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PRETTY MAIDS ALL IN A ROW: POWER AND THE FEMALE
CHILD IN FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT'S *THE SECRET
GARDEN*

Abstract

This article explores Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911) as a "hybrid" text and an example of "exploratory fiction." Of primary interest is the parallel between Mary's growth and the garden's rehabilitation. Through Mary Lennox, arguably Burnett's most complex fictional child, the novel challenges traditional patriarchal values with a depiction of female-based power dynamics. The novel makes a significant contribution to the shift in the way the female and the child was stereotypically portrayed in literature before the twentieth century.

Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911), like other early works of girls' literature, is paradoxical due to its seemingly conservative themes, which on the surface appear to reinforce gender roles even while they simultaneously allow for feminine self-exploration and expression. As Mary Jeanette Moran argues, novels like *The Secret Garden* can be considered "hybrid" texts that blazed a path for later groundbreaking female characters like Nancy Drew (33). In this way, Burnett's writing helped to launch the development of feminist undercurrents in girls' literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and later led to the depiction of the spirited, outgoing heroines we are so familiar with in popular culture today, as seen in blockbusters like Pixar's Oscar-winning animated film *Brave* (2012). However, as Lindsay Lowe reminded us in a March 2013 article in *The Atlantic*, this emphasis on the image of the spunky, extroverted girl unnecessarily overshadows the depictions of more reserved and thoughtful, yet equally brave female heroines. While Mary Lennox investigates the mysteries of the secret garden and the mysterious cries in the manor, she

develops her power of imagination and creativity, yet maintains her quiet strength. This subtle strength can be, as Lowe contends, “all too easily mistaken for meekness—and any female character who even *appears* timid or uncertain will inevitably face criticism for playing into antiquated gender stereotypes.” I argue that through Mary Lennox, perhaps Burnett’s most complex fictional child, the novel pushes past these rigid gender stereotypes and challenges traditional patriarchal values with a depiction of female-based power dynamics.

On the surface, a reading of the basic plot of the novel appears to project conventional distinctions of gender and class. Notably there is also a parallel between Mary’s transformation from a sickly child to a vibrant girl on the verge of young womanhood and the garden’s rehabilitation. An orphaned Mary is sent to live at her uncle’s house where she brings a garden back to life with the help of Dickon, a lower-class boy who loves nature. She discovers her ill cousin, Colin and helps return him not only to good health but also to a relationship with his father who has been distant and aloof. At the end of the novel, the relationship between the father and son is the focus, while the garden, Mary, and Dickon are seemingly forgotten. This has caused some to criticize the politics of the novel and what they see as the reinforcement of patriarchal values. The shift in narrative focus from Mary to Colin as protagonist is certainly a troubling aspect since Mary is clearly the center of the earlier part of the story and the reader is drawn into the development of her character. When the focus moves to Colin, Mary’s role is no longer as prominent.

Although some view the narrative shift as evidence of a marginalization of Mary in the later parts of the novel, I view the text as more flexible. Building upon Tim Morris’s notion of “exploratory fiction,” the text can be opened up for an interpretation that, rather than being didactic, instead presents patriarchal values in a way that questions them without supporting them (94). This is the agenda I see at work in Burnett’s novel. This type of fiction commonly features “withdrawn narrators and disjunctions of perspective and tone” similar to those in *The Secret Garden* (Morris 95). Reading the novel as exploratory fiction makes it less problematic and it helps account for the change in focus in the story. In this context, the narrative shift does not necessarily take away from Mary’s storyline, and it does not indicate a compromise and surrender to patriarchal values. The novel accommodates both Mary’s development of power through her rehabilitation of the garden as well as Colin’s restoration of health and position in his family. One storyline does not erase the other. Mary’s power is not lessened by the emergence of Colin’s story during the second half of the book.

The concept of “power relations” in children’s culture is a key context for comprehending Mary’s development. Morris’s view of childhood as a form of

“Otherness” that is always “insufficient, always wrong, always in need of guidance and correction” is a useful lens through which Mary Lennox can be studied (10). The child as Other helps define the “default value” of our culture by being its opposite. After Mary loses her parents in India, she comes to England as an Other and she must be acculturated into English society. In a sense then, when she arrives at Misselthwaite Manor, Mary begins a “quest” and her search is not simply for independence, but rather for a family and acceptance.

Mary makes a place for herself at the manor by adapting her behavior and her language. She learns to do things for herself through her interaction with Martha, who is very unlike her servants in India who did everything for her. Martha helps Mary transform from a stiff, passive child into a healthy and playful girl. The skipping-rope that Mary is given symbolizes her initiation into her new environment and a new stage in her childhood. As she learns to skip rope, she becomes happier, bolder, and more robust, which eventually leads to her admittance into the English culture of the manor. England offers her the possibility for change. Her physical appearance begins to alter as she gains weight and her complexion becomes rosier. Due to her new physical activities, she gains an appetite for the healthy English food she is served. She learns to dress herself and entertain herself outside during the day. She does not have to rely on others to take care of her. This transformation provides her with a new sense of independence and self-reliance.

Not only does she begin to do things for herself, but she also begins to think differently: “Since she had been living in other people’s houses and had had no Ayah, she had begun to feel lonely and to think queer thoughts which were new to her” (12). Mary’s experiences from the beginning of her stay at the manor start to alter her not only physically, but also mentally. She modifies her attitude towards other people and as a result, she is excited that they are starting to like her and that she is actually capable of liking them. Her attempts to use Yorkshire dialect with some of the servants display her willingness to accept them (and be accepted *by* them) and to want to communicate with them in their native way of speaking. Consequently, her world view expands greatly as she experiences these new feelings and relationships.

Mary’s process of acculturation into English life is also aligned with her development of becoming more feminine; she begins to fill out and become more attractive as the influences of the English culture take effect (Foster and Simmons 180). However, Mary’s deviance from conventional femininity could also be seen as her source of power. It is because of the unconventional way she was brought up that she has learned to follow her own impulses. Mary was not raised by her mother and influenced by the idea of traditional

female roles. She had no stereotypically feminine role model. Since she was not close with her mother or any other female maternal figure for the first ten years of her life, she does not behave as a female child typically would. Mary is described as “not at all a timid child” who “always did what she wanted to do” (35). This kind of behavior goes against stereotypical female roles of submission and obedience. Due to these qualities, Mary does not listen when she is told to forget about the garden and the cries she hears in the house. Instead, Mary follows through with her own ideas and as a result of this she restores not only the long-neglected garden but also the family of Misselthwaite Manor.

These characteristics of determination and stubbornness are vital to Mary’s source of power. Mary’s transformation is linked to these power dynamics and to her experiences with her environment, which she seeks to shape based on her own desires. Her growth is inextricably connected to her relationship with the garden. Both have been neglected and unloved for ten years. Her future is also tied to the garden because as she weeds and digs in it each day, her health and attitude improve along with the regeneration of the garden. As Phyllis Bixler contends, the environment mirrors Mary’s internal state and when she recognizes this, her self-awareness develops (96). Mary is no longer the lonely, contrary girl that she was at the beginning of the story. She realizes that she has something to offer to those around her and this develops her confidence and changes the way she treats others.

Although Mary is usually credited with having power, at least in the earlier parts of the novel, the presentation of gender and power as a whole is complicated. A projection of female power is present in the story but it is often considered unresolved and sometimes overshadowed by other tensions. Mary’s process of self-discovery relies on the regeneration of the garden and the restoration of Colin’s health. However, a strong connection can be made between the garden and Mary’s development of individual creativity and identity. For awhile, Mary’s garden is a space of female authority, but critics like Shirley Foster and Judy Simmons see it as eventually being integrated into the adult world when Mr. Craven returns to the manor at the end of the story (174).

Although the focus of the novel is primarily on stereotypically female themes, there are still some aspects that do not fit in with gender norms. For example, the male characters in the story are not aggressive, and in particular, Mr. Craven does not fit into the typical patriarchal authority role. On the contrary, he is sensitive and withdrawn due to the death of his wife. When he finally meets Mary, he acknowledges his submission to the advice of Mrs. Sowerby. He follows her suggestion of letting Mary grow strong by playing outdoors before trying to start any future training or education with a governess. Although Mr. Craven “thought [Mrs. Sowerby] rather bold to

stop [him] on the moor,” he describes her as a “respectable woman” who says “sensible things” (120). Mr. Craven defers his authority to this “healthy-minded” woman; she is a stark contrast to Mr. Craven who describes himself as “too ill, and wretched and distracted” (120, 122). Mrs. Sowerby is the stronger of the two characters and she has the power to influence what happens to Mary. Mr. Craven benefits from this female-dominated power-structure and he is ultimately strengthened at the end of the novel through the changes that Mrs. Sowerby, Martha, Dickon, and Mary create by bringing renewed life to the manor and restoring the health of his son.

Interestingly, the activities of the children are not split up into gender roles either. Mary and the boys alike participate in home-centered activities like gardening. In fact, Dickon is most closely associated with the act of gardening and nurturing. He is first introduced to Mary in a scene where she observes him playing a pipe and “charming” the animals around him. She notes that he smells of heather, grass, and leaves “almost as if he were made of them” (99). He seems to her like “a sort of wood fairy” that was “too good to be true” (118). From that first meeting on, the two develop a friendship based on their mutual interests. Dickon is a child of nature and through him, Mary is able to make the garden come to life and begin her own transformation as well.

Mary’s transformation could be viewed as merely a characteristic of a fairy-tale story, but in the context of gender and power, Mary can also be examined as what Foster and Simmons call the “female author prototype” through her story-telling abilities (178). Her talent in telling stories adds to her power. When she tells Colin about the garden, she makes it come alive to him. Before he ever leaves his room, Mary makes Colin see the garden in his mind and he begins to feel that he would like to experience the fresh air of the secret garden. When Mary proposes that some day he might be able to go out on the moors, Colin has a look on his face as if he was “listening to a new sound in the distance and wondering what it was” (148). In this way, Mary begins to change the way Colin views the world and himself. Martha even suggests that Mary has “bewitched” Colin. Although she has done no actual magic, her power with words strengthens her and those around her.

However, the novel does not merely celebrate female power. According to Foster and Simmons, the ambiguous representation of gender is a destabilizing device (179). At the beginning of the novel, Mary is described in an unflattering way: “she was the most disagreeable-looking child ever seen ... she had a little thin face and a little thin body, thin light hair and a sour expression ... her face was yellow because she had been born in India and had always been ill in one way or another” (1). This deconstructs the idealized view of childhood that is often portrayed in literature. Because she is not a pretty and vibrant girl at the beginning of the story, others dislike her and

comment on her disagreeable appearance. Following the English nursery rhyme, Mary is “quite contrary” at first, but after tending the garden, she begins to grow more attractive like the “pretty maids all in a row” in the song. Martha encourages her to spend time outside in order to increase her appetite and put some color into her pale complexion. The gardener, Ben Weatherstaff thinks she is not good-looking and that she must have a nasty temper. His blunt words surprise her because “she had never heard the truth about herself” and it makes her start to question her appearance and attitude (40). Even though this kind of thinking eventually leads her to change in a positive way, it is also troubling that she is considered ugly just because she does not possess the traditional qualities of feminine beauty.

The relationship between Mary and Colin is also an important aspect of the problematic representation of gender and childhood in the novel. Similarities between the two children are highlighted, and in this sense, Colin can be seen as Mary’s “double.” When they first meet they are not sure if the other is real or a ghost. It turns out that both are very much alike; they each suffer from neglect and isolation and initially they are both presented as weak. Mary and Colin undergo a change that allows them to grow stronger and become more accepted.

As Mary learns to break free from the trap of isolation she is eventually able to help Colin do the same. Foster and Simmons suggest that the novel at least temporarily challenges stereotypes of gender and class through Mary and Colin’s alliance against the adults (182). Again, in an attempt to reject their positions in society, they try to speak the Yorkshire dialect of the servants, and they also defy the authority of Mrs. Medlock and the doctor by ignoring their insistence that Colin is too ill to go outside. In the children’s sphere, hierarchy breaks down. Mary starts to get along with Ben Weatherstaff and Martha, and she develops a deep relationship with Dickon, all of whom belong to a lower class.

Gender roles break down also as the two main male characters, Colin and Dickon, show some feminine qualities. Colin is initially described as frail and delicate; his supposed illness can be compared to common female maladies of that era such as hysteria (Foster and Simmons 184). He has to be socialized and transformed in order to fit into the conventional male role that he takes on at the end of the novel. In the garden he becomes physically strong and by the end of the novel he is able to beat Mary and Dickon in a race. He also grows intellectually when he escapes the confinement of his sick room. In the garden Colin practices his skills at lecturing. He enjoys doing this because when he grows up he plans to “make great scientific discoveries” which he “shall be obliged to lecture about” (276). When his father returns, Colin walks back to the house as a young man and the future master of the manor. He is no longer the weak and sickly child that he was at

the beginning of the story. Similarly, Dickon possesses positive female qualities passed down from his mother. The nurturing maternal values of Mrs. Sowerby are carried on through her son Dickon when he is depicted as protecting and caring for animals, as well as mentoring Mary and Colin. In the same way that a child flourishes under the guidance of a kind and gentle mother, they respond to his influence positively and this is a significant factor in their growth.

The garden itself also offers a space where class and gender hierarchies are discarded. It is set apart from the patriarchal world of the manor. In the garden Mary is liberated and reawakened. Within the garden, Dickon provides the protective, nurturing qualities that play into the “magic” of the place. He kindles Mary’s dormant femininity and she in turn acts as a civilizing force on Colin. The final scene of the novel is troubling though because the garden and Mary seem to lose some of their power, and Colin leaves the garden to go back to the manor with his father. As Foster and Simmons indicate, the feminine is absent from this scene, which goes against the blurring of female and male boundaries that has been explored throughout the rest of the book (189).

Dickon, the representative of the lower class, is also missing from the final scene, resulting in an apparent return to social hierarchy and gender divisions, which is perplexing. This conflict can be viewed as a return to the conventional model of the feminine; however, the significance of the main action of the story, which exalts the freedom and creativity of the female, cannot be ignored when examining the possible underlying message of the novel. While some argue that female power is ultimately unresolved at the end of the novel, I believe that Mary’s search for power itself is more significant than the possible problem of the ending.

Mary’s journey and growth throughout the novel is not weakened by her lack of prominence at the end. The significant part of the story is the process of her transformation. When she arrives at Misselthwaite Manor as an orphan she seems to be extremely powerless, but Mary’s lack of parents can actually be seen as an opportunity for independence. Her narrative is part of the orphan story convention popular and prevalent in nineteenth and early twentieth century children’s literature. Mary’s unusual upbringing in India where she was ignored by her parents and taken care of by servants equips her with the ability to survive in the lonely environment of the manor. It never occurs to her that she might need permission to wander around the house and the gardens, so this does not impede her exploration and eventual discovery of the secret garden and Colin.

Mary acquires power because of her lack of adult guidance, but she has to adjust her use of that power in her newly forming relationships at the manor. In India she had power over her servants and she viewed them as

“obsequious and servile”; she is puzzled at Martha’s cheerful chatter because the servants in India “did not presume to talk to their masters as if they were their equals” (25). Mary finds herself in a different situation with the English servant Martha. She quickly learns that although Martha is of a lower class, she must still be treated with respect. Mary has to find a way to implement her power without oppressing others. This leads her to take on a maternal source of power instead. In the early parts of the story, she uses her power to create change in the garden and then later she functions as a more supportive, maternal force in the recovery of Colin (Griswold 207). By having Mary mother her male “double” Colin, she is aligned with the other sources of female power: Mrs. Sowerby, Colin’s dead mother, and the garden itself.

This concept of mothering is an important characteristic of the challenge to patriarchy in the novel. As Bixler describes, Mrs. Sowerby is a nurturing “Earth Mother” figure to Mary and Colin and she looks after them as if they were her own children (99). Even though she does not have very much money, she buys Mary the skipping-rope and she sends both the children milk and bread to help them grow healthy. She also nurtures them emotionally by evoking the spirit of Colin’s dead mother during her visit with the children. When Colin asks Mrs. Sowerby if she believes in magic, she responds by telling him that his mother’s spirit is present in the garden. She also helps reunite the boy with his father by sending a letter asking Mr. Craven to return from abroad. The letter from Mrs. Sowerby, along with the dream that his wife was calling him, are the two crucial elements that drive the reconciliation between Mr. Craven and his son when he returns to Misselthwaite Manor.

Despite some of the troubling aspects of the novel, it does ultimately challenge patriarchal values, although sometimes more subtly than one might like. Mary might not be as outgoing and assertive as feisty Merida from *Brave*, but Mary does search for and gain power through her experience with the garden. She is not merely a passive girl that is ruled by the adults around her. As a girl on the brink of young womanhood, she is developing a voice for herself and actively participating in the world around her. Even though the time period and culture in which Mary lives only allow her to have partial or temporary authority, she still uses that power to grow and develop as an individual. Significantly, Mary’s search is just as important as the outcome. Although the novel ends with a focus on the restoration of the father-son relationship and Mary is not foregrounded, she is also not silenced. Mary is important as a character who is setting the stage for future female fictional characters who are able to be powerful in less subtle ways. *The Secret Garden* confronts traditional patriarchy through its function as a “hybrid” text that changes the way the female and the child were stereotypically portrayed in girls’ literature.

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