

**Motherhood in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden***

**Contents**

1. Introduction	2
2. Synopsis and the idea of the Garden	2
3. Childhood and the Edwardian Age	3
4. <i>The Secret Garden</i> as a Children's Book	5
5. Concepts of motherhood	7
6. Conclusion	10
7. Bibliography	11

## **1. Introduction**

Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* is "generally held to be her most accomplished and lasting work." Since it is a book written for children a few questions are coming to mind: What could be the reason for the enduring success of the book and how does its plot relate to contemporary concepts of childhood as well as motherhood? In the following I am going to try and give a short presentation on the three aspects in question. In doing so it seems inevitable to start with the historical background because this is of course what is shaping people's lifestyle and literature. In connection to the historical values and ideas of that time it is further necessary to look at what makes the book a book for children. Is it educating or merely entertaining?

Nevertheless, my main focus will be on the different concepts of motherhood that are applied by Burnett. These are, of course, related closely to concepts of childhood and accepted social and moral values at the time of publishing *The Secret Garden* in 1911 during the reign of King Edward VII. But to apply only the characteristics and values of this epoch to the book would be to short-sighted since Burnett was not only British-born but also spent a large part of her life in the US and came to be called a "truly transatlantic novelist" since she brings two traditions together, the American tradition of domestic drama and the fairy-tale.

## **2. Synopsis and the idea of the Garden**

*The Secret Garden* is a "domestic tale centring on a strong, often displaced, female hero" and thereby acts as an "example of a genre which flourished in the US and Britain from the mid-nineteenth century onwards."

The novel's protagonist, Mary Lennox, a sickly, unpleasant looking and ill-tempered orphan is sent to England to live with her uncle whom she does not know after her parents both died because of the cholera in India. In the course of the book Mary discovers a secret garden and with the help of a common boy brings it back to life.

Furthermore she learns of the existence of her cousin Colin and helps him to overcome his fear of becoming a cripple. With the help of the secret garden Mary works a transformation on Colin and gains health and strength herself. A hint to why it had to be a garden of all things ( and not for example a mother-substitute like Mrs Sowerby) to heal Mary and Colin can be found in an account of Burnett's own childhood from 1892: "The Back Garden was always full of beautiful wonders. [It was] that enchanted Garden which, out of a whole world, has remained throughout a lifetime the Garden of Eden." Hence, the garden can now be seen as a symbol for and the means of social, physical, and spiritual healing: "These two difficult children [Mary and Colin] heal themselves by attending to the needs of other growing things; by turning their energies outward, they recover inwardly."

### 3. Childhood and the Edwardian Age

"There was a marked relaxation of social manners in the Edwardian age, together with an intensification of various kinds of intellectual and artistic concern and an escalation of domestic and international tensions, all of which were to have profound consequences for modern literature: but none of them was initiated by Edward's accession." This statement provides a nice summary of the so-called years of transition around the turn of the century. It was a time of change and uncertainty in both the US and in Great Britain. Literature and literary taste was changing dramatically because of social and economic circumstances and it was a "Golden Age of Children's Books". Major writers started to write for juveniles and Children's Books were no longer satellite departments, but the centre of publishing houses. Literacy increased from 60% of the population in 1841 to 97% in 1900 due to reforms in the educational sector and legislation changes. Furthermore, the number of published novels grew from 1850 on and reached numbers as high as almost two-thousand new ones per year in 1899.

In the context of radical social change, such as the urbanisation as a consequence from the Industrial Revolution, and changing reading habits because of improvements in literacy, the threads of the past were drawn together and redirected, and by the turn of the century explicit moral lessons were rapidly becoming outmoded. As an example one can detect patterns of disobedience towards adults in *The Secret Garden* when

Mary is not inclined at all to stay in her room instead of wandering through the manor or trying to find out who is crying at night.

Authors of that time came to reject "overt didacticism, sentimentality and adult models of behaviour, portraying children instead as rebellious and irreverent, their natural exuberance curbed by unsympathetic parents." This is just the case in *The Secret Garden*: Colin is not able to develop like any other child because his father is only thinking about himself and his sorrow after his wife has died instead of taking care of what she gave him.

Nevertheless, although times were changing in Britain as well as in the US certain differences can be detected in the field of literature and the concept of childhood. Burnett therefore should serve as an example for those differences since she wrote and lived in both countries. In Britain "middle-class children were now encouraged to exercise their imaginations both in reading and in the games they played, and play was recognised as an essential element in the learning process." American children on the other hand, "whether they grew up on farms or in cities, were expected to be purposeful, to understand money matters, and early to take on adult responsibilities. The fiction written for them reflected this, and contrasts with the fantasy and fairy-tales of England, where childhood, at least among the more prosperous classes, was prolonged and leisurely." To my mind then, *The Secret Garden* seems more of a British book although I see some US influences and ways of thinking. The housekeeper in Yorkshire expects Mary to play and learn without any adult supervision. But in contrast to Hunt I do not make out any so-called *American dream* since the working classes and the poor are kept in their place - with Dickon being the major exception: he plays with the upper-class children and is even allowed entrance to Colin's private room.

#### **4. *The Secret Garden as a children's book***

"... it was certainly true that American children of every region and of all sorts of backgrounds read with passion." And not only in the US but also in Britain children were not only reading but also living the books. Therefore it became still more important what children were reading and what they could learn by doing so. It is adults that write the books for children therefore a certain amount of educational

aspect is in each of them. Adults know that they influence, they know that their readership is less experienced than they; they know that society is looking over their shoulders. To define children's literature itself is difficult because the "concept of childhood shifts constantly from period to period" and as motherhood can not be seen apart from childhood it shifts, too. Hunt therefore concludes that "literature designed for children is going to reflect this variety". In the Edwardian time children's literature is always didactic and its purpose is to teach children certain values and patterns of behaviour. Therefore moral standards and overall social values of the time can always be very well found in children's literature. But one can also detect the influence of society on what is expected of authors to write: "The nineteenth century saw a radical change in the depiction and position of the child in society, which was directly reflected in the range and variety of writings addressed to children." The reasons for that change were of various nature. Firstly, cultural aspects can be made out, such as the shift from a rational concept of childhood to a more romantic approach. Furthermore, British society was deeply shaken because of the social consequences of industrialisation and urbanisation, and a compensation for malfunctioning family life was needed.

In connection to the more idealised and also more liberal way of perceiving children they were seen as having their own culture, secret passwords and pacts. This becomes quite obvious in *The Secret Garden*. To make Colin understand why the garden should be a secret, Mary says to him: "We could slip through [the door] together and shut it behind us, and no one knew any one was inside and we called it our garden [...]."

*The Secret Garden* could become a children's classic because with its fairy-tale like universality it relies for its "effects upon the power of wish-fulfilment, and both melodramatic plots and melodramatic settings [...]."

Furthermore, "fictional fathers were allowed to benefit from this process of re-education by their children, notable Mr Craven in Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, whose only son is neglected so completely that he has to be rescued from the verge of death by other children before the reconciliation between father and son can take place." This incident makes one realise that parents in reality are far from being the ideal guardian for a child. Since Mr Craven is described in a more realistic fashion readers can easily connect with the story instead of having to deal with idealised but unrealistic father figures.

Another aspect of appeal of *The Secret Garden* "lies in its exploration of the heroine's discovery of a space of her own." Mary is free to play the whole day instead of being educated by a governess. But most of all in finding the garden she discovers a world for herself and her new companions.

I think *The Secret Garden* also pleases children because of Burnett's mentioning of magic. Combined with a secret and a mystery, magic and its workings are just what occupies children's minds most. "Every day and every night it seemed as if Magicians were passing through [the garden] drawing loveliness out of the earth." Dickon's gift of being able to talk to animals and his firm belief that Colin will be able to walk is also brought into connection with magic: "Are you making Magic?" he is asked by Colin.

But after all, Hunt makes out a slight weakness of *The Secret Garden* in that the "authorial voice is inclined to enter and to hector." I do not think that is true since none of the children is ever punished as would have been the case some decades earlier. After Mary has found out about Colin although she was forbidden to wander around the house, Colin only has to give his orders that she shall come and talk to him every day and the adults agree. One could get the feeling that all the rules are made up in vain since breaking them has no bad consequences at all.

## **5. Concepts of Motherhood**

"Ideas of what was appropriate to young readers were changing; there was less moralizing, and it was no longer necessary that parents be depicted as faultless although fathers had been very commonly represented as shiftless drones in comparison to the strong mothers of fiction."

All in all we can speak of three mothers in *The Secret Garden* two of whom are not alive anymore when the story takes place: Mary's mother dies right at the beginning of the story in the first chapter and Colin's mother we later learn has died about ten years ago. The only "real" mother to be physically available to the children in the book is Mrs Sowerby, Dickon's mother, whom both Mary and Colin long to meet: "Even when I was ill I wanted to see you," says Colin when Mrs Sowerby comes to the secret garden.

It is interesting though, that both kids whose mothers are not there anymore to take good care of them are the ones that are sick and ill-mannered. And Dickon who still has his mother is the child most healthy and strong. Does Burnett want to tell us with this constellation that only with a mother and in consequence of this with a father and a strong family bound can a child grow up happily and healthily? I do not think so. At least in the case of Mary, and she is, after all, the books protagonist, this theory can not be applied. Her mother did do her no good at all, she even pretended to have no child and instead spent all her days going "to parties and amuse herself with gay people." Therefore one could almost be inclined to argue that it is the death of her mother, the delivery from her, that gives Mary the ability and the means to become a healthy and positive child. This then was, of course, quite a modern approach when Burnett wrote *The Secret Garden* in 1911 and had nothing to do with late-Victorian concepts of the family. On the other hand I do not want to argue that the story means that a child is better off without its mother or father. Without anybody to care for her, Mary would be lost. But the important aspect is whether a mother does care for her child not only in a materialistic way - as did Mary's mother in India and as her uncle's housekeeper is doing now in Yorkshire - but also emotionally. If not, then it is better for a child to find a substitute mother who gets involved emotionally in raising children no matter what the materialistic condition of the family is.

This is just the case with Dickon's mother. "...it would be wrong to conclude that affection was necessarily less [among the working class], or that there was less concern for children's health and welfare. Emotional investment in children should not be equated with economic investment." Although she is very poor and certainly not educated at all - as is evident in parts because of her Yorkshire accent - as are Mr. Craven and although she cannot give any materialistic things to her numerous children as could Mrs Lennox give to Mary, Mrs Sowerby can present her children with a much more important gift, the most important for a child to be given by his mother: love and affection. To care for the child but at the same time also to allow its freedom and believing in its ability to cope with life, thereby enforcing a strong mind and understanding of things by allowing for good and bad experiences to be made. And Mrs Sowerby does not only take care of her own children but also of others, Mary and Colin. Thereby she embodies real motherhood and somehow resembles the archetypal earth mother.

The case is different with Colin. He would have grown up to be a strong and healthy boy had his mother lived. Instead he had to suffer for ten years because his mother could not take care of him anymore. It becomes evident in the book that Mrs Craven would have been a good and affectionate mother and I think that Burnett is even trying to convince the reader that Colin's mother is still with him - as an angel or spirit - sending Mary to rescue her son. This would then constitute the perfect mother which even in death stands by her child and tries to protect it from all evil. All these first ten years she was powerless to do anything for Colin since it was the father, destitute because of his wife's death but also seen as the ruler over his family in the Edwardian age, who had decided to neglect his son. Only with the help of another abandoned child like Mary is Colin's mother able to rescue her son and to even bring what remains of her family together in the end. But it is only with the intervening help of Dickon's mother that Mr Craven comes home to see his son being healthy and happy. Mrs Sowerby therefore represents something like a good fairy and a messenger for Colin's mother. It can be said that she lets quite a few agents of goodwill act for her throughout the story: Mary and Dickon, Mrs Sowerby, Martha and Ben Weatherstaff.

Although both Mary and Colin are growing up without their mothers - and as it is without their fathers, too - they are in so far taken care of that food, housing and clothing is provided for them. Their material needs are met but the emotional side and the educational aspect of childhood are missing. This is what the children have to provide for themselves. And they do it with the help of the garden where they can let other living things grow. Dickon and his animals are another feature introduced by Burnett to heal Mary and Colin since Dickon can be seen as the living example of a perfect child: He knows his way around, he has good manners and can take care of himself. And like other children from poor families he has to help his mother in order to provide food for the whole family. And although he is poor Mary and Colin are subconsciously trying to be like him. They are intrigued by his charming of animals and belief that he can work magic.

"While parents are clearly impossible as friends or companions, a special place is found for those rare adults willing to side with the children, see their point of view, and if necessary help them out of trouble." This statement is also applicable for *The Secret Garden* since Martha and Ben Weatherstaff both side with the children and help

them in keeping their secret. Martha also introduces Mary to Dickon. Mrs Sowerby on the other hand seems to be standing somewhere in the middle: Since she is the archetypal mother she functions both as friend and mother to all three children.

Although traditional family structures are lacking for Mary and Colin they are able to become healthy and happy children. They develop all kinds of positive traits and ambitions out of their own imagination and enthusiasm. Burnett's giving that much freedom and independence to the children confirms the general mood of the time: "Children were suddenly to be allowed to be themselves in fiction. No longer were they praised for being pious, industrious, and well-mannered: instead the admired child was likely to be seen as imaginative, inventive, self-reliant and constantly in trouble."

## **6. Conclusion**

*The Secret Garden* can be described as a good example on how the changing social circumstances at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century came to be represented in literature. Books for children now had a lesser didactic purpose, carrying fewer morals and religious messages. Stories became more complex and the adult writers tried to incorporate the children's perspective into their novels.

The pervasive mood of anti-Victorianism did also play a part in the more liberal outlook on childhood in general and on children's literature, although "there is no single or simple explanation why so much independence was being granted at this time to fictional children. In addition to its links with anthropology and sociology, the change can be related to the greater independence being given to children by legislation."

In *The Secret Garden* Burnett incorporated all those ideas and devised a complex plot with "themes of sickness, health, and - paralleled by the garden - regeneration, as the children grow out of repression of various kinds."

What makes the story a wholesome book for children are its romantic anti-class attitudes, coming to display when Dickon joins Mary and Colin and somehow works

as their master in gaining strength and health. Furthermore, a series of melodramatic mysteries including the sealed garden, empty rooms, and noises in the night make *The Secret Garden* a mirror of Edwardian ideas and ideals about childhood.

And last but not least, the various concepts of motherhood that are presented - the perfect mother, mother earth and the evil and unaffectionate mother - give an overall understanding of family concepts around the turn of the century.

## 7. **Bibliography**

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