

Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The
Secret Garden*

Issues, imagery, symbolism

Burnett's The Secret Garden

- *Frances Hodgson Burnett (1849-1924): both British and American citizen.*
- *Author of other famous and influential books for children: Little Lord Fauntleroy, Little Princess.*
- *Between 1877 and 1925, Burnett published approximately 59 books and wrote 13 plays.*

The Secret Garden (1911)

- *Focused on Mary Lennox, an unattractive and spoiled little girl who is left orphan while living in India and is brought to live in the mansion of her misanthropic uncle, Mr Craven, in the Yorkshire Moors.*
- *Here she discovers that she has a cousin, Colin, who is kept in his room because he is sick and because his father doesn't want to see him.*
- *When Mary finds the secret garden of the mansion, she starts a process of regeneration that will heal both her emotional wounds and Colin's physical ailments.*
- *Crucial to Mary's regeneration is her ability to build relationships with others: to become socialized.*

Mary, 'miss quite contrary'

- *At the beginning of the book, Mary's disagreeable behaviour is emphasized: she shouts, gives orders, hates everything and everybody.*
- *Gradually, the reader learns that Mary has always been neglected, and that her behaviour is somehow dependant on this lack of love.*
- *Mary's 'healing' in turn prompts the healing process in other people around her: not only Colin, but also Mr Craven and Ben Weatherstaff.*
- *They're all like gardens: they've grown wild because their nature, unattended by the 'art' of human love, has brought about 'chaos'*

Mary, 'miss quite contrary'

- *Mary's 'contrariness' has two different connotations in the text. She is 'contrary':*
 - * *because of her disdainful disinterest in other people and of the irritability of her temper;*
 - * *because of a kind of emotional honesty, and of her intuitive reliance on her own judgement.*
- *The first kind of 'contrariness' will be overcome through her curiosity for the garden, and through her interest in kind-hearted people around her (Martha, John, Dickon; Ben Weatherstaff and Mrs Sowerby).*
- *The second kind of 'contrariness' will remain important throughout the text...*

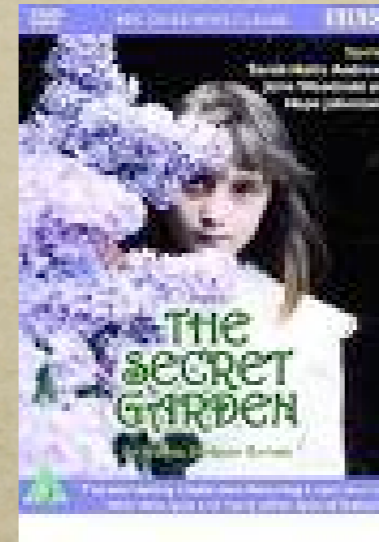
The Secret Garden, the moors and the Brontë sisters

- *Mary's 'contrariness' (Type 2!) similar to Jane Eyre's 'logic of truth' (Mary also physically akin to Jane);*
- *Mary's self-centredness and 'natural' behaviour similar to Catherine's in Wuthering Heights;*
- *Gothic elements (e.g. the wind 'wailing' like the ghost of someone lost in the night, Mary and Colin as 'ghosts', the self-conscious remark on 'wuthering', Mr Craven's dream)...*
- *... but also a sort of tongue-in-cheek demystification of Gothic conventions (the mystery of Colin's cry is exactly like Bertha's laughter in Jane Eyre)*

The Secret Garden: screen and stage adaptations



The Secret Garden, dir. by Agnieszka Holland, 1993



Television adaptation by BBC (7 episodes), dir. by Dorothea Brooking, 1975



Broadway Musical, dir. by Susan Schulman, 1991-93

Holland and Brooking compared



- *a 'family' movie*
- *Hollywood production*
- *nicely filmed and captivating narrative structure*

- *a 'children's classics'*
- *low-budget production, early evening screening*
- *'literary' screenplay, very faithful to Burnett's text*

Holland and Brooking compared



- *attractive protagonist*
 - *insistence on Gothic features*
 - *departures from the text:*
 - *the earthquake replaces the cholera epidemics (and 'surviving' replaces 'being forgotten')*
 - *the role of the robin is 'banished' from the text*
 - *no Yorkshire (the 'language of the heart')*
- *the child actress is, especially at the beginning, plain, pale and sickly*
 - *insistence on Mary's socialization*

An essential Yorkshire glossary

- *thee (tha)*: you
- *art*: are
- *un'*: one
- *Aye*: yes
- *missus*: Mrs
- *enow*: enough
- *nowt*: nothing
- *mayn't*: may not
- *canna*: cannot
- *mun*: must
- *thysen*: yourself
- *hissel'*: himself
- *parps*: perhaps
- *as*: that
- *yeller*: yellow
- *forrad*: forward
- *wench, lass*: girl; *lad*: boy
- *I'll warrant*: I'm sure

Watch out for the wrong verb conjugation that often occurs:

'Does th' like it?': 'Do you like it?'/ 'as if they was': 'as if they were' / 'animals likes him': 'animals like him' / 'play you' (imperative)

Can you translate from Yorkshire?

(Martha to Mary): “Canna’ tha’ dress thysen?”

(Martha to Mary): “(the moor in spring is) covered wi’ growin’ things as smell sweet”

(Ben to Mary): “Tha’ an’ me are sure a good bit alike. We was wove out of th’ same cloth”

(Dickon to Mary): “If tha’ was a missel thrush an’ showed me where thy nest was, does tha’ think I’d tell anyone?”

(Mary to Dickon): “I’ll tell thee what us’ll do first”

(Mrs Sowerby to Colin): “Thy father mun come back to thee”

(Mary to Colin): “I’m givin’ thee a bit o’ Yorkshire. I canna talk as graidely as Dickon an’ Martha can but tha’ sees I can shape a bit”

Space and Power

Misselthwaite Manor

- * emanates masculine power
- * the realm of Archibald
- * a complex and fatiguing labyrinth: imprisoning and withering
- * emphasis on closing/shutting up (Colin, the portrait)
- * the (old-fashioned) resonance of Gothic

The Secret Garden

- * female authority, class and gender are more blurred
- * the realm of Lilies
- * a fertile place that has also some healing power
- * emphasis on the life-giving power of love
- * the magic: dynamic, connected with renewal and regeneration

Gender in the garden

- *Mary-Colin: both traditional and subversive gender roles*
- *At the beginning: Mary = contrary (unconventional femininity / masculine behaviour); Colin = hysterics (a typical 19th-C feminine disorder);*
- *towards the end we find Mary patiently waiting for things to grow (feminine attitude) and Colin wanting to become an athlete: restoration of conventional gender roles?*

Gender in the garden

- *feminist scholars have been typically dissatisfied with the representation of femininity to be found in The Secret Garden. According to this view, especially in the final chapters, the text:*
 - ◆ *shifts the emphasis from Mary to Colin;*
 - ◆ *represents the garden as an enclosed, domestic space in which Mary learns traditional female roles (women/gardening; men/‘serious’ activity outside the house); the garden vs the moor;*
 - ◆ *stereotypes female roles and positions women as subservient and subjugated to men.*

The symbolism of motherhood

- ... and yet, Burnett's text also seems to resist a clear-cut representation of gender roles, especially when the garden is concerned...
- ... the symbolism and power of motherhood reaches far beyond a simplistic gender division:
 - ◆ the garden = Lilies' garden
 - ◆ Mary = 'cured' in the garden through the discovery of nurturing (plants) and maternal love
 - ◆ Susan (= 'lily') Sowerby as a Madonna-like image:
"With the ivy behind her, the sunlight drifting through the trees and dappling her long blue cloack, and her nice fresh face smiling across the greenery she was rather like a softly coloured illustration in one of Colin's books" (Ch. 26)

The symbolism of motherhood

- The symbolism related to motherhood is of course applied to Nature, almost always personified in its power to 'stir' life; and yet motherhood is also applied to male characters:*
- ◆ *Ben acts as a sort of 'mother' to the robin and to the neglected roses in the secret garden;*
 - ◆ *Dickon is both a Pan-like figure and a motherly figure (he is associated with seeds and has a special talent for making things grow; he has been 'mother' to the fox, the crow and the lamb, saving, nurturing and protecting them)*
 - ◆ *From this perspective, Yorkshire is all the more relevant in its role as a 'mother-language'*

Motherhood and feminine symbolism

Symbols and metaphors reflect the feminine aspects of Christianity ('Mary'-Madonna, the roses etc.) and reach behind it to older elements of Pagan worship:

- ♦ *Pan but especially the Greek female Goddesses associated with Nature and flowers: Chloris, Artemis, Aphrodite, Cybele*
- ♦ *Ritualistic planting in the text resonates with the echoes of ancient fertility rites*
- ♦ *Examination of the mythic forces of light / darkness, sleep / wakefulness, life / death*
- ♦ *the roses, Mary, Ben and Colin as 'wick': withered in appearance, thorny and hard in personality. But as the garden works its magic, they discover the life-force (the 'sap') within themselves*

Garden and Eden

- *Although the secret garden is a domestic space, there is more than the confinement of female values within a safe and not disturbing area:*
 - ◆ *the word 'Paradise' etymologically comes from the idea of the 'enclosed garden'*
 - ◆ *the secret garden is of course a kind of Eden, including a more-than-literal 'fall' ...*
 - ◆ *however, Liliias has not been banished from the garden; rather, her spirit pervades it;*
 - ◆ *again, the Gothic trope of the haunted place is reversed: here, we have the 'magic' that heals*

The imagery of 'seeing' and 'not seeing'

- *Sight is crucial to the growth and development of the characters; the semantic area related to 'seeing' is repeatedly insisted upon:*
 - ◆ *Mary is able to 'see' things: she 'sees' the door to the garden, and inside the garden she demonstrates an excellent power of observation;*
 - ◆ *Archibald refuses to see 'what he does not want to see' (especially Colin - and specifically Colin's eyes)*
 - ◆ *Colin does not want to be seen (the covered portrait)*
 - ◆ *Both Colin and Archibald are restored to health through sight (un-covering the portrait - the 'vision' of Liliias and the garden)*

Speech in the garden

Speech as the (feminine) power to tell stories that comfort, cheer, entertain, and incite curiosity:

- ◆ *Mrs Medlock in the carriage tells Mary the story of the hunchback Mr Craven and his wife, and Mary becomes interested in something for the first time;*
- ◆ *Similarly, Martha incites curiosity in Mary by telling her of the locked garden; she also comforts her with the stories of her own family in the cottage*
- ◆ *Dickon also has a talent for telling stories: his descriptions of the moor are so vivid that “you feel as if you saw things and heard them”, making “you almost tremble with excitement”*

Speech in the garden: Mary and Colin

At the beginning, Mary's speech is dominated by issues of command and insults;

Later, however, she shows a talent for telling stories: she tells stories about India, she calms Colin by singing songs her Ayah used to sing to her and persuades him to keep the garden secret; she can also use harsh words (e.g. Colin's 'tantrum')

On the other hand, Colin's speech is used mainly to dictate, intimidate, and dominate;

Colin's speech remains authoritarian to the end (also in the garden).