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Webb's Shropshire and Hardy's Wessex: Literary and Geographical Influences on the Early Novels of Mary Webb

Abstract: Mary Webb, whose novels and poetry portray her native county of Shropshire, was a keen reader of Thomas Hardy. Several biographers and scholars – including Gladys Mary Coles, Andrew Radford and Carol Siegel – have noted Hardy's influence in her work. However, while these authors have explored aspects such as sexual politics, classical myth, and biographical details, they have focussed less upon Webb's use and description of landscape, as well as Shropshire mythology and folklore. This article will build upon a small amount of research by these scholars, and not only examine the influence of Hardy's works in Webb's own writing but also note how she developed her own style stimulated by Hardian influence. It can be assumed that Webb's use of local legends, vernacular, and landscape mirrors, to some extent, Hardy's aesthetic depiction of his native Wessex. Additionally, her use of legend and folk beliefs creates a kind of Gothic rendering of a fictional Shropshire, akin to some of Hardy's portrayals of Wessex. This article examines Webb's life and literary influences – particularly Hardy, to whom she dedicated her fourth novel – and, following Coles, considers how her time spent living in the West Country, influenced the creation of her first novel.

Keywords: The West Country, Shropshire, Gothic depiction, use of local legends, Webb's style

Mary Webb is often granted, or perhaps even relegated to, the status of a “regional writer” (Duncan 1979¹), as she is best known for writing about Shropshire. All her five completed novels (and one uncompleted work) are based in that county. She was born and grew up there and it had a significant influence on her work, including her short stories, poetry, and essays. However, she did have some influences which came from beyond her home county. Arguably two of the clearest “external” sources of inspiration for her early novels were her time in Weston-Super-Mare and her love of literature, particularly that of Thomas Hardy, of whose work she

¹ This quotation is from Duncan's introduction to *Gone to Earth*. Pages are not numbered.

was a great devotee (Coles 1978: 34), and with whom she communicated via letters and to whom she later dedicated her fourth novel *Seven for a Secret*.

Webb is amongst the most notable of Hardy's contemporaries to be influenced by his writing. Her works use rustic imagery and characters, they display a strong sense of localisation, being wholly set in her home county of Shropshire. Additionally, like Hardy, she utilises local customs, dialect and legends in her work, having both researched them and actually lived amongst some of the rural people that she seeks to portray. Whilst her technique does not quite extend to the creation of a regionalized mythos, such as Hardy's Wessex, the overall body of novels (and poetry) does create a kind of literary Shropshire which has since become known as "Mary Webb Country"². The use of local folk customs and legends also creates a particular image of a region strongly affected by supernatural forces, or at least forces believed in by the characters who inhabit it (Coles 1978: 24). This complex impact of Hardy on Webb's writing is, as this article will suggest, perhaps most obvious in some of the themes she uses and in her strong awareness of folk culture and nature, much of which helps form the Gothic aspects of some of her work³.

There are, however, only a few detailed explorations of the influence of Hardy's work upon Webb's literary output, which may raise the question of exactly how, if at all, his work influenced hers. Of the more accessible works which examine the literary relationship between the authors, the influence of Hardy seems to be readily accepted, and the current author will follow the same path⁴. However, the article will seek to enhance the earlier research by focussing on areas which, it may be argued, are lacking in these texts.

With regard to the question of the literary and personal relationship, between the authors, Radford points out that, in a 1922 letter wherein Webb asked Hardy's permission to write the dedication, she refers to him as "The greatest exponent of the wild human heart since Shakespeare" (Radford 2004: 56). A subsequent letter in November 1922, which accompanied a copy of the novel, asks him to accept the dedication "as you would a child's stalkless daisy – valueless, but given with enthusiasm and sincerity" (Radford 2004: 60). The tone of the letters and the dedication "To the illustrious name of Thomas Hardy" (Webb 1922) seemingly demonstrate

² See: W. Reid Chappell (1930), *The Shropshire of Mary Webb*. London: Cecil Palmer. Published only three years after Webb's death, it has Reid Chappell travelling the region, describing the landscape, retelling local legends and meeting locals. It is believed to be the first work to refer to "Mary Webb Country".

³ This article is based on a paper presented by this author at the THS conference "Hardy and Gothic Wessex" (28–30 October 2022).

⁴ See: Coles (1978: 24), Radford (February 2004), Siegel (1991).

not only a deep respect for the older author but also a desire for acceptance by him. This would also seem to strengthen the argument that his work had a direct effect upon her own. Furthermore, comparing Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* with Webb's *Gone to Earth*, Radford notes the Shropshire author's use of mythical motifs, in this case her utilisation of the Persephone myth, and comments,

Mary Webb would have learnt from Hardy how to use the Demeter-Persephone myth to assess the relationship between virginity, fecundity and purity; and life, death and rebirth. This is a crucial point, because Webb, like Hardy in *Tess*, felt no awkwardness in absorbing mythical motifs into a novel (Radford 2004: 59).

Curiously, however, Radford chooses to focus on an alleged use of classical mythology over one of regional folk mythology, something both authors are well known for.

A much more detailed analysis of the relationship between Hardy and Webb is presented by Carol Siegel (1991) who examines Webb's *Gone to Earth* from a strongly feminist perspective, considering the links between male attitudes towards female bodies and colonialism. As such, she likens the female body and psyche to land colonised and dominated by males (Siegel 1991: 132–137). Siegel strongly suggests an influence of Hardy upon Webb's work by suggesting *Gone to Earth* can be read as a parody of *Tess* (Siegel 1991: 138–139), particularly when their similarities in structure and narrative are considered: "Transtextuality is most evident in Webb's characterizations, her three main characters bearing a parodic relation to Hardy's" (Siegel 1991: 139). Elsewhere, she suggests that Webb parodies Hardy by comparing *Tess*'s submissive "entrapment by social rules" with that of Hazel Woodus, the protagonist of *Gone to Earth*, for whom the trees and flowers weep upon her departure from the world of nature into the world of social rules (Siegel 1991: 141). For the current author, this suggestion of "parody" is slightly problematic, especially when one considers Webb's letters to Hardy and the language therein, which hardly sounds like someone who would parody their literary hero. Likewise, the suggestion that the weeping of trees and flowers is a deliberate parody of Hardy's work is problematic in the light of Webb's very serious approach to nature in her collection of essays *The Spring of Joy* (Webb 1917/2016). These essays suggest that Webb was unlikely to intentionally use nature as a comic parody in this instance. While it is possible to read *Gone to Earth* as a parody of Hardy, it was unlikely to have been Webb's intention.

Siegel also creates a very intriguing argument regarding the "colonial" aspects of both novels. However, she does not focus greatly on the descriptive passages

dealing with landscape, though she does provide an interesting reflection on the symbolism of the interiors of the manor houses and cottages into which both characters, Tess and Hazel, move – particularly in relationship to the struggle for their own internal psyche and sexuality (Siegel 1991: 141).

As previously mentioned, neither Radford nor Siegel explores Webb or Hardy's relationship with regional English and Welsh folklore⁵ – something Coles does focus on to some extent, noting how Webb, like Hardy, “used legend and superstition as an important element, integral to the plot, structure, and meaning, influencing character and action” (Coles 1978: 24). Coles considers Hardy to have been “an important influence on Mary's style and thought” (Coles 1978: 35) and suggests that, amongst others, such as George Elliot, she studied the narrative conventions of Hardy (Coles 1978: 125). Additionally, Coles argues,

Mary's preceptive handling of the interaction between human and the animate and inanimate in the landscape owes much to her reading of Thomas Hardy, but also to her own understanding of the ways in which external circumstances of environment could shape individual lives, and to the exercise of her acute senses during more than thirty years immersed in the Shropshire countryside (Coles 1978: 128).

Despite this, presumably due to it being a biography, rather than a literary analysis, Coles' work does not focus on direct comparisons of the authors' techniques.

This article therefore aims to build upon the previous scholarly examination of the literary relationship between Thomas Hardy and Mary Webb by comparing, amongst other things, their reliance upon and utilisation of landscape and folklore. It suggests possible influences of Hardy upon Webb, while also noting how she developed her own style in the light of these influences. To this end, selected works of Webb are examined – predominantly her first two novels, *The Golden Arrow* (1916) and *Gone to Earth* (1917) – not least because the former was written following her stay in Weston-Super-Mare, and the latter appears to show a more obvious influence from Hardy's work. These novels will be compared with Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, which Coles (1978: 35) highlights as having been a particular favourite of Webb's. This comparison aims to suggest aspects where the literary influence upon her work by Hardy's novel is most conspicuous. Furthermore, the article considers how Webb's move to the English West Country and her separation from Shropshire provided an impetus on her creative work.

⁵ This is also a subject overlooked in Barale's biography, *Daughters and Lovers: The Life and Writing of Mary Webb* (Barale 1986).

Additionally, it is suggested that her early novels, through using folk motives and local legends, may be read as a form of Gothic literature in a similar way to some of Hardy's work.

1. Early years in Shropshire

Born on 25 March 1881 in the village of Leighton, Shropshire, Mary Webb was the eldest child of George Edward Meredith and Sarah Alice Meredith (nee Scott). Her father was an Oxford educated schoolteacher from a clerical family who, like many Salopians, was of Welsh heritage. He was also keenly interested in literature and the arts, being a poet and author in his own right. He passed these passions on to his children. Mary grew up surrounded by a love of literature, legends, folklore and nature (Coles 1978: 6–8).

In the year following Mary's birth, the Meredith family moved to a small market town of Much Wenlock (Figure 1), which she later referred to as a "Rip Van Winkle of a borough" (Byford-Jones 1937: 17; Wood 1944: 64). It houses several holy wells (Palmer 2004: 63) and the ruins of a twelfth century Cluniac monastery, dissolved in 1540 and later bought, in 1856, by James Milnes Gaskell. His son Charles and his wife Lady Catherine were noted society figures and entertained, amongst others, the authors Henry James and Thomas Hardy. Although the young Mary Meredith did not meet her literary hero at this time, someone she did meet was her governess, Edith Lory. Miss Lory was instrumental in expanding Mary's reading, not least by introducing her to the works of Hardy, a particular favourite being *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (Coles 1978: 35). During her childhood,



Figure 1. Much Wenlock (photo by author)

she accompanied her father on charity visits to the rural poor, becoming familiar with rural culture and folklore (Coles 1978: 27), aspects of local life which would later be utilised in her writing.

The Merediths moved from Much Wenlock in 1896, eventually settling in Meole Brace (1902), now a suburb of Shrewsbury. This was shortly after Webb's first attack of Graves disease, a disorder of the immune system which produces, amongst other symptoms, hyperthyroidism. It was during her period of convalescence that she began writing essays. By 1909 she had published some poems and a short story. However, in the same year her father died, something which was to leave a heavy impression on her. In 1910, she met Henry Webb, a teacher, essayist and translator. They began an intense relationship (the inspiration for that of Amber and Michael in Webb's third novel *The House in Dormer Forest*⁶), marrying in 1912. Soon afterwards, Henry Webb accepted a teaching position in Weston-super-Mare, on the north Somerset coast. It was there that he and Mary lived for around the next two years, during which she began working on what would eventually be her first novel *The Golden Arrow*.

2. Weston-super-Mare

In her biography of Webb, Gladys Mary Coles entitles the chapter on the Weston-super-Mare period "Hiraeth", using a Welsh word which roughly translates as a longing or nostalgia for a culture, place or homeland, particularly in a Welsh context. Webb herself was fond of using the term, and it seems to have been a driving force in her writing at this time (Coles 1978: 113–130). It is perhaps worth considering that her more successful works are those written (or started) when she was experiencing a certain amount of separation from Shropshire⁷, and her new home was much further from the county than before. Weston-Super-Mare is a seaside town, whereas Shropshire is the largest landlocked county in Great Britain. As such, the geography differs greatly to the hilly regions of which she was so fond. Coles describes Webb's reaction to the new environment and her

⁶ See: Coles (1978: 9).

⁷ As suggested by Coles, the hiraeth from living in Weston Super Mare arguably influenced Webb's drive to research and plan for her first novel. *Gone to Earth* (1917) was begun in 1916 while she was living in Chester, whereas her fifth (and most well known) novel, *Precious Bane* (1924) was largely written in Hampstead. Both *The House in Dormer Forest* (1920) and *Seven for a Secret* (1922) were either written or begun in Shropshire (Coles 1978: xx) and were her least commercially successful works.

experience of the different nature and landscapes (Coles 1978: 114). She was in an alien land, and there being no Shropshire trees, she had to seek a place of meditation in Weston Woods. In addition to this alienation, her mother, Alice Meredith, had sold up and moved to Chester, so Mary also experienced the loss of the home where her beloved father had spent his final years. This probably heightened her fear of losing Henry or being separated from him, and this anxiety (possibly also attributable to Graves Disease) became an increasingly stressful part of the couple's relationship over the years. Such stress is clearly notable in *The Golden Arrow* with its focus on separation, anxiety and abandonment.

Weston-super-Mare was influential on Webb because, according to Coles, it provoked the hiraeth which led to her imagining and writing descriptions of her homelands and creating characters based on people she knew. Like Hardy⁸, she had spoken to older residents of her area (including those from the local workhouse) and studied local history and folklore⁹. In addition, she immersed herself in such authors as the Irish writer John Millington Synge and the Scottish works of Fiona McLeod (pseudonym of William Sharp) who, along with her beloved Hardy, utilised "folk" materials and regional idioms and dialect. Webb would later do this in her own novels, filling them with various Shropshire dialects (Coles 1978: 117). McLeod/Sharp would also prove influential for certain aspects of folk traditions, especially the concept of sin-eating, which appears in Webb's *Precious Bane*¹⁰.

3. Return to Shropshire and first novel

In early 1914, the Webbs returned to Shropshire and settled in the village of Pontesbury, around nine miles from Shrewsbury and close to Pontesford Hill. The location was important as it was a local legend and custom which provided the title of *The Golden Arrow*, which was completed in 1915 and published the following year. Having read accounts in the folklore collections of Charlotte Burne (Palmer 2004: x),

⁸ Jacqueline Dillon suggests that while Hardy claimed much of his knowledge of folklore came from an "old lady", it is highly likely to have been his mother (Dillon 2016: 9).

⁹ As well as having grown up within the local "traditional culture", Hardy was also a collector of folklore, albeit, allegedly, somewhat erratic (see: Taft winter 1981: 399). He was also friends with a number of scholars involved with the Folklore Society (Dillon 2016: 8–9).

¹⁰ The sin-eating scene is perhaps one of the most noted in Webb's work, supposedly coming from an old practice of somebody eating food laid across the deceased to absolve them of sins (a kind of post-mortem Last Rites). In her foreword to *Precious Bane*, Webb acknowledges McLeod's previous use of the ritual (in the 1895 short story *The Sin-Eater*) but points out the practice was well known in Shropshire in earlier times (something questioned by Roy Palmer 2004: 172).

Mary spoke with old people from the neighbourhood about a wake which used to be held on Palm Sunday (although the practice had ceased in the mid-nineteenth century), during which, young couples would go off together to find a legendary golden arrow, supposedly lost after a seventh-century battle (Palmer 2004: 295). The arrow becomes, in the novel, a symbol of a happiness which must be sought.

Close to the Webbs' new home were the areas known as The Long Mynd, a raised plateau of moor and heathland, and The Stiperstones, a quartzite rock ridge formation with several distinct outcrops, the most famous being The Devil's Chair (Wall 2015: 16–21)¹¹. The area surrounding The Stiperstones was, at that time, an important centre of lead-mining, particularly the village of Snailbeach. All these areas feature prominently in *The Golden Arrow* and *Gone to Earth*, the latter being written throughout 1916 and published in 1917. In addition to making substantial use of local geography, both novels feature an abundance of local folklore and legends.

4. Landscape, locals and legends

Webb, like Hardy with Dorset and the West Country, had a wide knowledge both of her native county and its folklore. Some of this she had learned from her father as well as her charitable visits to poorer people in her neighbourhood, including the local workhouse. Furthermore, as previously noted, she was heavily influenced by Charlotte S. Burne's groundbreaking work *Shropshire Folk Lore* (1883), one of the first major collections concerning a single English county (Coles 1978: 72). However, it is important to note that despite her obvious knowledge of local folklore and geography, Webb occasionally conflates both for literary purposes. As Coles admits, "Sometimes it is not possible to identify a location because it is purely a creation of Webb's imagination, or it is drawn from numerous separate features of the landscape intimately known to her" (Coles 1978: 333)¹². Halszka Leleń similarly points out potential problems in attempting to equate Hardy's literary geography with real world geography (Leleń 1999: 101–104). It is therefore important to consider whether Hardy's own conflation of his Wessex

¹¹ Tom Wall points out that the hill is always referred to as "*The Stiperstones*" (Wall 2015: 5). This, in part, differentiates it from a nearby village called Stiperstones.

¹² An interesting example of this can be noted in Danielle E. Price's article "Controlling Nature: Mary Webb and the National Trust", where she refers to the National Trust (a UK heritage organisation) attempting to procure some historic lime pits, citing their cultural importance due to their inspiration for a specific piece of landscape in *Gone to Earth*. However, as Price notes, another place, The Major's Leap, is also a contender for this status (Price 2014: 251).

geography was knowingly influential upon Webb's, although it may be unlikely, unless Webb herself had a profound knowledge of the countryside Hardy describes. A similar observation about conflation and adaptation in the use of folklore is made by W.K. McNeil, who points out that Webb occasionally transposes aspects of folklore or moves traditions and events temporally to fit the narrative (McNeil 1971: 134). It is therefore not always possible to take a legend or practice as being historically accurate, rather, one should take them as a piece of literary flavouring. Similar suggestions have been made about Hardy's work by such scholars as Michael Taft, giving the example of the wife sale in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* as a "manipulation" of folklore, contrasting with actual records (Taft winter 1981).

A specific aspect of Webb's use of legends and folklore is that of the coexistence of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon lore, both of which she utilises. This is partly due to the borderland geography and culture of Shropshire, where even today, there are Welsh speaking communities on both sides of the border¹³. Additionally, she was familiar with Welsh literature, such as *The Mabinogion*, considering Wales her "ancestral country" (Coles 1978: 72). It is notable that in her novels, Wales and the border country are treated as having some kind of link with the land of Faery, as noted in the mention of the fiddler Welsh fiddler Ned Pugh (Webb 1917/1979: 214), who, according to legend, consorted with faeries, and the book of folk magic which Hazel's Welsh Romany mother has left to her. Elsewhere in Webb's work, the character of Nesta in *Armour Wherein He Trusted* (Webb 1929) is said to "come from the Cymru... my lineage is elf-lineage" (Webb 1929: 15). In her 1922 novel, *Seven for a Secret*, which Webb dedicated to Hardy, the border country is referred to as "the country that lies between the dimpled lands of England and the gaunt purple steepes of Wales – half in Faery and half out of it" (Davies 1990: 29). However, the reference to Faery is more of a romantic one than a suggestion that supernatural beings will appear in the text.

A notable element in the use of folklore by both Hardy and Webb is the creation of a kind of Gothic atmosphere. Birch (2009) and Hogle (2002) define Gothic as working with a sense of threat or dread, often with elements of the supernatural. Following Hogle, Gothic often takes place in an "antiquated or seemingly antiquat-

¹³ <https://www.dailypost.co.uk/news/north-wales-news/english-town-welsh-language-heard-27809572> [accessed: 26.03.2025]. In the early part of the twentieth century, the Welsh language was strongly represented in areas such as Liverpool and other English border regions. In 1917 the National Eisteddfod, a festival of Welsh culture, literature and language, was held in the English town of Birkenhead: www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-41214767 [accessed: 26.03.2025]. Webb spent some time in the nearby city of Chester working with war-wounded soldiers in 1916 (Coles 1978: 154–158), so presumably was aware of the local Welsh-speaking community.

ed space... Within this space, or a combination of such spaces, are hidden some secrets from the past (sometimes the recent past) that haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise at the main time of the story” (Hogle 2002: 2). It is relatively easy to compare Hardy’s use of such places as d’Urberville Hall and Stonehenge with Webb’s literary use of elements of Shropshire landscape, such as Diafol Mountain (based on the Devil’s Chair on The Stiperstones) in *The Golden Arrow*, and both the old quarry on God’s Little Mountain and Undern Hall of *Gone to Earth*. Just as Hardy uses the mystique of the pagan temple of Stonehenge to suggest Tess’s approaching death as a kind of sacrifice, Webb uses the old quarry and the demonic tales of the Devil’s Chair to hint at the forthcoming fates of her characters.

The role of the past upon the present within a literary text is, as Hogle states, a specific ingredient of the Gothic character which generates a form of dread.

At the same time, the conflicted positions of central Gothic characters can reveal them as haunted by a second “unconscious” of deep-seated social and historical dilemmas, often of many types at once, that become more fearsome the more characters and readers attempt to cover them up or reconcile them symbolically without resolving them fundamentally (Hogle 2002: 3).

The literary motif of Gothic haunting often serves to connect the present to the past, as represented by Hardy’s linking of Tess’s circumstances to the crimes of her d’Urberville ancestors. The author uses it to create a strong sense of foreboding, further exemplified by his use of the ghostly “d’Urberville Carriage”, based on a genuine Dorset legend surrounding the defunct Turberville family (see below). In Webb’s *Gone to Earth* this is demonstrated by Hazel’s belief in the link between herself, her pet fox, and the fearful legendary ghostly riders of the Death Pack, who she believes took her mother.

In *The Golden Arrow*, a young country girl called Deborah Arden falls for Stephen Southernwood, the foreman of the local mine, which is suggestively called Lostwithin. The couple move to a cottage on Diafol Mountain (The Stiperstones). Deborah’s father, John, whose temperament and character seem to have been partly based in part on Webb’s own father (Coles 1978: 17), is a land-working peasant farmer who not only has acute sensitivity to nature but is also a mystic, occasionally experiencing trance-like states¹⁴. Being a town man, and despite having first appeared as a preacher, Stephen initially views the countryside with a demeaning attitude

¹⁴ Mystics and empaths feature frequently in Webb’s work. She herself displayed such tendencies both in her work and everyday life (Coles 1978: 51–2).

and scorns notions of faith, superstition and spirituality. Eventually the pressure of living in the country begins to affect him, and he starts to hate the landscape. It is the land, however, with which the Ardens have a spiritual relationship, particularly Diafol Mountain. Eventually Stephen falls into a state of despondency and feels unable to stay, abandoning Deborah. She subsequently burns their belongings and returns home in a state of depression. Stephen later realizes his mistake and returns to Deborah, and their recently born child, who has learned to live without him. Interestingly, this might be read as a reversal of Tess's reaction to the return of Angel Clare from his overseas ventures, albeit with a happier ending.

Gone to Earth is set in roughly the same geographical area, although much of the action takes place on and around a fictional location called God's Little Mountain, which is based on real-life Lordshill at the end of The Stiperstones ridge¹⁵. Another place of action is the local manor house, called Undern Hall, which the scholar Andrew Radford describes as "a grotesque re-imagining of Alec d'Urberville's country estate". In reading the novel as a variant of the Persephone myth, Radcliffe suggests Undern Hall is a kind of Hades for Hazel's Persephone-like character (Radford 2007: 163). The novel bears a strong resemblance to *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, being a story of the naïve country girl Hazel Woodus, caught in a love triangle between Jack Reddin, a lustful local squire, and a young clergyman called Edward Marston. The story utilises the conflicts between the untamed, natural spiritual state and the civilized society, as well as delving into matters of sexuality and power. The latter is shown in the way the innocent Hazel is pursued by Reddin. Andrew Radford compares this pattern to the seduction of Tess Durbeyfield by Alec d'Urberville, linking both to the Persephone tradition of kidnapped young women (Radford 2007: 88–138, 139–172). Ultimately, Hazel and her pet fox, Foxy, suffer a tragic fate, being pursued over the edge of a quarry by a pack of hounds from Reddin's hunt. In both novels, the hunt ends in the death of its prey, for both Hazel and Tess.

Both *The Golden Arrow* and *Gone to Earth*, contain the themes of man against nature and the spirituality of the natural world¹⁶. However, it is important to note that Webb does not engage with the supernatural in the conventional sense of spirits,

¹⁵ The Baptist chapel of Lordshill was used in the 1950 film adaptation of the novel (Wall 2015: 117–122).

¹⁶ While it may be preferable to some extent to use a non-gendered phrasing of "humanity against nature", I have chosen the gendered phrase as, to some extent, female characters are shown to be more aligned with nature than male protagonists, such as the tortured Stephen Southernwood, or the sadistic Jack Reddin, who tortures animals in front of Hazel and ultimately leads the fox hunt in which she dies.

ghosts, and similar phenomena. She is critical of both conventional Christianity and folk magic (Thrall 2020: 207). It is perhaps more precise to say that she describes a “super nature”, one with which a sensitive person can communicate, a nature which can influence those around it and within it. James H. Thrall suggests that this even goes as far as Webb placing “the outcomes of her narrative within the frame of an overarching destiny seen itself as a force of nature” (Thrall 2020: 207). This is possibly connected to Webb’s personal study and practice of mysticism, as evidenced in her essays upon the healing power of nature, *The Spring of Joy* (Webb 1917/2016)¹⁷. In addition, while Webb utilises legends and images of the supernatural in her work, it is notable that it is a belief in the supernatural which affects and motivates her characters, not an actual entity-character. Gladys Mary Coles points out that Webb considered herself to be superstitious “like all country women” (Coles 1978: 136) and in *The Golden Arrow* Mary uses around thirty legends and superstitions, and around two hundred in her most well-known novel *Precious Bane* (1924), including the famous sin-eating scene.

To illustrate how Webb utilises regional folklore, it is necessary to examine some of these legends and superstitions which make The Stiperstones, particularly The Devil’s Chair, such a powerful symbol in the *The Golden Arrow*. Part of the mystique of The Stiperstones, which Webb renames Diafol Mountain, is the way they dramatically rise out of an apparently green environment (Figure 2). Around them are rolling hills and heathland, yet, at one of the highest points in the region, several rock clusters stand out on the horizon, looking down over the surrounding countryside, the most notorious of these being The Devil’s Chair,

On the highest point of the bare, opposite ridge now curtained in driving storm-cloud, towered in gigantic aloofness a mass of quartzite, blackened and hardened by uncountable ages... The scattered rocks, the ragged holly-brakes on the lower slopes were like small carved lions beside the black marble steps of a stupendous throne. Nothing ever altered its look... It remained inviolable, taciturn, evil. It glowered darkly on the dawn; it came through the snow like jagged bones through flesh; before its hardness even the venturesome cranberries were discouraged. For miles around, in the plains, the valleys, the mountain dwellings it was feared (Webb 1916/1935: 31).¹⁸

¹⁷ This subject is explored in greater detail by James H. Thrall in his chapter on mysticism in *Gone to Earth* and *Precious Bane* in his monograph *Mystic Moderns* (Thrall 2020: 205–219).

¹⁸ While it is beyond the scope of this article, further research could compare the techniques of visual representation and “painter-like” qualities of Webb’s descriptions of landscape and Hardy’s aesthetic patterns, the latter discussed in Leleñ’s article on fictional space and visual arts (Leleñ 2001).



Figure 2. The Devil's Chair, The Stiperstones (photo by author).

The reason the Devil's Chair is feared stems from the genuine legend that The Stiperstones were created when Satan's apron string broke as he was carrying a load of rocks, with which to carry out some mischief elsewhere. So angry was the Devil that he cursed Shropshire. Subsequently, from time to time, he sits on the pile of stones known as The Devil's Chair, attempting to drive them, and Shropshire, under the ground. When Shropshire sinks, England shall fall. Coupled with this is the belief that bad weather, especially mist on the stones, is a sign of evil activity and that the Devil is sitting in his chair (Wood 1944: 44–45). For this reason, the fact that it is raining when Diafol Mountain/The Stiperstones are first introduced in *The Golden Arrow* is significant. Anyone attempting to climb or sit on the chair risks misfortune.

At this point, it is useful to compare Webb's description and use of The Stiperstones with Hardy's use of Stonehenge in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Hardy's description of the henge is not unlike that of Webb's description of The Stiperstones, emphasizing the bulk and darkness of the construction and its place within the natural surroundings,

Clare felt the vertical surface of the structure ... Carrying his fingers onward he found that what he had come in contact with was a colossal rectangular pillar; by stretching out his left hand he could feel a similar one adjoining. At an indefinite height overhead something made the black sky blacker, which had the semblance of a vast architrave uniting the pillars horizontally. They carefully entered beneath and between; the surfaces echoed their soft rustle; but they seemed to be still out of doors. The place was roofless (Hardy 1891/1974: 444).

Later, as the (sacrificial) dawn approaches, the henge, blended with nature, expresses humanlike moods and traits, as do Webb's Stiperstones,

The band of silver paleness along the east horizon made even the distant parts of the Great Plain appear dark and near; and the whole enormous landscape bore that impress of reserve, taciturnity, and hesitation which is usual just before day. The eastward pillars and their architraves stood up blackly against the light, and the great flame-shaped Sun-stone beyond them; and the Stone of Sacrifice midway (Hardy 1891/1974: 446).

When Angel Clare explains to Tess where they are, he comments that the henge is "Older than the centuries; older than the d'Urbervilles!" Tess, realising they are at the ancient heathen temple, lies on the sacrificial altar and declares herself at home (as a heathen). "One of my mother's people was a shepherd hereabouts, now I think of it. And you used to say at Talbothays that I was a heathen. So now I am at home." (Hardy 1891/1974: 445). Here, Hardy uses Stonehenge as a symbol of a dark, spiritual past, linked to ancient spiritualities. Happening, as it does, at the climax of the novel, it shows Tess has seemingly come full circle, back to the source of her being and her spirituality, her true and natural place. Webb, however, uses *The Stiperstones* in a kind of reverse image of Hardy's Stonehenge, both in their role and their effect on the lives of the heroine.

While Tess experiences the henge as a kind of peaceful homecoming, for Deborah, whose father is also a shepherd, Diafol Mountain is something she is born and raised in the shadow of. Her relationship with the stones is not, initially, one of peaceful homecoming; it is one of sometimes uneasy coexistence. Furthermore, Webb's use of *The Stiperstones*/Diafol Mountain is perhaps even darker than Hardy's Stonehenge – in that the henge is a man-made temple dedicated to nature's powers, whilst *The Stiperstones* are nature itself. As such, their age is older and their power darker. The builders and users of the henge are gone, and it lies seemingly isolated, whereas Diafol Mountain persistently exerts its power on those who continue to live and work beneath it. A further contrast might be that Hardy utilises the symbolism of Stonehenge at the climax of the novel. In *The Golden Arrow*, Diafol Mountain appears at the beginning, thus playing a greater role and perhaps suggesting that the dark powers of nature and *The Stiperstones* are more prominent in the lives of the characters, casting a greater, more acknowledged influence. Unlike Stonehenge, to which Tess is delivered prior to her sacrifice, thus allowing her to connect her life to the ancient past, Diafol Mountain remains a looming presence, as it was before mankind existed.

Throughout *The Golden Arrow*, the Devil's Chair dominates the landscape, appearing to act as a harbinger of misfortune, at one point being described as "like a fist flourished in the face" (Webb 1916/1935: 55). Early in the novel, Deborah perceives the shadow of the Diafol Mountain as a giant finger portending something, she knows not what, relating to herself and her coquettish friend Lily, who declares that it predicts "Weddings!" (Webb 1916/1935: 17). Lily's later marriage to Deborah's brother Joe becomes a loveless one, whilst Deborah experiences abandonment.

While courting Deborah, Stephen mocks the Devil's Chair and her belief in devils, even persuading her to reluctantly climb upon the Chair itself. As he reaches the top, he slips and sits down upon the stone, something Deborah interprets as a sign of misfortune to come, which it does. Stephen's own downfall comes not from any imaginary hellish entity but from his continued exposure to the countryside and the Devil's Chair. Slowly he begins to experience a loss of faith in whatever it is he holds sacred and experiences a spiritual emptiness, as "lost within" as the mines where he digs out the heart of the hills. The Devil's Chair does not frighten him because it is evil, or haunted; it frightens him because it represents a symbol of endless nothingness, the emptiness of religion and faith, "an empty throne. There it was; no devil, no angel, no god ever was there, ever would be, nothing ... He shuddered at the appalling picture. He could not get the look of the empty throne of black rock from his mind" (Webb 1916/1935: 181).

For Stephen, this is more terrifying than any mythical devil. He attempts to dynamite the chair but leaves no mark. He realises he must leave as he feels unable to survive in this environment and is unable to understand how the natural acceptance of fates and nature, as shown by John Arden, would help him. Learning at the All-Hallows Eve party about a job which would take him to America, he abandons Deborah on St Thomas's Day, the day of the Doubter. Her reaction is to make a giant bonfire of all their possessions before returning to her parents' house and spending several weeks in a depressive state.

Webb ties these events around a second legend connected with The Stiperstones, that on 21st December, St Thomas's Day, all the ghosts of Shropshire gather at The Stiperstones to elect a new king/ruler. This is mentioned several times in the novel and the sight and sounds of Deborah's fire makes others think on the ghostly tradition (Webb 1916/1935: 220): "The air was full of snow, driving, whirling; and what with its eddying round the Chair and the falling of the stones, and the strange sounds as of laughter and sorrow that came thence, it seemed as if the old tales were true and the ghosts had indeed come in like a tide" (Webb 1916/1935: 251).

St Thomas's Night and the night of ghosts also coincide with the Winter Solstice- the longest night, something else suggested by the idea of bonfires and witches, paganism. Indeed, it marks a new beginning for Deborah. Her decline into depression, her personal "longest night", and her subsequent emergence from it, as she reaches a state of acceptance in the warmth of the setting sun over the Chair (now seen in an almost benevolent light), heralds a kind of rebirth in accordance with that of older, pagan faiths and nature itself. Whereas Tess seems to achieve her homecoming before the sunrise, Deborah experiences hers before sunset. The role of the Solstice may also suggest the reason for the reversed fates of Tess and Deborah, mentioned previously. Tess is symbolically sacrificed upon the man-made altar of the henge, which might also be seen as representing male religion and morality. Deborah, through the healing power of nature, represented by the Chair, is revived and a new circle begins. Greater symbolism is also shown through Stephen ejecting the religious zealot Eli from their house, enhancing the image of the reviving spiritual power of nature over the distorted representation of Christianity Eli represents.

5. Shades and foreshadowing

A third legend connected to The Stiperstones, hinted at in *The Golden Arrow*, concerns that of Wild Edric's Ride, something central to the imagery in *Gone to Earth*. Wild Edric was an Anglo-Saxon thane who led resistance against William the Conqueror following his invasion of England¹⁹. Having initially shown allegiance to the Conqueror, Edric rebelled and joined with the rebels of Wales and the border counties. At one point, he besieged Shrewsbury Castle, but later submitted to William, possibly serving with him as a soldier in his Scottish campaigns (Palmer 2004: 72–73). In folklore, such "betrayal" is not looked upon kindly and for his sins, Edric is cursed to ride with his warriors and his elfin wife, the Lady Godda, across the Welsh Marches, especially The Stiperstones, in a local version of The Wild Hunt legend (Wood 1944: 42–45)²⁰. In particular, he is seen on the eve of war and was allegedly seen before both the Napoleonic Wars and the Crimean War, and even

¹⁹ Edric's father is believed to have been the thane who owned areas of land around Much Wenlock priory, while Edric's own major holdings were around Clun, the Stiperstones and the Long Mynd (see: Williams 1995: 91–92).

²⁰ The Wild Hunt is a motif from European folklore involving a chase of mounted supernatural figures, often led by a hero or deity (such as Odin) (see: Thompson 1977: 257).

in 1914 prior to the outbreak of WW1. This is of particular significance in that *Gone to Earth* was written during WW1 when Mary's brothers were on active service.

While Andrew Radford has written a superb interpretation of *Gone to Earth* through the lens of the Persephone legend (Radford 2007: 138–171), he neglects the use of local folklore by Webb, which, considering her reputation for using such sources, arguably restricts his analysis. Whereas Radford limits his focus to the figure of Hades and the North European legend of “The Wild Hunt”, he apparently overlooks the potential role of the Wild Edric myth²¹. *Gone to Earth* uses the imagery of the Hunt by having the local squire, Jack Reddin, as not only a hunter of foxes but also a relentless pursuer of young women²². Throughout the novel, Reddin pursues the naïve young heroine, Hazel, even after her marriage to Edward Marston, and rapes her, in an attempt to get her to be his mistress. It is while trying to escape his hounds and save her pet fox that she falls to her death in the local quarry. Even the title of the book is a hunter's call for when a fox burrows to escape.

As previously noted, *Gone to Earth* owes a lot to Thomas Hardy's style of writing. Not only is it comparable plot-wise with *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, as Andrew Radford points out with the notion of the “doomed Persephone” heroine (Radford February 2004), but relies heavily on foreshadowing and the occasional contrived coincidence, which, while a literary technique used by numerous writers, is particularly evident in Hardy's novel (Zhang/Zhao May–June 2019: 871). The suggestion of Wild Edric is an example of such foreshadowing and, once again, is comparable to examples within *Tess*, in particular the ghostly d'Urberville coach, a kind of wheeled harbinger of doom to members of the d'Urberville family, from whom Tess is descended, which is mentioned by both Angel Clare and later Alec d'Urberville.

The carriage is introduced late in the novel (Chapter 33), when Tess comments that she feels a familiarity with the ancient carriage which has taken her and Clare to the church on their wedding day. Reluctantly, Angel tells of a family curse which was brought about when a d'Urberville “committed a dreadful crime in his family coach” (Hardy 1891/1974: 256), which Alec later confirms was the kidnap of a young woman which resulted in a murder of either the d'Urberville man or the woman (he forgets which) and the curse of the ghostly carriage, which

²¹ Radford only mentions the Wild Edric myth in a footnote (footnote 89, page 167) and incorrectly describes Wild Edric as being seen with his hounds. According to Charlotte Burne's well-known account, Edric is seen with his band of warriors (Burne 1883: 28).

²² Reddin is possibly inspired by the rakish Shropshire landowner, “Mad” Jack Mytton who was renowned for his wild ways and love of fox hunting and riding (see: Palmer 2004: 212–213).

is heard prior to the death of a d'Urberville (Hardy 1891/1974: 402). In Hardy's novel, it foreshadows both Alec's murder and Tess's death and is based on the real legend of a ghostly carriage seen by members of the Turberville family near Woolbridge Manor, Dorset²³.

Likewise, the ghostly hunt of *Gone to Earth* (also referred to in *The Golden Arrow* as "the dark riders") is a harbinger of death and disaster, which also links the story to a genuine local legend. In *Gone to Earth*, the Hunt, or as it is referred to in the novel "the Death Pack" is introduced early on. Hazel, finding Foxy restless at night, comments, "'Maybe they're out,' ... 'Maybe the black meet's set for to-night and she's scented the jeath pack.' She looked about nervously. 'I can see summat driving dark o'er the pastures yonder; they'm abroad, surely'" (Webb 1917/1979: 16). The legend is then explained, "It was said that the death pack, phantom hounds of a bad squire... scoured the country on dark stormy nights. Harm was for the house past which it streamed, death for those that heard it give tongue. This was the legend, and Hazel believed it implicitly" (Webb 1917/1979: 17).

Hazel has her own reasons to fear the Death Pack, which illustrates the symbolic links between herself and her pet, believing the Hunt had killed Foxy's mother and her own, "Hounds symbolized everything she hated ... She identified herself with Foxy, and so with all things hunted and snared and destroyed" (Webb 1917/1979: 17). This itself foreshadows their mutual end at the end of the fox hunt.

Jack Reddin first meets Hazel when driving his horse and trap along the same night-time road on which she is walking home. He takes her to Undern Manor in the hope of seducing her but is unsuccessful, as she leaves before he gets the chance. This creates an interesting contrast to Tess's "kidnap" by Alec, in that while Hazel initially escapes Jack's amorous intentions, she will fall prey to them later, in a place of nature, Hunter's Spinney, which Radford (Radford 2004: 59) parallels with Tess's rape "under the 'Druidical Oaks' of The Chase", suggesting, perhaps, a certain inevitability of her fate. Hazel's next sighting of him is when he arrives outside an inn, searching for her, unaware she is within. Like Tess's noisy carriage, the sound of Jack's horse frightens Hazel, "suddenly there was a great clatter outside, the sound of a horse, pulled up sharply, slipping on the cobbles, and a shout for the landlord. 'Oh, my mortal life!' said Hazel, 'it met be the Black Huntsman himself'" (Webb 1917/1979: 54).

²³ www.dorsetlife.co.uk/2017/01/wool-and-woolbridge-manor/ [accessed 25.03.2025]; <https://dorset-ancestors.com/category/wool/> [accessed: 25.03.2025].

It is Reddin's mistreatment of animals which appals Hazel, such as when he tortures a hedgehog in front of her and burns some ants alive, while his brutish sexuality attracts her. His casting as a hunt master blends the Wild Edric myth and Webb's own tailoring of it with her dislike of hunting. In the final scene, it is Hazel's distrust of Jack which stops her handing Foxy to him to save her from the hounds, and thus she dooms herself and her pet.

Hazel's death at the end of the novel is not merely hinted at but also outlined by the narrator and the characters from early in the text. This creates a heavy, brooding atmosphere in a Gothic tradition. In the first chapter she and her father are preparing to attend a funeral, him being both a wreath maker and a harpist. In the second chapter, Hazel goes into town to buy a dress and is refused a bed for the night by her aunt. "In after years, when the consequences of her action had become things of the past ... She never dreamed that she, by her selfishness that night, had herself set Hazel's feet in the dark and winding path that she must tread from that night onward to its hidden, shadowy ending" (Webb 1917/1979: 23). It is, whilst on this "dark and winding path", while walking home, that she meets Reddin for the first time. Prior to this encounter, she saves a rabbit from a trap and gets blood on her dress, prefiguring several future events, not least her eventual sexual "bleeding" by the hunt master, and her own death. Following her narrow escape at the inn, Hazel and her father are walking to the funeral when she begins to dance around a felled tree. Rebuked by her father, who reminds her she's a grown woman, Hazel replies "I'm not an 'ooman growd! ... I dunna want to be, and I won't never be" (Webb 1917/1979: 54).

At this point, Webb once more gives the suggestion of "super-nature" and its potential power for human interaction, "The pine-tops bent in the wind like attentive heads, as gods, sitting stately above, might nod thoughtfully over a human destiny. Someone, it almost seemed, had heard and registered Hazel's cry, 'I'll never be an 'ooman,' assenting, sardonic" (Webb 1917/1979: 54). As if this was not enough foreshadowing, they then walk past the quarry. After hearing the tale of a cow which died falling into it, "Hazel stood at the edge of the steep grey cliff, her hands folded, a curious fatalism in her eyes. 'There'll be summat bad'll come to me hereabouts,' she said – 'summat bad and awful'" (Webb 1917/1979: 54–55). Later, Hazel goes to her own wedding wearing funeral wreaths, as her father has run out of frames to make proper wedding ones. The reader is forewarned of the ending, which becomes increasingly clear as the final scene unfolds. Chased by the hunt, attempting to save Foxy, Hazel falls to her death over the edge of the quarry. For her, the curse of the Death Pack is as real as she imagines it.

While the imagery of Wild Edric is obvious, both Gladys Mary Coles (Coles 1978: 23) and Dorothy P.H. Wrenn (Wrenn 1964: 10) point out a further local legend which inspired the final scene of the novel, that of *The Major's Leap*²⁴. During the English Civil War, Major Thomas Smallman, a Royalist officer, was pursued by Parliamentary troops. Realising they were gaining on him, he forced his horse to attempt to jump a gorge on Wenlock Edge. The horse died but the Major escaped by landing in an apple tree. He then managed to take his dispatches to Shrewsbury. Since then, a ghostly re-enactment of the deed has allegedly been seen. Mary Webb was fascinated by the idea of a man being hunted like a fox (she herself was anti-bloodsport and a vegetarian) and managed to combine the two legends into the harrowing finale²⁵.

As mentioned previously, Webb does not use the interaction of supernatural forces upon her characters as much as she uses their own superstitious belief in such things to influence them. To some extent, the readers of her novels also become readers of folk lore, interpreting premonitions in everyday actions and events but also having the ability of a detached observer to see the danger of misreading such beliefs. One example might be when Hazel herself encounters a contrived coincidence whilst attempting a spell to communicate with fairies, asking whether she should return to Reddin. She takes the faint harp music as a positive reply. Of course, she, unlike the reader, is unaware that her father is practising his harp playing on the other side of the hill. Once more, superstition has sealed her fate.

Mary Webb's own fate was also sealed in later life. She suffered several more bouts of Graves Disease and developed pernicious anaemia, which was generally fatal at that time. Eventually her marriage began to fail, ironically just as her literary career was starting to reach new heights. In 1922 she had written to Thomas Hardy, asking if she might dedicate her fourth novel, *Seven for a Secret*, to him. He replied in the positive with a letter which praised her work. Mary was invited to visit him, but bad health prevented the meeting (Coles 1978: 227). Mary Webb passed away on 8th October 1927 in a nursing home in St Leonard's, Sussex, far from her beloved Shropshire. Thomas Hardy died a few months later.

²⁴ See footnote 12 of this article.

²⁵ As a side note, Major Smallman was the owner of Wilderhope Hall, upon which Reddin's Undern Manor is based.

6. Conclusion

The influence of Thomas Hardy upon Mary Webb is both noticeable and sizeable. The immediate similarity of themes used by both authors (pastoral life, conflicts of tradition with modernity, the position of women, sexual awakening, and other) would itself suggest a strong debt in Webb's work to that of Hardy. Additionally, a certain similarity of literary techniques might further show the inspiration Webb found in her love of Hardy's novels. Like Hardy, Webb used folklore extensively and utilised it in the creation of a form of pastoral Gothic, not least through the use of foreshadowing, a technique with which Hardy is much associated. Furthermore, the creation of an idealised region (Hardy's Wessex and Webb's almost mythical Shropshire, both with their powerful descriptions of landscape) is a technique which, arguably, the younger author derived in part from the elder. Similarly, while Hardy is certainly not alone in this, the use of regional dialect is a major factor which they both share. Both were exposed to their respective idioms from birth, for while Webb was born into and grew up in a highly educated middle-class family, she lived and interacted with rural folk from an early age, and each carried out substantial research into the fields of language, history and folklore of their chosen regions.

The Webb novels analysed for this article, were chosen specifically because, in my opinion, they illustrate the strong influence of Hardy's work, especially in the case of *Gone to Earth*. Examination of her later work, while often dealing with similar themes, may illustrate her move away from the influence of others, but the limitations of space must leave such an exploration for future research. Such enquiry is certainly required to ascertain how else Hardy's work influenced Webb's, and an examination of any relevant diary entries or letters would be an important step, should they exist²⁶. Likewise, the influences of other authors, such as Synge and Fiona McLeod, while mentioned briefly, remain to be analysed, especially with their relationship to the Celtic Revival and possible influence on Webb's relationship with "Welshness" and Celtic "magic" in her later works. However, as Gladys Mary Coles points out, it would be a mistake to treat Webb's work purely as an

²⁶ At the time of writing, only three letters from Webb to Hardy seem to exist in public access; the two mentioned above by Radford (her initial request to Hardy to dedicate a novel to him, the accompanying note with a copy of *Seven for a Secret*) which are in the possession of the Dorset History Centre (<http://marywebb.stanford.edu/contacts/20905/>), and a note accompanying a copy of *Precious Bane* in which she enquires about the possibility of attending a production of Hardy's play *The Queen of Cornwall* (<http://marywebb.stanford.edu/contacts/20899/>). Coles appears to suggest the existence, or at least a knowledge of, further communication attempting to arrange a meeting but gives little detail (Coles 1978: 227).

imitation of Hardy's or other authors, "while she admired Synge, Fiona McLeod and Thomas Hardy, her work was in no way a pastiche of theirs. Mary Webb in her writings was uniquely herself from the beginning and was not made by affinities or influences" (Coles 1978: 117).

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