



## Unearthing the Garden: Colonial Shadows and Ecological Contradictions in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*: A Book Review

**Murtada Ali Hussein**

Assistant Lecturer, English Department, College of Education for Women, University of Kufa, Iraq

\* Corresponding Author: **Murtada Ali Hussein**

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### Abstract

Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911) occupies a revered position within children's literature, celebrated for its themes of rejuvenation, the restorative power of nature, and personal transformation. However, critical interrogation reveals complex layers obscured by its idyllic surface. This research employs postcolonial theory, ecocriticism, disability studies, and critical discourse analysis to excavate the novel's embedded colonialist ideologies, problematic representations of disability and class, and the inherent tensions within its construction of nature. Through a close reading of the text, significant gaps are identified: the elision of Indian voices and contexts, the normalization of imperial attitudes, the pathologization of difference, and the contradictory portrayal of the natural world as both benevolent healer and a space requiring colonial-style mastery. It is argued that the garden functions as a microcosm of imperial control, while the narrative's resolution relies on problematic assimilations. This analysis contends that a critical reappraisal is essential to understand the novel's enduring legacy and its often-unexamined participation in the discourses of its era.

**Keywords:** *The Secret Garden*, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Postcolonial Criticism, Ecocriticism, Disability Studies, Children's Literature, Imperial Ideology

### Introduction

Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* has been consistently lauded since its publication, securing its status as a cornerstone of Anglo-American children's literature. The narrative, tracing the journey of the orphaned, disagreeable Mary Lennox from India to the Yorkshire moors of her reclusive uncle, Archibald Craven, and her subsequent discovery of a hidden, neglected garden alongside her invalid cousin Colin, is ostensibly a parable of healing. The garden's restoration, facilitated by the working-class figure of Dickon Sowerby, is mirrored in the physical and emotional rejuvenation of Mary and Colin. Themes of nature's benevolent magic, the triumph of positive thinking, and the power of companionship are readily apparent and frequently celebrated. Consequently, the novel is often positioned as a wholesome, life-affirming text for young readers.

However, the enduring popularity and seemingly universal appeal of *The Secret Garden* have frequently resulted in a critical complacency. The novel's profound cultural work, particularly its reflection and reinforcement of the dominant ideologies of its historical moment – the zenith of the British Empire – demands rigorous scholarly attention beyond celebratory readings. A critical lens reveals that the garden's "glories" are intertwined with significant "gaps" and problematic undercurrents. The narrative's foundation rests upon an unexamined colonial backdrop; its representations of health, disability, class, and gender are deeply embedded in Edwardian norms that require deconstruction; and its much-vaunted celebration of nature reveals ambivalent, even contradictory, impulses. This research undertakes such a critical excavation. By applying contemporary theoretical frameworks – specifically postcolonial theory to interrogate the imperial subtext, ecocriticism to analyze the construction of nature, disability studies to examine the portrayal of Colin, and critical discourse analysis to scrutinize class and

gender dynamics – the complexities and contradictions beneath the surface narrative are systematically uncovered. The central argument posited is that *The Secret Garden*, far from being a simple pastoral idyll, functions as a narrative deeply implicated in the colonial project, naturalizing hierarchies of power, pathologizing difference, and presenting a vision of nature that ultimately requires human dominion, thereby replicating imperial logic within the domestic sphere. Acknowledging these dimensions is not to negate the novel's aesthetic qualities or its capacity to resonate with readers, but is essential for a mature understanding of its place within literary and cultural history.

### Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with *The Secret Garden* has evolved significantly, moving from primarily appreciative or biographical approaches towards increasingly critical and theoretically informed analyses. Early criticism often focused on Burnett's life, particularly her interest in Christian Science and New Thought philosophies, linking these to the novel's emphasis on mind-over-matter and positive affirmation (Thwaite; Gerzina). The therapeutic power of nature was frequently highlighted as the novel's central, unambiguous message (Carpenter; Townsend). Such readings established the groundwork but often lacked critical depth regarding the text's ideological underpinnings.

A significant shift occurred with the rise of feminist literary criticism. The character of Mary Lennox was re-evaluated, no longer seen merely as a spoiled child who learns kindness, but as a figure challenging Victorian/Edwardian expectation of passive femininity. Her assertiveness, curiosity, and physicality were interpreted as proto-feminist traits (Nelson; Kutzer). Concurrently, the character of Colin Craven was examined through nascent disability studies perspectives, noting how his confinement and perceived frailty reflect societal anxieties about weakness and the male body (Keith; Moss). Susan Sontag's conceptualization of illness as metaphor, though not applied directly to *The Secret Garden* until later, provided a crucial framework for understanding the symbolic weight carried by Colin's condition. These approaches began to expose complexities within characterizations previously accepted at face value.

The most transformative critical interventions emerged with the application of postcolonial theory. Critics like Jerry Phillips, U.C. Knoepfelmacher, and Elizabeth Lennox Keyser pioneered this approach, arguing persuasively that the novel's narrative trajectory depends entirely on its colonial setting and attitudes. Mary's initial characterization as "Mistress Mary Quite Contrary" is inextricably linked to her upbringing in India, depicted as a place of neglect, disease, and indulgence. Her transportation to England is framed as a necessary rescue and civilizing mission. The erasure of India and its people, except as a negative counterpoint to England, and the normalization of imperial attitudes within Yorkshire (embodied by characters like Mrs. Medlock and the initial portrayal of Mr. Craven) were identified as central to the text's ideological structure. Phillips notably argued that the garden itself represents a colonial space, requiring rediscovery, cultivation, and control by the rightful (English) heirs. This line of inquiry exposed a critical gap in earlier interpretations: the failure to acknowledge how deeply imperial ideology permeates the novel's very fabric.

Simultaneously, ecocritical readings began to complicate the

straightforward celebration of nature. While acknowledging the novel's undeniably positive depiction of the natural world's impact on the children, critics like Alice Curry and Sidney Dobrin questioned the nature of this relationship. The garden is not presented as a wild, independent entity but as a space that must be "wakened" and managed. Dickon's almost mystical communion with animals is celebrated, yet the narrative ultimately privileges the transformative work of Mary and Colin – the privileged children who claim the garden. The emphasis on cultivation, order, and bringing the garden "back to life" under human guidance suggests an anthropocentric view where nature's value lies in its service to human (specifically, privileged English) well-being, potentially replicating colonial paradigms of land use and resource exploitation.

Gaps persist within the scholarship. While postcolonial critiques are now well-established, deeper analysis of the specific mechanisms by which colonial discourse operates within the Yorkshire setting, particularly through language and the treatment of class, could be further developed. The intersectionality of Colin's disability with his gender and class position deserves more nuanced attention. Furthermore, ecocritical analyses often stop at identifying ambivalence; a more sustained critique of how the novel's "green" message is inextricably bound to imperial notions of improvement and control is warranted. This research seeks to build upon these foundations, synthesizing postcolonial, ecocritical, and disability studies frameworks while pushing further into these identified gaps. Specifically, it will offer a sustained analysis of how the garden functions as a site where colonial logic is domesticated, how Dickon's role embodies both an idealized connection to nature and the limitations placed upon the working class, and how the "healing" of Colin involves the suppression of traits deemed unacceptable within the normative Edwardian masculine ideal.

### Analysis

#### 1. The Unspoken Foundation: Colonialism and the Erasure of India

The narrative impetus of *The Secret Garden* is irrevocably rooted in the context of British India, yet this foundation is treated with remarkable narrative elision and ideological bias. Mary Lennox is introduced as a product of colonial neglect: born in India to parents absorbed in the social whirl of Anglo-Indian society, utterly disinterested in their child. Her initial characterization – sallow, sickly, disagreeable, and tyrannical – is explicitly linked to her Indian environment, described as a place of "horrid" servants who indulge her every whim due to fear of her "sahib" father, rampant disease (cholera), and an atmosphere of enervating luxury devoid of genuine care. India functions solely as a negative space, a site of moral and physical degeneration. As Jerry Phillips argues, Mary must be "decolonized"; her salvation necessitates removal from the corrupting colony and transportation to the heart of England – the Yorkshire moors.

This erasure is profound. Indian characters are non-existent except as faceless, fearful servants ("Ayah" is a role, not a name) or victims of the cholera epidemic. Their culture, landscape, and humanity are rendered invisible or implicitly inferior. The language used is saturated with imperial attitudes. India is associated with heat, sickness, irrational fear, and indolence, while Yorkshire, despite its initial grimness (Misselthwaite Manor), is associated with bracing

cold, potential health, order (however latent), and ultimately, redemption. Mrs. Medlock's dismissive remarks about Mary's "nasty little temper" and her origins reinforce the sense that Mary's flaws are intrinsically linked to her colonial upbringing. The normalization of this perspective, presented without narrative irony or counterpoint, embeds a colonial worldview deep within the text. Mary's journey is not merely geographical; it is framed as a journey from barbarism (associated with the colony) towards civilization (associated with the metropole). Her transformation begins only when the markers of her Indian life – her clothes, her servants, her environment – are stripped away. The colonial "gap" is not just a setting left behind; it is an active ideological force shaping the narrative's logic and character development, presenting imperial hierarchy and the inherent superiority of England as natural, unquestioned truths.

## 2. The Garden as Colonial Microcosm: Discovery, Cultivation, and Dominion

The titular Secret Garden is frequently interpreted as a symbol of untamed nature or a restorative Eden. However, a postcolonial and ecocritical lens reveals it to be a potent symbol of colonial enterprise translated into the domestic sphere.

The garden is not discovered in a state of wild, independent flourishing; it is found locked and forgotten, a space deliberately excluded from the current order of Misselthwaite Manor. Its "secret" nature marks it as territory awaiting rediscovery and reclamation. Mary's discovery mirrors the colonial explorer "finding" lands deemed vacant or in need of European intervention. The key, buried in the earth, functions as a symbol of ownership and the right to access, echoing colonial claims staked on distant shores.

The subsequent narrative focuses intensely on cultivation and restoration. The garden is described as overrun, choked by weeds, with roses needing to be "wakened." This language is crucial. The garden is not valued in its present, "wild" state; its value lies in its potential under proper management – specifically, the management of Mary (and later Colin), the rightful English heirs. The act of "bringing it back to life" is an act of domestication and control. The children's labor, though joyful, is framed as a benevolent mastery. They decide which plants live (the roses, the bulbs) and which are weeds to be removed. Order is imposed. This process directly parallels colonial agricultural projects and the imposition of European horticultural practices on colonized landscapes, often displacing indigenous flora deemed "unproductive" or "untidy."

Dickon Sowerby, the working-class boy with an almost preternatural affinity for animals and plants, occupies an ambivalent position within this colonial microcosm. He possesses the practical knowledge necessary for the garden's restoration – knowledge that Mary and Colin lack. He is the skilled laborer, the "native informant" figure who facilitates the colonizers' project. His deep connection to the natural world is romanticized and admired, yet he remains fundamentally subordinate. He is granted access to the garden only by Mary's invitation; he does not own it. His role is to serve the project of the privileged children. The garden's ultimate flourishing and the children's healing are celebrated, but the power structure – the Yorkshire gentry reclaiming and restoring "their" land with the essential but subservient aid of the local laboring class – reinforces the very hierarchies of

the Empire it seemingly escapes. The garden becomes not a refuge from imperial logic, but its miniature re-enactment. The "glory" of its restoration is inextricable from the "gap" of its underlying ideology of possession, improvement, and control.

## 3. Pathologizing Difference: Disability, Gender, and the Normative Body

Colin Craven's narrative arc is central to the novel's theme of healing, yet a disability studies perspective reveals a deeply problematic representation. Colin is introduced as a hysterical invalid, confined to his room, convinced he is dying, prone to tantrums, and tyrannizing the household with his demands and fears. His condition is presented as largely psychosomatic, stemming from his father's neglect and his own negative thinking, compounded by the indulgent fear of the servants. While the novel's era lacked modern medical understanding, the narrative itself wholeheartedly endorses the idea that Colin's primary ailment is a moral and mental failing – his lack of "Magic" (positive thought).

His characterization relies heavily on harmful stereotypes associated with disability and chronic illness, particularly regarding gender. Colin's confinement, fragility, emotional outbursts, and preoccupation with death are consistently feminized within the Edwardian context, contrasting sharply with the robust, active masculinity idealized at the time (embodied later in his transformation). He is depicted as a burden, his demands unreasonable, his fears irrational. His "hysterical" fits pathologize emotional expression linked to his physical state. Susan Sontag's concept of illness as metaphor is vividly illustrated: Colin's physical weakness becomes a metaphor for moral weakness, lack of will, and failed masculinity. His father's rejection is implicitly linked to this perceived failure.

The "cure," therefore, involves not just physical strengthening through exposure to fresh air and exercise (a legitimate therapeutic approach), but crucially, the suppression of his "hysterical" traits and the adoption of a relentlessly positive, assertive, and physically vigorous mindset. His healing is synonymous with becoming "normal" – specifically, a normative, active, dominant male heir. The moment he stands and declares "I am Colin Craven!" is the moment he claims his birthright, embodying the strength and authority expected of his class and gender. The narrative presents this transformation as unequivocally positive, eliding the problematic implication that his previous state was not simply ill but morally deficient and unacceptably feminine. The "gap" here lies in the failure to offer any valid alternative to the normative ideal. Colin's worth is contingent upon his conformity to able-bodied, masculine expectations. His earlier experiences of pain, fear, and isolation are invalidated, framed solely as obstacles to be overcome through sheer force of (positive) will. This reinforces a damaging cultural narrative that equates disability with personal failing and locates the solution solely within the individual, ignoring broader social and structural factors.

## 4. Nature's Ambivalence: Healing Power vs. Anthropocentric Control

The Secret Garden is undeniably a powerful testament to the perceived healing power of the natural world. The transformation of Mary and Colin is catalyzed by their engagement with the garden and the moor. Fresh air, physical

activity, the cycles of growth, and the beauty of flowers are depicted as vitalizing forces that counteract the stagnation and illness fostered by confinement indoors. This aspect is the novel's most celebrated and enduring legacy, contributing significantly to its status as a classic. Ecocriticism acknowledges this positive valence, recognizing the text's role in fostering early environmental awareness in readers.

However, a deeper ecocritical analysis reveals significant ambivalence and contradiction within the novel's construction of nature. While nature is a source of healing, it is rarely presented as possessing intrinsic value or agency independent of human needs and projects. As previously discussed in relation to the colonial microcosm, the garden's value is contingent upon its cultivation and control by Mary and Colin. The moor, initially perceived by Mary as a "great, dull, purple" expanse of "nothing," only becomes meaningful through Dickon's interpretation and its eventual incorporation into the children's domain (the garden offers a view of the moor). Nature is valued primarily for its utility in human rejuvenation and its aesthetic contribution to the ordered space the children create.

Furthermore, the narrative implicitly reinforces an anthropocentric hierarchy. Dickon's communion with animals is presented as magical, almost otherworldly, setting him apart. For Mary and Colin, interaction with nature involves a degree of mastery – learning the names of plants, directing the garden's growth, enjoying the animals because they are tame enough to eat from their hands. The famous scene where Colin commands the garden with his "Magic" declarations ("You will live! You are live!") epitomizes this. While framed positively as affirmation, it positions the human child as the animating force, the bestower of life upon the passive natural world. The garden thrives because Colin wills it so. This replicates the colonial mindset of improvement and dominion, albeit in a softer, more benevolent guise. The "Magic," ultimately, is human will projected onto nature, not a force inherent within nature itself that humans must learn to respect and harmonize with.

The ecocritical gap, therefore, lies in the tension between the surface celebration of nature and the underlying narrative that positions humanity, particularly privileged humanity, as the rightful managers and beneficiaries of the natural world, whose purpose is to serve human growth and well-being. The novel stops short of advocating for ecological interconnectedness or the intrinsic rights of the non-human world.

### **5. Class and the Limits of the Arcadian: Dickon Sowerby's Contained Magic**

Dickon Sowerby stands as one of the most memorable characters, embodying an idealized connection to nature and a seemingly class-transcending innocence. He is consistently described in terms of the natural world: having eyes like "the sky over the moor," understanding animals "like the Irish understand Irish," smelling of heather and grass. His poverty is rendered picturesque; his cottage is a cozy, rose-covered haven, his large family a source of warmth and abundance. He represents a romanticized vision of the rural working class – uncorrupted, naturally virtuous, and in tune with the rhythms of the earth. He is instrumental to the garden's restoration and the children's transformation, providing both practical skills and unwavering, non-judgmental acceptance. However, a critical analysis reveals the limitations and

containment of Dickon's role. Despite his centrality to the narrative's positive outcomes, he remains firmly within his social station. His "magic" is contained within the sphere of nature and practical labor; he possesses no social or economic power. Access to the garden, the symbolic heart of the narrative's transformation, is granted solely by Mary's patronage. He facilitates the project of the gentry children but does not share equally in its ownership or its ultimate symbolic fruits (the reclaiming of the manor's heritage). His knowledge, while revered by Mary and Colin, is framed as instinctive or folk wisdom, distinct from and implicitly inferior to the formal education and social status they possess. The narrative offers no critique of the class structure that positions Dickon as a benevolent servant. His family's poverty, while not presented as grinding misery, is nonetheless a fixed condition. The Sowerbys exist to support the Craven estate; Martha is a maid, Dickon is a tender of animals, their mother provides practical maternal wisdom. Their contentment with their lot functions to naturalize the class hierarchy. Dickon's role is ultimately to enable the healing and unification of the gentry family – restoring Colin to health and, implicitly, to his father. His own future remains bound to the land as a laborer. The novel's pastoral idyll, therefore, relies on the unquestioned continuation of existing class relations. Dickon's "glory" – his connection to nature and his moral purity – is celebrated precisely because it poses no threat to the social order; it is a contained, subordinate magic that serves the interests of the privileged. The "gap" is the absence of any narrative challenge to this structure or any vision of genuine social mobility or equality. The Arcadian harmony of the restored garden is built upon a foundation of unacknowledged class privilege and dependence.

### **Conclusion**

Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* remains a powerful and enduring work of children's literature, its appeal rooted in compelling narratives of transformation, the evocative depiction of nature's beauty, and the satisfying arc of neglected spaces and lives being restored. However, this research has undertaken a critical excavation, employing postcolonial theory, ecocriticism, disability studies, and discourse analysis to uncover the complex and often troubling ideologies embedded within its seemingly benign surface. It has been demonstrated that the novel's foundation rests upon an unexamined colonial worldview, where India functions solely as a site of degeneration and Mary's salvation necessitates erasure of her colonial past and assimilation into Englishness. The cherished Secret Garden itself, far from being a pure Edenic refuge, has been revealed as a microcosm of colonial logic, requiring discovery, cultivation, and dominion by the rightful heirs, its restoration mirroring imperial projects of control and improvement.

The portrayal of Colin Craven's healing, while central to the narrative's redemptive arc, relies on the pathologization of disability and chronic illness, framing his condition as a moral failing linked to negative thinking and failed masculinity. His "cure" necessitates conformity to able-bodied, assertive masculine norms, reinforcing damaging cultural narratives. While the novel celebrates nature's restorative power, an ecocritical lens exposes significant ambivalence: nature is valued primarily for its utility to human well-being and is subject to an anthropocentric perspective where human will (Colin's "Magic") is

positioned as the animating force. Finally, the idealized figure of Dickon Sowerby, though embodying a deep connection to nature, ultimately serves to reinforce rather than challenge class hierarchies; his "magic" is contained within the role of the benevolent, subordinate laborer who facilitates the gentry's restoration.

These uncovered "gaps" – the elision of colonial reality, the problematic representations of difference, the contradictions within the nature ethos, and the naturalization of class structures – are not peripheral flaws but integral to the novel's fabric and its cultural work in the Edwardian era. They reflect and reinforce the dominant ideologies of empire, normative bodies, social hierarchy, and human dominion over nature. This critical analysis does not seek to dismiss *The Secret Garden* or negate its capacity to bring joy to readers. Instead, it argues that a mature appreciation of the novel, particularly within academic and educational contexts, necessitates acknowledging these complex and often uncomfortable dimensions. Understanding the "hidden glories" requires grappling with the "hidden gaps." Only then can the novel be engaged with fully, recognizing its artistry alongside its participation in the power structures of its time. Future scholarship could productively explore these intersections further, particularly applying intersectional analysis to Martha's character, a more detailed examination of Archibald Craven's grief as a form of deviance, or comparative analyses with other colonial-era children's classics. *The Secret Garden* endures, but its legacy is best served by critical scrutiny that illuminates its full, complex, and sometimes contradictory nature.

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