her as did a homely little cottage in the village. (The cottage was Kester's.)

Gideon and Jancis had been in love for a long time, and although Beguildy wanted her to catch a wealthier, nobler man (in wedlock or out), the "love-spinning" or the spinning of the bridal sheets was held in spite of him. At Flash, the home of the Beguildys, the neighborhood of women gathered, Beguildy himself having been lured away from the house for the day. There Mrs. Sarn had her one brief moment of happiness; and there Prue first met Kester Woodseaves, the weaver, and played at cards for his soul with Felena, the shepherd's wife, who, they said, danced on the heath in the light of the moon with a hoofed man.

For Prudence had fallen in love with Kester at first sight; she recognized that the "maister be come". Even so, to save Jancis from being a party to Beguildy's scheme to "raise Venus" for young Mister Camperdine, Prue took her place. It was thus Prue's naked body that he and Kester saw in the rosy light when, with a rope under her arms "Venus" was hoisted through the trap-door. The young Camperdine was duly attracted to this body and so was Kester; and although Prue says that "serious-minded folk will need to pass over this raising of Venus", the occasion was of benefit to her because she learned that whatever her face might be, her body was beautiful like her soul. Beguildy's scheme to sell Jancis to young Camperdine was likely to prove successful.

And finally Beguildy said that Jancis must either be Camperdine's or must go to the hiring-fair as a dairymaid. When Jancis sought refuge at Sarn, Gideon rejected her for the first time,* telling her that her earnings would help him in his plans.

Gideon and Prue went also to the hiring-fair; Kester was there and tried to stop the men of the village from continuing their bull-baiting. He offered to take on the dogs one at a time and tie them up so that the bull might be spared. He was successful until a vicious, new dog in the village was turned upon him. But Prue had foreseen some injury to him and had gone for aid; she returned in time to knife the dog just as its jaws were closing upon Kester's throat.

During that winter Prue wrote in "the best tall script" letters for Gideon to Jancis, and in reply Kester wrote for Jancis to Gideon. The letters are delightful reading for there is a strange confusion of Gideon to Jancis and Prue to Kester in each. Then Jancis ran away, again sought refuge at Sarn, and was again rejected by Gideon, fearful that she would be a burden to his plans. But after a short time he did not scruple to take her out of wedlock. Mrs. Beguildy connived with the young lovers, but Beguildy returned to find them. In revenge he set fire to the newly stacked grain that Sarn's harvest-home and gathered for him. This crop, selling at a time when grain was very dear, would have meant that all Sarn's plans would come true. Even the old mother worked knee-deep in water to try to save the grain.

After that, disaster followed disaster in rapid succession. Beguildy was jailed and his family was ousted from the stone house

* v. supra, pp.62-3

at Plash. Mrs. Beguildy died, and Jancis returned with a wisp of a baby only to be rejected for the third time by her lover-- but not from ambition, rather from hate because she is Beguildy's daughter. Old Mrs. Sarn had been ill ever after the fire, and Sexton's Tivvy had come to help nurse her. After learning from a medical man that she would never be of further use about the farm, Gideon poisoned her with a "bitter brew" of fox-glove tea. Jancis, although protected for a few hours by Prue, drowned herself and her child in Sarn Mere. Haunted by her spirit, Gideon finally did the same.

Of all the major characters of the story, there remained only Prue. Sarn held no attraction for her, and she made ready to sell everything. At the market, she was attacked by Tivvy and her mother as a witch, and as such she was in a ducking stool when rescued by Kester.

He stooped. He set his arms about me. He lifted me to the saddle. It was just as in the dream I had. And, as in that dream, Felena looked up, imploring, and he took no account of her, and the noise of the people sank away, the laughter, and the curses.There was only the evening wind lifting the boughs, like a lover lifting his maid's long hair.

Summary:

A character may be, not illogically, "consistently inconsistent", but dramatic incident must be logical in more absolute measure. Thomas Moulton quotes the following "well-considered criticism in another of the weekly reviews":

The chief obstacle to a full acceptance of Mrs. Mary Webb's novel Precious Bane is not so much that it is written in a highly poeticized Shropshire dialect but that it is supposed to be narrated by an ill-educated country woman who found time to keep a

diary during a life of hard work on a farm. It requires a deal of imagination to believe that Prue Sarn, however straight the furrows that she ploughed, would be likely to write:

"And I knew it would take a heap of money to cure a hare-shotten lip. There was a kind of sour laughter in the thought of it. It called to mind the blackish autumn evenings when grouse rise from the bitter marsh and fly betwixt the withered heather and the freezing sky, and laugh. Old harsh men laugh that way at the falling down of an enemy. And the good ladies of a town, big with stiff flounced silks and babes righteously begotten, laughed so behind their fans when they went to the prison to see a lovely harlot whipped."⁽¹⁾

Mr. Moulton ably defends Prue Sarn's ability to write poeticized prose. When he sees this quotation and criticism as merely a question of Prue Sarn, he (and perhaps the critic he quoted) are a bit beside the point. The critic, whoever he is, was right in sensing a discrepancy somewhere; Mr. Moulton is right in defending what he does defend. Prue certainly was a person who might write from the spirit and the flaw lies, to me, only in the last sentence of the quotation. Where has Prue been that she should hear the laughter of the "good ladies" when a lovely harlot was whipped? The sentence is perhaps the only sentence in Mrs. Webb's writings that could be conceived of, to use an ugly word, as dishonest. It is a pity that it should be called to our attention, but the fact remains that it is a touch to show historical detail like the ducking-stool and the sin-eating, and the love-spinning. But these last are assimilated by the story; that one sentence protrudes. It is pretentious.

More directly concerned with the creation of dramatic incident, the critical reader asks the following questions: Why should Mrs. Beguildy, who was so hale, die--unless for the obvi-

(1) Moulton, op.cit., p.247

ous reason of leaving Jancis and the child quite unprotected? She should have been killed, if that is necessary, in trying to stop Beguildy from firing the corn rick.

And how on earth could Mrs. Webb have conceived of Felena's saying to Kester, "If you come our way, Mister, I'll learn you the story of Adam and Eve."?(1) Did she say it before all the women at the love-spinning? How could Prue have heard it? Obviously the answer is that she did not hear it, but that Kester told her of it after their marriage, and the book could say as much in three parenthetical words. At the first of the story, Kester is spoken of familiarly as a wife does speak of a husband; there should have been this intimation here.

A worse discrepancy lies only a few pages before this one, when Prue and Mrs. Miller are playing cards against Felena and Mrs. Sexton.

And I may say that Missis Miller and I won, out and out, to her everlasting astonishment. For she seemed to think it an impertinence on her part to beat Missis Sexton.(2)

But on the very next page, when Missis Sexton's daughters come downstairs full of news about the new weaver, Mrs. Webb says,

It was lucky for the girls that their mother happened to have won.

Prue's visions, her second sights, are not always convincing. All these things Mrs. Webb can nearly make us believe; in fact, we do believe them in our first reading; and the other valuable parts of the book, the beautiful parts, make us excuse them. Writing either under strong inspiration and therefore rapidly, or slowly and with effort as she sometimes did after

Golden Arrow and Gone to Earth, she evidently lacked patience to revise and examine her work from the reader's standpoint. Probably, as I have said in regard to House in Dormer, she lacked advice which she could trust implicitly. What she seems to have needed was a good editor and agent. If she had one he was not good enough to help her produce a perfect work. But it does seem pitiful that literature in the highest sense, beautiful writing unmarred by "fine writing" or "purple patches", should be marred by things that could have been explained in a sentence or a phrase. In the instance of the game, of course, a sentence should have been omitted.

There are little crudities in language which fit Prue's lack of education; the beautiful pictures come from the soul and not from training. The slow, quiet pace of the book (much slower than the other novels) is admirably suited to the subject, to the character who is telling the story, and to first person narrative in general. It is not to be rushed through like a detective novel; it is not beer to "gulp", but rare wine to "bite" and savour.

Summary of the Five Novels

While accepting Precious Bane as Mrs. Webb's masterpiece, I think The Golden Arrow nearly as good, surprisingly good for a first novel, and Gone to Earth as slightly better than The Golden Arrow. Gone to Earth has the essence of pure tragedy; its effect upon one can bring the realization of what Aristotle meant by katharsis just as much as Ibsen's Doll House or Dreiser's American Tragedy can. But Mrs. Webb's effects never seem to derive from morbidity.

That her first two novels came out in wartime was undoubtedly an important factor in their failure to sell. This failure preyed upon her mind, seemed to her unjust, and made her disgruntled. Her second pair of novels, coming after the war, are attempts to do something for which she was not fitted; she no longer worked with surety. Only in religion and in art could it be true that conformity need spoil one's individuality; in Mrs. Webb's case, we have a proof of the partial truth of the theme of The House in Dormer Forest when it is applied to art. But her failure was not in conforming, but in attempting something for which she was unfitted. The theme when generalized, however, remains untrue and ridiculous--unless it be in some glorious Utopia. Seven for a Secret, as we have seen, was without theme; it is therefore without significance.

The threads that appear and re-appear in the five novels are important: first, earth-mysticism; and secondly, place-mysticism, possibly a part of or subsidiary to the first; third, glo-

rification of pity and hatred of cruelty; fourth, a Shropshire or remade Shropshire geography; fifth, beauty of soul opposed to beauty of features; and last, humour and caricature. Mysticism (it is well to remember) includes intuition.

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APPENDIX

Questions Used in Judging the Novels

I Theme:

- A. Has the novel a theme?
 - or, (1) Is it just a chronicle?
 - (2) Is it a plot-novel?
- B. Is the theme adhered to?
 - (1) Too closely?
 - (2) Is the major point made clear?
 - (3) Is it too obviously propaganda?

II Plot:

- A. Is the novel largely a plot-novel?
- B. Is the plot plausible?
 - (1) Are there too many coincidences?
 - (2) Is the plot sacrificed to the theme?
 - (3) Is the plot plausible in connection with the characters involved?
 - (4) Is the ending forced?
 - (5) Are any happenings too melodramatic?
- C. Is there a good climax?
 - (1) Is there suspense leading up to climax?
 - (2) Is the climax dramatically foreshadowed?
 - (3) Is the climax handled powerfully and effectively?
- D. Is the story-interest (or plot) too slow in beginning? that is, Is the introduction too long?

III Characters

- A. Are the characters well chosen for purposes of plot and theme?
- B. Are they well contrasted with each other?
- C. Are they well portrayed?
 - (1) Do they seem to live?
 - (2) Are they alive but caricatured?
 - (3) Are they stock figures subsidiary to plot?
- D. Is the characterization direct or indirect?
 - that is, (1) Does the author directly describe them?
 - or (2) Are they characterized by their own speech and actions, or that of other characters?
- E. Are they consistent?

IV Setting: A. Commonplace? B. Vivid? C. Mechanical D. Artificial?

- V. Style:
 - A. Is it commonplace?
 - B. Is it high-flown?
 - C. Is it suitable to the main purpose of the novel?
 - D. Is the author's personality revealed?

VI Time and perspective:

- A. Does the author write too near to his own day and age?
- B. If the story is set in the past, does the author handle his material accurately?