Beverley Beddoes-Mills, "Entry on: The Secret Garden by Frances Eliza Hodgson Burnett", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale, Susan Deacy and Diana Barnes. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2022). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1463. Entry version as of November 05, 2026.

Frances Eliza Hodgson Burnett

The Secret Garden

USA and UK (1911)

TAGS: Pan



Cover of American edition from 1911. Retrieved from Archive.org (accessed: July 5, 2022). Public domain.

General information	
Title of the work	The Secret Garden
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom, United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1911
First Edition Details	Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden*. New York, Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1911, 375 pp.
ISBN	Not applicable for editio princeps
Available Onllne	*The Secret Garden* at the archive.org website (accessed: July 5, 2022). *The Secret Garden* at the Library of Congress website (accessed: July 5, 2022).
Genre	Children's novel*, Fiction
Target Audience	Children (and young people)
Author of the Entry	Beverley Beddoes-Mills, independent researcher, beverleym@bigpond.com

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Creators



Frances Burnett in 1888, part of a photograph by Herbert Rose Barraud (1845-1896). Public domain.

Frances Eliza Hodgson Burnett , 1849 - 1924 (Author)

Frances Hodgson Burnett was an internationally known children's writer born in Manchester, England in the UK on November 24, 1849. The family of five children was left in serious financial circumstances when her father died in 1865. Burnett was about 16 years old when her family immigrated to Tennessee in the U.S. to live with her mother's brother. The only education she received was at a dame school, which were small private schools in England, run by women. Burnett was an avid reader and this is how she educated herself. She loved telling stories and due to a desperate lack of money she began to send her stories to popular magazines such as *Godey's Lady's Book*. She began to be regularly published by *Godey's*, *Peterson's Ladies Magazine*, *Scribner's Monthly*, and *Harper's*. She married Dr. Swan Moses Burnett in 1873 and a year later her son Lionel was born. The birth of her second son, Vivian, occurred in 1876 in Paris where the Burnetts had moved in 1875. To support the family financially Burnett continued to write. Her first novel, *That Lass o' Lowrie's* was published in 1876 and it was instrumental in establishing her writing career in the U.S. and the U.K. (where she bought a home in the 1880's).

Burnett wrote 55 books, five of which became bestsellers and a number were adapted for the stage. Her most successful children's book was *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, which was published in serialised for in 1885 in a children's magazine and later (1886) then as a stand-alone book. Based on her son Vivian, it became a best seller and was translated into many languages. After *Little Lord Fauntleroy* Burnett published *A Little Princess* in 1905, and The Secret Garden in 1911. The latter became a children's classic. In 1909 Burnett left England and built a home in Plandome, Long Island, New York where she died in 1924.

Sources:

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Additional information

Adaptations

Film:

First filmed in 1919 by the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation.

Second film adaptation released by MGM in 1949.

In 1987 the third film adaptation was produced by Rosemont Productions.

The 1993 American Zoetrope production directed by Agnieszka Holland was produced by Frances Ford Coppola.

The fifth version directed by Marc Munden was released by Heyday Films in 2020.

Television:

The BBC adapted the book as an eight-part serial in 1952 and a seven-part serial broadcast in 1975.

Hallmark Hall of Fame filmed a TV adaption of the novel in 1987.

In 1994 an animated adaptation as an *ABC Weekend Special* and released in a video in 1995.

In 19991–1992, NHK Japan produced and broadcast an anime adaptation of the novel.

Theatre:

In 1991 A Theatre for Young Audiences was written and won an American Alliance for Theatre and Education “Distinguished New Play” award.

Also in 1991, a musical version opened on Broadway.

Festival Theatre Edinburgh presented a musical adaptation in 2010–2011.

In 2013 an opera was commissioned by the San Francisco Opera.

A stage play was performed at Grosvenor Park Open Air Theatre in

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Chester in 2014.

Translation

The Secret Garden has been translated into Spanish, English, Chinese, Russian, Hindi, Bengali, Arabic, Portuguese, Indonesian, Malaysian, French, German and many others.

Summary

The Secret Garden concerns Mary Lennox, a 10-year-old girl born in India to wealthy British parents. Spoiled by the native servants and neglected by her parents Mary is selfish, rude, and self-centred. She is orphaned after the death of her parents during a cholera epidemic. She finds temporary refuge in the home of a British clergyman. Mary is then sent to Britain, to her uncle, Archibald Craven, who resides in Misselthwaite Manor, a large English country house situated on the Yorkshire moors. After arriving in Britain Mary is accompanied on her journey from London to the Misselthwaite by Mrs. Medlock, her uncle's cold and impersonal housekeeper who is devoid of motherly sensitivity towards her rude and plain young charge. There is no welcome for Mary on her arrival at the Manor as her Uncle does not wish to see her. She is confined to her room and forbidden to investigate the Manor. Mary is not happy in her new home and is disturbed by strange cries at night. However, she discovers that the chambermaid, Martha, is friendly and interesting. Martha shares with Mary stories of her family and the special relationship she has with her mother, Mrs. Sowerby. She also describes the unusual activities of Dickon, her 12-year-old brother, who is endowed with Pan-like abilities. Mary is intrigued by hearing of Dickon's magical relationships with animals and his exploits in the natural world of the moors. Martha also informs Mary of the circumstances of the death of Lilias, Mr. Craven's wife in the walled garden which culminated in him locking the door of the garden and burying the key. Mary's imagination is fuelled by Martha's stories and she decides to go into the gardens around the Manor with the hope that she may find the key to the secret garden.

Spending time in the gardens, Mary begins to discover a new world that is in deep contrast to the enclosed and dark world of Misselthwaite Manor. This experience changes her. She talks to the elderly gardener, Ben Weatherstaff who encourages her to watch the

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green shoots in the earth and she is befriended by a robin who leads her to the key to the door of the secret garden. One day walking in the wood Mary comes upon Dickon, sitting under a tree and playing his wooden pipe. Mary takes Dickon to the secret garden and he shows her how to plant the flower seeds he has brought her.

One night, unable to sleep, Mary hears the crying in the house and decides to investigate. In one of the bedrooms, she discovers Colin, Archibald Craven's sickly son, who believes he is unable to walk. Mary tells Colin about the secret garden and when Dickon visits the Manor they decide to take Colin to the garden in a wheelchair. When Colin is incensed by Ben Weatherstaff's belief that he is a cripple leaves the wheelchair, he stands. The natural world of the garden has revitalized both Mary and Colin. After receiving a letter from Mrs. Sowerby, Archibald Craven returns to find his son strong and well.

Analysis

Burnett's well-loved children's book, *The Secret Garden* makes reference to classical myth to underline nature's healing influence. Also, through the two opposing worlds of the secret garden and Misselthwaite Manor, the influence of Burnett's interest in the New Thought movement which stressed the healing power of the human mind is apparent. The influence of this motif is revealed in the subtle changes of the thought and behaviour of Mary and Colin, as they leave the confines and restrictive mental atmosphere of the manor, with its images of death and illness, and enter into the natural, life-enhancing world of nature. They are gradually restored to a new sense of life which Colin experiences as "the sun [...] warm upon his face like a hand with a lovely touch". He cries out to Mary and Dickon, "I shall get well! And I shall live forever and ever!" (pp. 266–267).

The garden is the key to the ideas and images that represent the world of classical mythology. This ancient thought is also characterised by Dickon, the pipe-playing boy, who in his understanding of animals epitomizes the Greek God, Pan. Mary hears of Dickon's exploits, from his sister Martha, and Ben Weatherstaff, the gardener. She experiences her own awakening to the influences of the power of Pan as she goes out into the garden and understands that the bird with the red breast is whistling and calling to her. The influence of Pan is also transferred to Colin when Mary tells him of Dickon and his mythic power over the wildlife in the garden. Dickon's Pan like skills over the wild, moor, animals are instrumental in

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bringing both Mary and Colin out of the dark, bleak atmosphere of the Manor into the natural, health-giving world of the garden.

The other important character in the book is Mrs. Sowerby, Dickon and Martha's mother. Mrs. Sowerby's understanding of the needs of the young people epitomises the powerful qualities of mothering and stands in stark contrast to the parenting of Mr. Craven and Mary's deceased parents. Through the character of Mrs. Sowerby, the care and the tender solicitude for young people, as a vital characteristic of a mother's love, is shown. Also, Mrs. Sowerby's actions in providing a skipping rope for Mary to encourage her to play in the fresh air, reveal her sense of nurturing. Although initially deprived of this mothering love and nurturing, both Mary and Colin experience its restoration through Mrs. Sowerby's actions. This plays an essential part in the healing process for these children.

The Secret Garden itself is a key symbol in the book, and one enriched by reference to the classical tradition. Although the garden was locked and neglected following the death of Mr. Craven's wife, it continued to express life. However, unlike the wild moors, the garden needs to be rejuvenated and Dickon, representing the pastoral qualities of Pan, teaches Mary and Colin how to restore its former glory. Dickon brings seeds and both he and Mary are united in the mothering of the garden. The change this brings to Mary is apparent when she asks Mr. Craven for "a bit of earth" (p. 148). Mary is no longer enclosed in her selfish attitude to life. Now she is determined to follow Dickon, to plant seeds, to make things grow, and see them come alive. Participation in the garden has brought healing and transformation, joy and wonder. Burnett suggests that this potential rejuvenation is the secret of the garden for those who are willing to listen to their imaginations and discover for themselves the power of Pan.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Pan
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant	Adversity Child, children Childhood Death Family Friendship Humanity Individuality Innocence Invention Knowledge Love Morality

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for Children and Youth Culture	Nature Parents (and children) Past Peers

Further Reading

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Addenda

The Secret Garden was first published in serialised form in *The American Magazine* in ten issues over the period November 1910 to August 1911.

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