



Frances Hodgson Burnett: *The Secret Garden*

(1909)

[Angelika Zirker \(Eberhard-Karls Universität Tübingen\)](#)

Genre: Novel, Young Adult. Country: England.

The Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett was first published in monthly instalments in *The American Magazine* from October 1910, and then as a book by Frederick A. Stokes in New York (as an edition without illustrations), and by Heinemann in London in 1911, with illustrations by Charles Robinson.

The status of *The Secret Garden* has changed over the years. The novel was not mentioned at all in Burnett's obituary in *The Times* in 1924 but can be considered as her most famous and popular story today. The memorial for Frances Hodgson Burnett in New York Central Park, installed in April 1937, depicts Mary Lennox and Dickon Sowerby (Gerzina ix).

The title originally given to the story by Burnett was not *The Secret Garden* but "Mistress Mary quite Contrary" (Gerzina 2), the first line of a popular nursery rhyme. Similarly, chapter headings were added for the publication of the novel: Burnett only gave numbers to the chapters at first, but then added titles, e.g. "There Is No One Left" to Chapter One, for the publication in *The American Magazine* (Rector 190).

Very little is known about the writing process of *The Secret Garden*. While Burnett would usually have corresponded about her books with her family, she was living with them at the time she was writing *The Secret Garden*, so there was simply no need to tell them about her progress or difficulties in letters. The only thing known is that Burnett wrote the book very quickly. She was in England in April in order to be present at the first performance of *Dawn of a Tomorrow*, and as early as October she wrote to her publisher in London that the novel was finished (Gerzina 180-81).

The Secret Garden is the story of Mary Lennox who grows up in India and, at the age of ten, loses her parents in a cholera epidemic. The spoiled and at the same time neglected girl is subsequently sent back to England to live at her uncle's house, Misselthwaite Manor, in Yorkshire. Her uncle, Archibald Craven, a hunchback, has lived in isolation since the death of his wife ten years earlier and spends very little time at his home.

The first person she meets in England is Mrs. Medlock, her uncle's housekeeper, who comes to London to pick her up and tells her about the manor house on the moor where she is going to live. Mrs. Medlock is to take charge of the girl together with Martha Sowerby, a housemaid at Misselthwaite. Martha astonishes Mary with her "good-tempered, homely way" (4.19). She speaks in Yorkshire dialect and talks to Mary about the moor and about her own family. At length, she makes Mary go outdoors by telling her about her younger brother Dickon who is always outside and practically lives on the moor. Moreover, she awakens Mary's curiosity by telling her

about one of the gardens that has been locked up for ten years: “Mr. Craven had it shut when his wife died so sudden. He won’t let no one go inside. It was her garden. He locked th’ door an’ dug a hole and buried th’ key” (4.21). From that moment, Mary can only think about the garden finding, for the first time in her life, a real interest in the outside world.

During her daily rambles in search of the locked, secret garden, Mary meets Ben Weatherstaff, a gardener who is just as contrary as she is, and she befriends a robin who shows her the place where the key is buried and who then leads her into the garden. At the end of chapter eight, “she [is] standing *inside* the garden” (46), but thinks that it must be dead because everything looks dull and barren.

After her discovery of the secret garden, she meets Dickon for the first time. She finds him

sitting under a tree, with his back against it, playing on a rough wooden pipe. He was a funny looking boy about twelve. He looked very clean and his nose turned up and his cheeks were as red as poppies and never had Mistress Mary seen such round and such blue eyes in any boy’s face. And on the trunk of the tree he leaned against, a brown squirrel was clinging and watching him, and from behind a bush near by a cock pheasant was delicately stretching his neck to peep out, and quite near him were two rabbits sitting up and sniffing with tremulous noses. (10.57)

Dickon is a sort of conjurer, a Pan-figure, who can charm animals; his appearance also alludes to St. Francis, known for his close contact with animals, who was said to have known the language of birds. Dickon is likewise enchanted when Mary eventually lets him into her secret and shows him the garden she has found. It is Dickon who helps her bring it back to life and who, at the same time, befriends her. With him, Mary speaks Yorkshire dialect, and the first question she ever asks in this language is “Does tha’ like me?” (11.65), which illustrates her gradual development into a ‘healthy’ child. The character of Dickon has mythological, magical and religious connotations. He can enchant animals and communicate with them, and he helps Mary, and later her cousin, back to health.

When Mary’s uncle comes to Misselthwaite for a short visit, she asks him whether she might have “a bit of earth” (Chapter 12). He grants her this wish without asking for any details. In fact, she reminds her uncle of his deceased wife: “You remind me of some one else who loved the earth and things that grow. When you see a bit of earth you want [...] take it, child, and make it come alive” (12.70). Before she finds the garden, however, Mary is led towards another gradual discovery, within the house. One night she hears a cry in the corridor but cannot make out where it comes from. When she has to spend a day inside because of bad weather, she hears it again. It is only after she has found the garden that she solves this mystery. Hearing the crying again another night, she decides to follow its source as it “seemed even stranger than the secret garden and the buried key” (13.73). It is thus that she finds her cousin Colin who is as old as she is but has spent most of his life locked up in a room in fear of becoming a hunchback like his father.

At first they both believe that they are seeing a ghost, and have to convince each other they are real. Colin admits that he is afraid of dying: “No one believes I shall live to grow up” (13.76). Mary then uses the same strategy as Martha and awakens his curiosity by telling him about the garden that was locked and the key which was buried. Colin is immediately attracted by the idea of a locked garden and makes Mary fear that he will simply command someone to open the garden for him as he declares that everybody obeys him. Mary succeeds in keeping him from doing this only by emphasising that the garden is their special, shared secret.

Mary gradually lets Colin into her secrets and starts by telling him about Dickon. After some time, the secret that they know each other is discovered: only Martha knew that Mary had found Colin; one afternoon Mrs. Medlock and the doctor enter Colin’s room and find Mary there. Colin orders them to let Mary see him regularly, and they spend each day together whenever the weather is bad. It is only when there is sunshine again and Mary spends

her days outside with Dickon in the garden that Colin, whose health is already improving, throws a tantrum, which Mary answers with her own rage and contrary behaviour: “You stop! I hate you! Everybody hates you! I wish everybody would run out of the house and let you scream yourself to death! You *will* scream yourself to death in a minute, and I wish you would!” (17.103). Colin was having hysterics because he thought he could feel a lump on his back. Mary then examines him and cannot find anything. It is actually Mary’s contrary behaviour that makes him believe her. From this moment on, Colin develops into a healthy young boy: he tells Mary that he likes her (Chapter 18) and Mary eventually tells him that she has already found the secret garden. Soon after that Dickon comes to see him with some of his animals, and they plan their first visit in the garden together. When they finally get there, Colin cries out: “I shall get well! I shall get well! [...] And I shall live forever and ever and ever!” (20.124).

It is in the garden that Colin eventually learns to walk and develops a healthy appetite for the first time in his life. Ben Weatherstaff finds them one day and joins them in the garden, where they perform “Magic” that is supposed to make Colin healthy: “Magic is always pushing and drawing and making things out of nothing. Everything is made out of Magic, leaves and trees, flowers and birds, badgers and foxes and squirrels and people. [...] The Magic in this garden has made me stand up and know I am going to live to be a man” (23.139).

Meanwhile Archibald, who is travelling in Europe, begins to feel better, much to his surprise. He learns only later that this began on the very day when Colin cried out in the garden that he was going to live forever. Moreover, the same night, he dreams of his wife who calls him; when he asks “[W]here are you?”, Lilies answers in his dream, “In the garden!” (27.166). The following day he receives a letter from Susan Sowerby, Martha and Dickon’s mother, who has visited the children in the garden. She asks him to return to Misselthwaite. He immediately travels home, where he learns that Colin is in the garden having a race with Mary. Colin dashes into his father’s arms. In the novel’s final scene Archibald and Colin are walking to the house together: “At the end of the book, the reader knows that Mary, Colin, and Mr. Craven will form a new family” (Carpenter, *Beyond* 106).

The children’s healing process follows the seasons: Mary arrives towards the end of winter, the main action of the novel is set in spring, and it is during the summer that Colin becomes a healthy boy and eventually meets his father. The garden brings this process about, which is why Pape regards “the secret garden” as a symbol of Eden, arcadia and the golden age simultaneously (392).

Burnett had a profound belief in the influence of the mind on the body: “So long as Mistress Mary’s mind was full of disagreeable thoughts, [...] she was a yellow-faced, sickly, bored and wretched child” (27.163). It is only when she goes outside and starts to think about different things that she can become healthy and develop normally. The same is true for Colin. This view has to be read in the context of Christian Science and Mary Baker Eddy’s work *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*. Burnett herself tried Eddy’s treatment and believed in its effects, although she later rejected the notion of being a Christian Scientist herself (cf. “Mrs. Burnett Not a Christian Scientist”).

In *The Secret Garden*, Burnett also expresses her own love of gardens. During her childhood she loved a garden close to her house, and later in her life she leased Maytham Hall in Kent for ten years from 1898. Pape views Burnett’s life as a constant escape from reality which is conveyed in her literary productions. The sources of her writing, according to Pape, lay in her own childhood days; he refers mainly to her memoir *The One I Knew the Best of All* in which she reflects on her love of gardens and gardening (cf. Pape 372). *The Secret Garden* is considered to be the result of her stay in Kent. In 1912 she also published the story “My Robin” which is based on her ‘befriending’ a robin in that very rose-garden.

Studies concerning *The Secret Garden* focus on the healing magic at work within the garden walls (Adams; Bixler 1991; Darcy; Marquis; Roxburgh; Stolzenbach), the presentation of Mary as a contrary child (Evans; Keyser; Moran), its fairy tale elements (Connell), the depiction of India in the introductory chapters (Webb) as well as its

place in children's literature (Carpenter; Bixler 1996). Although *The Secret Garden* is one of the few works Burnett did not plan to dramatize, there are several film and musical versions of the novel. There was a 1919 film, now lost; a 1949 adaptation by Metro-Golwyn Mayer starring Margaret O'Brien (Bixler 1994); and, in 1993, director Agnieszka Holland's version appeared. The first musical adaptation was produced in Britain in 1983, followed by an American Broadway production in 1991 which was awarded several prizes (cf. Bixler 1994). Gerzina remarks in this context that "the effect of that book on its readers only grows with time. As a novel, a film, and a play [...] it continues to move readers and viewers all over the world" (Burnett 307).

Works Cited and Bibliography

- Adams, Gillian. "Secrets and Healing Magic in *The Secret Garden*." *Triumphs of the Spirit in Children's Literature*. Ed. Francelina Butler; Richard Rotert. Hamden: Library Professional Publications, 1986. 42-53.
- Bixler, Phyllis. "Gardens, Houses, and Nurturant Power in *The Secret Garden*." *Romanticism and Children's Literature in Nineteenth-Century England*. Ed. James Holt McGavran. Athens: The U of Georgia P, 1991. 208-25.
- Bixler, Phyllis. "*The Secret Garden* 'Misread': The Broadway Musical as Creative Interpretation." *Children's Literature* 22 (1994): 101-23.
- Bixler, Phyllis. *The Secret Garden: Nature's Magic*. New York: Twayne, 1996.
- Burnett, Frances Hodgson. *The One I Knew the Best of All: A Memory of the Mind of a Child*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893.
- Burnett, Frances Hodgson. *The Secret Garden: A Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina. New York: Norton, 2006.
- Burnett, Frances Hodgson. "Mrs. Burnett Not a Christian Scientist." 1909. *The Secret Garden: A Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina. New York: Norton, 2006. 249-50.
- Carpenter, Angelica Shirley; Jean Shirley. *Frances Hodgson Burnett: Beyond the Secret Garden*. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications, 1990.
- Carpenter, Humphrey. *Secret Gardens: A Study of the Golden Age of Children's Literature*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1985.
- Connell, Eileen. "Playing House: Frances Hodgson Burnett's Victorian Fairy Tale." *Keeping the Victorian House: A Collection of Essays*. Ed. Vanessa D. Dickerson. New York: Garland, 1995. 149-71.
- Darcy, Jane. "The Representation of Nature in *The Wind in the Willows* and *The Secret Garden*." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 19.2 (1995): 211-22.
- Evans, Gwyneth. "The Girl in the Garden: Variations on a Feminine Pastoral." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 19.1 (Spring 1994): 20-24.
- Gerzina, Gretchen Holbrook. "The End of an Era." *The Secret Garden: A Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina. New York: Norton, 2006. 179-86.
- Gerzina, Gretchen Holbrook. *Frances Hodgson Burnett*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2004.
- Keyser, Elizabeth Lennox. "'Quite Contrary': Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*." *Children's Literature: Annual of the MLA Division on Children's Literature and Children's Literature Association* 11 (1983): 1-13.
- Marquis, Claudia. "The Power of Speech: Life in *The Secret Garden*." *AUMLA* 67 (May 1987): 163-87.
- Moran, Mary Jeannette. "Nancy's Ancestors: The Mystery of Imaginative Female Power in *The Secret Garden* and *A Little Princess*." *Mystery in Children's Literature: From the Rational to the Supernatural*. Ed. Adrienne E. Gavin; Christopher Routledge. Houndsmill: Palgrave, 2001. 32-45.
- Pape, Walter. *Das literarische Kinderbuch: Studien zur Entstehung und Typologie*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1981.
- Rector, Gretchen V. "Digging in the Garden: The Manuscript of *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett." *The Secret Garden: A Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina. New York: Norton, 2006. 186-99.
- Roxburgh, Stephen D. "'Our first world': Form and meaning in *The Secret Garden*." *Children's Literature in Education* 10.3 (1979): 120-30.

Stolzenbach, Mary. "Braid Yorkshire: The Language of Myth? An Appreciation of *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett." *Mythlore: A Journal of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams and the Genres of Myth and Fantasy Studies* 20.4 (78) (1995): 25-29.

Webb, Jean. "Romanticism vs. Empire in *The Secret Garden*." *Introducing Children's Literature: From Romanticism to Postmodernism*. Ed. Deborah Cogan Thacker; Jean Webb. London: Routledge, 2002. 91-97.

[Angelika Zirker \(Eberhard-Karls Universitat Tübingen\)](#)

Citation: Zirker, Angelika. "The Secret Garden ". *The Literary Encyclopedia*. First published 29 April 2009 [https://www.litencyc.com, accessed 05 June 2023.]

This article is copyright to © [The Literary Encyclopedia](#).

All entries, data and software copyright © The Literary Dictionary Company Limited

ISSN 1747-678X