

The Enchantment of Childhood Innocence in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden Approach*

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Abstract:

This paper makes an effort to explore the concept of Childhood innocence in *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. It is concerned with the complexities, born out of life's difficult situation. It contemplates the sense of wonder to the joy of delight in the little things in life and in the natural environment. This paper intends to analyse and validate the inner struggle of children often abandoned in the world surrounded by adults. In this paper, not only is their lost state mentioned, but also the endless hope in suffering is explained.

KeyWords: Burnett, Children's literature, Innocence

"The Secret Garden" is a children's novel by American author Frances Hodgson Burnett¹. She liked to tell stories, and her favourite theme was the idealised idea of childhood. She had a gift for writing realistic fiction that incorporated touches of magic and fantasy, making her stories quite unique. Burnett's *The secret garden* is an extraordinary work that has as its central idea the innocence of childhood and the magic which this innocent nature sets free. The field of children's classic is one that often goes uninterrupted and very often buried from the critical perspectives and analytical views. It's literature that's meant for kids, and one tends to forget to see the richness of its contents.

From time immemorial, Children have been the key subject of great poets and writers. As generations move on, Children have excessive become the core of most works of art. They are portrayed in positive light in the face of poverty or misfortunes as virtuous beings. The aspect of childhood innocence can be seen from the Romantic age. The "regressive desire for a pre-industrial, rural world and the identification of the child with purity and moral simplicity" (Wullschläger 17). This has also visible in the Christian thought, and is furthermore found in the writing of Blake and Wordsworth, who have increasingly signified the aspect of a childhood as innocence. So gradually, Children have evolved as symbols of hope and that of new beginnings.

Mary Lennox, at the beginning of the novel, is far from the ideal of childhood innocence². Mary is raised in colonial India by indifferent parents and servants who indulge her whims. She grows up to be a spoiled, irritable and emotionally detached child. She is described as unattractive both in appearance and in temperament. She is not loved, not accompanied and hence she doesn't have the natural growth of childhood's innocence. But when Mary goes to Misselthwaite Manor in Yorkshire the change begins. Initially sour and withdrawn, her character changes as she is exposed to the natural environment and becomes more independent. Mary has to learn to take care of herself unlike in India where she was always taken care of. The secret garden is the main symbol of the novel and it represents the essence of childhood innocence. At first the garden is neglected and locked up which reflects Mary and Colin's emotional state of mind, both are lonely, unloved and without happiness. The garden unlocking is the start of change and renewal.

¹ Ann Thwaite, *Waiting for the Party: The Life of Frances Hodgson Burnett* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1974), 112.

² *The Secret Garden*, by Frances Hodgson Burnett (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1911), 1–5.

Mary is working in the garden and it slowly begins to come back to life. Flowers blossom, plants sprout and the space becomes beautiful and vibrant. And so this physical change mirrors Mary's emotional growth. The garden is a refuge of innocence, free from the restrictions of society and the interference of adults. It's a space for children to explore, dream and interact with nature.

The garden's secrecy contributes to its magic. It is a private world in which Mary, Colin and Dickon can be themselves. Here, they're not the traumas of their past or the expectations of society. Instead they get to be children: curious, playful and full of wonder. Burnett uses the garden to show that innocence thrives in an environment that encourages freedom, creativity, and a connection to nature. Also, the garden symbolizes the cyclical nature of life. The characters, like the garden, pass through seasons of decay and renewal, periods of emotional hardship followed by growth and healing. Innocence, in this sense, is not static but dynamic, expanding with experience and interaction.

Another powerful image of lost and regained innocence is Colin Craven, the sickly and reclusive son of Archibald Craven. Colin is shut up in his room, convinced he is going to die young, and wallows in despair and self-pity. The man is not only physically ill, but profoundly psychologically, suffering from neglect, fear and lack of love.

Mary's impact on Colin is profound. Her brutal honesty and growing compassion confront his negative beliefs and spur him to engage with the world outside his room. Colin is transformed when he is taken to the secret garden. The garden becomes a place where he can experience freedom, joy and a sense of belonging.

Colin's story demonstrates the power of innocence to heal. He starts believing in his own strength and vitality. He becomes physically stronger. Burnett's notion of "Magic" is a metaphor for positive thinking and the power of belief³. For Colin, to embrace this "Magic" is to rediscover innocence, to return to a state of hope, of imagination and openness. The friendship of Mary and Colin is at the heart of this change. They grow together and learn from each other working in the garden. Burnett emphasizes the development of innocence through relationships and emotional ties through their relationship.

Dickon Sowerby represents another form of childlike innocence, one that is closely tied to nature. Unlike Mary and Colin who must re-discover innocence, Dickon is naturally innocent and in harmony with the natural world. He is often depicted as having a magical affinity with animals and plants, and embodies a pastoral ideal of simplicity and goodness.

In the novel, Dickon's character is a guiding factor for Mary and Colin. He teaches them the rhythm of nature and how to take care of the garden. His gentle ways and consistent kindness provide a sense of steadiness and reliability. Innocence is linked with a love of nature and a loving attitude to all living things, as Burnett expresses through Dickon.

Dickon's character also supports the notion that innocence is not ignorance. Rather it is a wisdom born of empathy, of curiosity and of a profound understanding of the natural world. His influence helps Mary and Colin to reconnect with these qualities, further enhancing their transformation. The novel also depicts nature as a significant element in the process of recovering innocence. The Yorkshire moors with their wide horizons and shifting seasons are in stark contrast to the confined and artificial environment of Mary's former existence in India. Nature provides a sense of freedom and possibility that is essential for the characters' development.

In Burnett's work, nature is a nourishing space that invites exploration and self-discovery. For Mary and Colin, gardening is a therapy, a productive, life-affirming outlet for their energy. By interacting with the natural world, they develop a sense of responsibility, patience and appreciation for life.

The touch of the earth, the fragrance of flowers, the song of birds—these are the sensuous experiences of nature which contribute to the re-awakening of innocence. These experiences root the characters in the present moment, cultivating an attitude of wonder and joy. Burnett feels that reconnecting with nature is important for emotional and psychological well-being. What makes the novel most interesting is its exploration of the relationship between

³ Phyllis Bixler, *The Secret Garden: Nature's Magic* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 72–76.

innocence and psychological healing. Both Mary and Colin are victims of emotional neglect and trauma, which they express through their actions and bodies. Their journey to innocence is also a journey to healing.

Burnett offers a contemporary psychological perspective by showing how positive thinking, emotional support, and oneness with the natural world can promote well-being. The idea of “Magic” can be seen as a cognitive shift of sorts, a move from negative to positive thought. The secret garden is a healing space in which characters can face their fears and develop resilience. They forgive innocence and move beyond their past to forge a healthier future.

The enchantment of childhood innocence in *The Secret Garden* extends beyond the individual characters to convey a universal message. Burnett suggests that innocence is a vital aspect of the human experience, one that should be preserved and cultivated. It is a source of creativity, empathy, and resilience. The novel also highlights the dangers of neglecting innocence. Mary and Colin’s initial illustrate how the absence of love and care can lead to emotional stagnation. However, their transformation offers hope, demonstrating that it is possible to reclaim innocence and rediscover joy⁴. Burnett’s work continues to resonate with readers because of its timeless themes. In a world often characterized by stress and disconnection, the novel serves as a reminder of the importance of simplicity, nature, and human connection.

An interesting aspect in children’s literature is children as orphan heroes and heroines especially in the fiction of nineteenth and early twentieth century. Interestingly, *The Secret Garden* opens with the following lines: “When Mary Lennox was sent to Misselthwaite Manor to live with her uncle. Which means the fact that she is orphaned as a child?”

Mary Lennox was a 10-year-old girl born to very wealthy British parents in India who were absorbed in a life of parties and gatherings. So she was brought up by servants. Unfortunately, the cholera epidemic had struck and kills her mother, her father and all the servants leaving her all alone in a deserted house. So, she is taken to England and sent to Yorkshire, to live with her uncle, Archibald Craven at his home which is called the Misselthwaite Manor. Here the novel presents one aspect of the child-protagonist’s being orphaned and under the care of the nearest relative.

At the beginning Mary doesn't like her uncle's big house, the people who lived in it and especially the wide expanse of moor, which looks dull and grey after the winter. She is told to keep herself shut up in her two rooms and that no one would disturb her. A cheerful maidservant, Martha Sowerby, tells Mary a story of the late Mrs Craven her aunt, who used to spend hours in a private garden growing roses, and how she was tragically killed in an accident in the very same garden, and Mr Craven had the garden locked and the key buried away.

Mary is excited by this story and the mystery of the missing key. She is determined to find it. She starts to be less rude as time goes on, and soon she enjoys spending time with Martha, Ben Weatherstaff the gardener, and a friendly bird called the robin redbreast, whom she imagines has human traits. She even gets hungrier and stronger as she plays by herself on the huge moor. Martha's mom buys Mary a skipping rope to help her stay healthy and active. But Mary spends most of her time thinking about the secret garden and the strange crying sound that can sometimes be heard around the house, which the servants either ignore or deny.

Mary finds some turned-up soil by the little red robin while she is looking around the gardens. This is how she gets the key to the locked garden. She asks Martha for tools for the garden, and Martha sends them to her by Dickon, her twelve-year-old brother. Mary and Dickon quickly become friends. Mary is eager to learn more about gardening from him, so she tells him the secret about how she found the garden, and he promises to keep it.

Mary hears a child's cry late at night again. She goes on a quest to find out who was the only one crying in the middle of the night and finds Colin, a small boy her age, living in a hidden bedroom. She learns that they are cousins and that his mother died when he was a baby. She also learns that he has a problem with his spine that isn't clear, which makes it hard for him to move around.

⁴ Phyllis Bixler, *The Secret Garden: Nature’s Magic* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 84–90.

Mary visits him every day and tells him stories about the moor, Dickon and his animals, and the garden. She becomes a great friend, and they share almost everything. At one point, when he is asked about his illness, he says, "I want to forget it, and she makes me forget it." So, one day, she decides to take Colin outside because he needs fresh air and take him to the secret garden, which Mary finally admits she has access to. So, Colin is put in his wheelchair and taken outside to the garden. This is the first time in years that he has been outside.

The kids are surprised to see Ben Weatherstaff on a ladder looking over the wall. He is shocked and angry to find the kids in the garden of his late mistress (Colin's mother's) house. He had thought Colin was a cripple. Colin surprises him by getting up from the chair he had been in for a long time to show that his legs were fine but a little weak because he hadn't used them in a while. Colin spends almost every day in the garden, trying to walk, removing weeds, planting small plants and the fresh air renew not only his spirit but also his body and he becomes stronger than before, that he even begins to walk on his own.

The children conspire to keep Colin's health a secret so he can surprise his father, who is travelling and mourning over his late wife. Colin's health progresses greatly and his father begins to recover from his grief and gets a dream of his wife calling him to visit her garden, so he immediately returns home.

And as he is wandering around the outer wall of the garden pondering in the memory of his deceased wife lost in his thoughts of how the once beautiful rose garden has become abandoned and lonely but suddenly he hears voices from within and is surprised to find the doors unlocked and is even more shocked to see the garden filled with flowers and green plants in full bloom with children playing in it and his sick son running around in the fullest of health.

Mr. Craven later walks back to the manor, and everyone is shocked to see his son Colin walking beside him, happy and glad. In Emile Rousseau speaks of the child with Nature, he stresses the fact that a child must be kept in a natural environment to preserve his purity. In this sense, the garden became "a place of safety beyond social corruption or sexual awakening, especially with regard to cultural fears of lower-class contamination" (McCulloch 151). In *The Secret Garden*, nature and innocence are shown to be the cause of the sick child's transformation into a healthy and happy one. "The fact was that the fresh wind from the moor had begun to blow the cobwebs out of her young brain and to waken her up a little. She stayed out of doors nearly all day, and when she sat down to her supper at night, she felt hungry and drowsy and comfortable" (47-48).

The garden is the central image of the novel and is based on Rousseau's idea of the positive effects of educating and raising children in a natural environment to preserve their purity and innocence. The romantic poets played a major role in creating an ideal image of childhood, which was often referred to as a state of Edenic bliss. Burnett turns the secret garden into a secluded paradise that is kept hidden and protected from the outer world. The secret garden is related to the Biblical Eden through Martha's story of the divine time in relation to her Master Craven and his wife's literal fall, meaning she fell out of the rose-tree to her death. The garden is the Edenic for it is a paradise of innocence and purity for Mary and Dickon. In the Biblical Eden too Adam and Eve have a unique and very close relationship with God which is close to magic. This blissful nature is again seen as the children spend time together in the secret rose garden surrounded by the presence of Dickon's pet animals just like the animals created by the God to keep the first men and woman company in the Garden of Eden.⁵

One can clearly see that Miss Mary Lennox because of her innocent nature befriends the old Gardner, a robin i.e., a bird, Martha the housemaid, Dickon (a boy who the animals are fond of), Collins and finally Mr Craven. Despite the new atmosphere and strange people, she manages to become friendly and loving towards all the people and

⁵ Phyllis Bixler, *The Secret Garden: Nature's Magic* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 80–89.

things around her. The girl easily gets her way through because of the innocent nature that literally draws people towards her. The lively chatter and easy-going nature are quite admirable.

In this novel the protagonist plays an important role in restoring the lost past and helping adults to wake up their dormant lives and find happiness and joy in the world around them. Jean Jacques Rouseasu claims that children are born in innocent and educators need to protect child's natural state from the contamination of the society⁶. This is similar to the state of mind of a child as a blank slate which was also illustrated in John Locke's concept of tabula rasa. Children's Innocence can do a kind of magic that can puzzle anyone as to the power children have in bringing the sunshine of hope and joy into people's lives.

The Secret Garden depicts the warmth and innocence of the story, giving the audience a clear glimpse of the power of faith. Adults are reminded that it is the optimism, faith and innocence that solve all problems before it is corrupted by society's overwhelming pessimism. Burnett does not romanticize the children or childhood, but treats the children with respect and realism. But at the same time she pulls us into the amazing world they find and then make for themselves.

"A thistle cannot grow where you tend a rose, my lad" (230). As the above quote says, where innocence grows and flourishes, immorality cannot share in it. Children's innocence has a kind of magical power which may seem mysterious as it is a driving force that guides people towards the ultimate destiny where one finds peace, joy and happiness.

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⁶ Emile, or On Education, by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, trans. Barbara Foxley (London: J. M. Dent, 1911), 5–20.