The Other Side of Silence: The Life and Work of Mary Webb


Abstract

Erika Duncan has commented that ‘because of the intangible sentimental quality of Mary Webb’s special genius, there has been a general reluctance to acknowledge her as a major writer.’ This thesis argues against such dismissive approaches to Webb and makes a case for a re-evaluation of Webb as an unusual writer of pantheist spirituality and nature mysticism and one who can now be appreciated for the ecopoetics of her work. Within this framework the study charts the stylistic qualities of her writing and its mutative shifts through a chronological examination of her work which also includes a biographical account of her life and the major influences which shaped her ideas and writing. Aspects of inter-textuality with other writers will be considered throughout and will underscore the value of Webb’s work whilst emphasising the unique and beautiful quality of her voice. The first chapter, ‘Early Responses’, considers her formative experiences and her earliest essays and poems. ‘Mythological Motifs’ then reviews the mythopoeic nature of Webb’s first two novels and her use of myth in furthering her themes. The ensuing chapter, ‘Preceptive Perception’, evaluates both the didacticism in authorial style and the pertinence of Webb’s vision which are features of her third book. Chapter Four discusses her final two completed volumes as ‘A Dyad’ for they represent, respectively, her weakest and her finest writing. The final chapter, ‘A Medieval Message’, focuses on Webb’s last, incomplete, work, analysing its experimental qualities and its potential to reveal Webb’s last efforts to leave a parting missive for her readers before her death. Central critical concepts are that: in the development of Webb’s religious views from conventional Christianity to pantheism she anticipated modern feminist spirituality; and, in her insistence upon the supreme value of nature and its continual risk from human exploitation in connection with the oppression of women and their need for spiritual freedom, Webb is an unrecognised ecofeminist who was reflecting early twentieth-century issues. In addition, I attempt to discover reasons for Webb’s neglect and positively propose a place for her in literary studies. A Conclusion will summarise the main arguments and indicate possible further avenues of research.

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Uncontrolled Keywords: Mary Gladys Webb (25 March 1881 – 8 October 1927); Poetry; Prose; English novelist;
P Language and Literature > PR English literature > PR111 Women authors
P Language and Literature > PR English literature > PR500 Poetry
P Language and Literature > PR English literature > PR750 Prose > PR821 Prose fiction.
The novel

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Most of the action in "The Other Side of Silence" takes place in hotels or private apartments, in wartime Germany (during a long flashback), or in the Villa Mauresque, the extravagant, art-filled Riviera residence of novelist W. Somerset Maugham. As students of spy fiction know, Maugham not only managed British spies early in the 20th century; he also wrote "Ashenden," one of the best collections of spy stories. In his 80s when he and Bernie get to know each other, Maugham continues to dabble in espionage; in fact, he might not be free to quit even if she often worked far into the night and lived on little more than bread and butter and tea. She came first in the examination in the physical sciences in 1893, and in 1894 was placed second in the examination in mathematical sciences. It was not until the spring of that year that she was introduced to Pierre Curie. Their marriage in 1895 marked the start of a partnership that was soon to achieve results of world significance. Following Henri Becquerel's discovery in 1896 of a new phenomenon, which Marie later called 'radioactivity', Marie Curie decided to find out if the radioactivity -- Mary Webb | from:English. Over the Hills and Far Away. Two Young Peasant Women, by Camille Pissarro, 1891-92. She worked hard. She could make butter-baskets and poultry-baskets through which not the most centrifugal half-dozen fowls could do more than insinuate anxious heads. She could make children's ornamental basket-chairs, and she could do the close wicker-work of rocking-chairs for nursing-mothers. He might even speak to her. He sat on the other side of the hearth while the servant-girl laid tea – the knife-and-fork tea of farms, with beef and bacon and potatoes. A tea to remember. It was one of those marvellous half-hours of a life-time, which blossom on even to the grave, and maybe afterwards. She had never dreamed--.