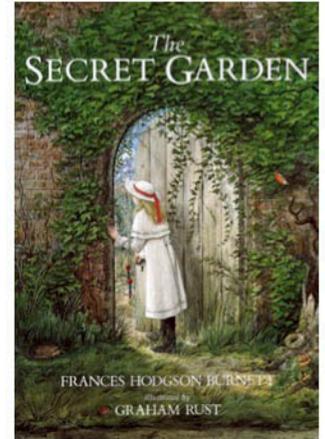




# *The Essence of Nature*

*A close reading of*

*The Secret Garden by Frances Hodgson Burnett*

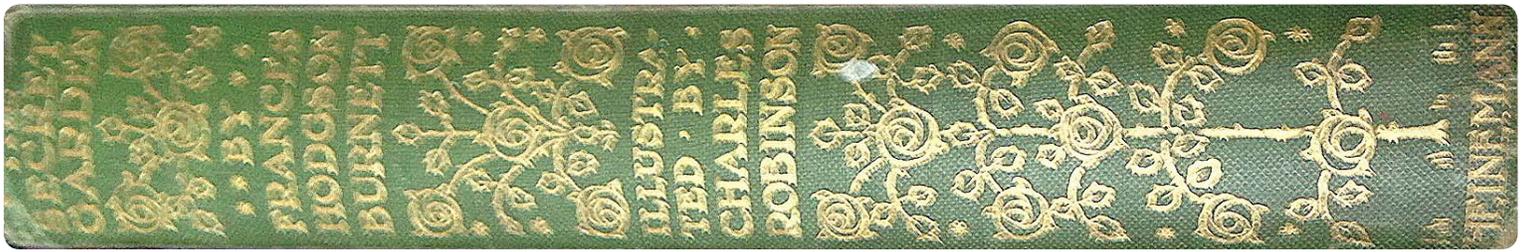


The importance of gardens as a space of leisure and tranquility has been reflected across the world for generations. Gardens often serve as a getaway from the trials of the everyday hustle and bustle of the real world and redirect our attention to a space that thrives at its own pace. Take Central Park in New York City, New York for example. Aimed to “improve public health and contribute greatly to the formation of civil society,” (Central Park Conservancy) the concrete stabilization of nature into a pruned and perfected space was important in such a setting as a large and congested city. Gardens are seen throughout the world, in cities, in small towns, in urban areas and even in backyards. As a controlled space, they improve personal health by means of fresh air, visual pleasantries, helps to grow the imagination. In *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, the garden of the Misselthwaite Manor is locked and forgotten until Mary Lennox, the ward of Archibald Craven, becomes determined to enter it. Once the garden is opened,

it begins to transform the lives of all who enter. In this way, a space such as a garden becomes not only a place of comfort, but also a place of healing.



*Central Park Bridges (view from Bridlepath looking southwest), Gothic Arch, Spanning bridlepath south of tennis courts, north of reservoir, New York City, New York County, NY*



The main character, Mary Lennox, of *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, is the epitome of the unwanted child. The sickly child of English settlers in India, she is left to fend for herself as the cholera epidemic invades their village, killing her parents and her caretakers. She is later transplanted into a Manor house in Yorkshire, England, where she seeks the solace by opening a secret garden locked away and walled within the moor. With her new home comes a new outlook on her life thus far. Mary, a girl without friends, without parents, without any sense of love and nurture in her life starts to transform as she spends more time opening her imagination to the world around her. With the help of Martha, she starts to become a healthier and opens her mind the world around her. Mary's journey to unlocking this garden and bringing it back from the brink of death coincides with the return of health Mr. Craven's son, Colin. Mary acts as a catalyst to the garden, for as she nurtures the garden it begins to nurture the family. As Mary transforms throughout the book, there is a sense of a nature versus nurture coming into play. Mary and Colin are both very much a product of their surroundings and upbringing, the neglect and abandonment experienced is reflected in their personalities, especially when they are first introduced. Colin is not physically ill, he has no predisposed illness to which he can account his ailments, but rather his illness has developed from a mental standpoint. He is essentially 'ill and dying' because he believes he is ill and dying. It is human instinct to love and be loved, to care and be cared for. The cycle of love that begins to transform this family is evident between all who live there. Caring for one another, in comparison to the way Mary cares for the garden, leads to the transformation in all aspects of the moor. Mary's desire to find the secret garden and to essentially restore it to its former glory, represent a cycle in which the love and nurturing of someone or something may bring about change.

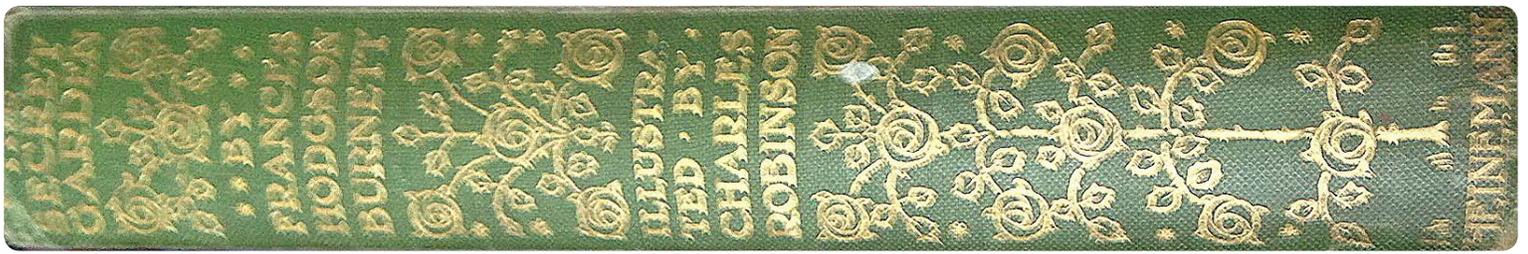
A garden is considered to be a tamed version of nature, to be enjoyed by all ages and considered a generally safe space. When reading *The Secret Garden* there are blatant themes of British Imperialism alongside the less obvious but still prominent need to prune and perfect this man made institution; the garden. Mary was born and raised in British occupied India, where she was waited on hand and foot and treated fairly well due to the constant threat of the servant losing their job. As it were, Burnett sends the message that Mary is sickly and unmannerly due to the fact that she lives in India "Her hair was yellow, and her face was yellow because she had been born in India and had always been ill in one way or another." (Burnett 7) Once she moves to



*"Who are you?" he said at last.  
'Are you a ghost?'"*

*"Her hair was yellow, and her face was yellow because she had been born in India and had always been ill in one way or another." (Burnett 7)*

England she becomes more refined and healthy. The exotic and foreign land, then comes to represent a space unfit for a British child. It could be presumed that India was essentially a new garden of British Imperialism and acted as if it was a piece of nature that needed to be tamed and pruned into the space they wished it to be.



According to Humphrey Carpenter's *Secret Gardens*, Burnett herself had "become obsessed with a walled garden at Maythem Hall near Rolvenden in Kent, which was for many years her home when not in America." (188) Believing that she took inspiration from this among other very famous and classic literature, she delved into what

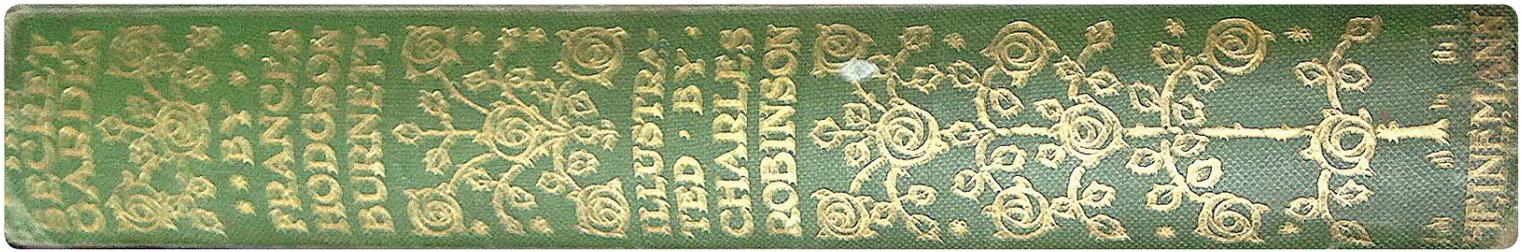
*"'Even if it isn't real Magic,' Colin said, 'we can pretend it is. Something is there - something!'" (Burnett 176)*



*"He would lie on the grass 'watching things growing'"*

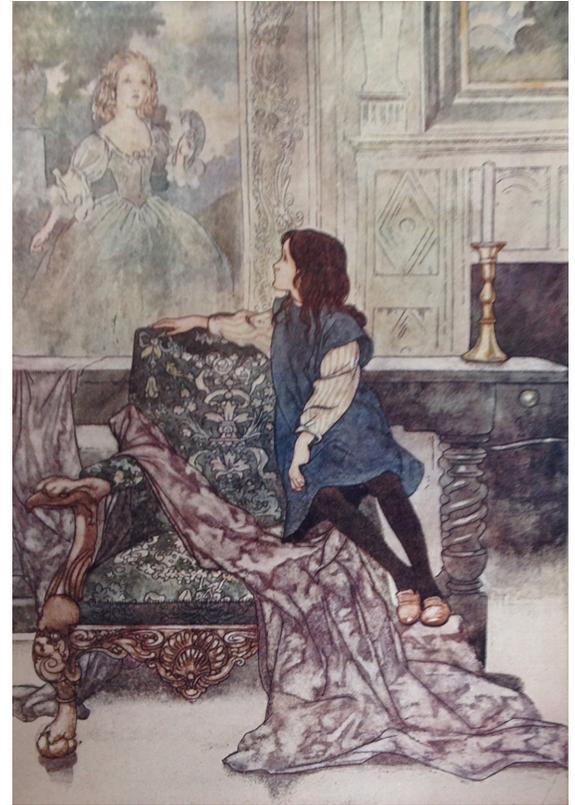
became *The Secret Garden*. In Carpenter's book, he challenges Burnett's view of the garden, stating, "Mrs. Burnett cannot comprehend that no Magic is needed to explain the potency of the Secret Garden." (190) Here, Carpenter points out that part of her novel exasperate the need for some

kind of magic in order to explain the healing that it provides for Colin, and while Colin and Mary are not sure whether it truly is magic, they still harp on the idea. "'Even if it isn't real Magic,' Colin said, 'we can pretend it is. Something is there - something!'" (Burnett 176) In some ways I do agree with him, but the ways in which the garden is described makes it magical. Like Carpenter, I wish Burnett wouldn't have harped on the idea of Magic, but rather let the garden itself contain magic according to the reader. As a man made institution, a garden could be seen as needing Magic thrust upon it, but here there is really no need. The way, in which the garden provides, grows, and nurtures give an aura of magic without having to use the word. This book itself is about the healing and growth experienced in the garden, and while all of the elements there are to be found in nature, the way in which this garden is depicted gives a sense of mysticism. "At first it seemed that green things would never cease pushing their way through the earth, in the grass, in the beds, even in the crevices of the walls. Then the green things began to show buds, and the buds began to unfurl and show colour, every shade of blue, every shade of purple, every tint and hue of crimson." (Burnett 176)



Themes of *The Secret Garden* present a sense of wonder and imagination along with the realities of a world that is often confusing and mysterious, especially for children. In this book there is a parallel between what is concrete in their lives and the way they perceive the world. For Colin, in particular, much of the outside world is a figment of his imagination. He is essentially hidden away from reality and forced into an imagined reality. His world is a solitary four walls, boarded windows and the covered painting of his mother. Due to the lack of contact with people, places or things, Colin finds himself questioning if Mary is a real person or a ghost roaming the manor. “‘Who are you?’ he said at last in a half-frightened whisper. ‘Are you a ghost?’” (Burnett 98) In his mind’s eye, he can see his life coming to a close, and those thoughts are strong enough to cripple him. Just because they are thoughts, doesn’t make his symptoms and less real, but in actuality, his imagination has tricked him into believing he is limited and disabled. Similarly, Mary starts out with only the portraits on the wall to keep her company. In her reference to the portrait of the girl in the green brocade dress with a green parrot on her finger she says “‘Where do you live now?’ said Mary aloud to her. ‘I wish you were here.’” (Burnett 45) As Mary becomes more explorative of the moor, her imagination is piqued and begins to develop this imagined world of what might lay beyond the garden walls. The robin, which is the only creature that has been able to enter the garden, helps to create the picture of his existence within the garden. Mary listens to the story of Mrs. Craven told by Martha, and the ten-year-old garden begins to take shape within her imagination. When the garden is opened, it becomes an actualized space that grows right along with Mary and Colin. For Mary and Colin, the difference between imagined and actualized spaces coincides with their lives before and after opening the garden. These children were very isolated from other people, limiting their social skills and condemning their behavior towards others. Their representation of the world was a painted picture, or a window into the world until they were able to experience it for themselves. In stark contrast to Colin and Mary, there is Dickon whose imagination is specifically based on reality. He is content with nature and has a very concrete relationship with the outside world, animals and people alike. “‘... Our Dickon goes off on th’ moor by himself an’ plays for hours. That’s how he made friends with th’ pony. He’s got sheep on th’ moor that knows him, an’ birds as comes an’ eats out of his hand.’” (Burnett 30) In this way Dickon is significantly different from Mary and Colin who use imagination to create a reality rather than use reality to fuel the imagination.

The garden depicted by Frances Hodgson Burnett is one that transcends and represents more than one’s own simplistic back yard garden, and for that reason this story continues to eclipse time as a classic. Whether it be opening one’s mind to the world contained within the garden or looking at the broader scope of what lies beyond its walls, *The Secret Garden* is a story that brings about ideas of childhood innocence, containment of nature, imagination, love, growth and reconciliation. For Mary, Colin and Dickon, the garden allows their imaginations to thrive, for their physicality to be restored and for their spirit to be uplifted.



*“There was a stiff plain girl.... She wore a green brocade and held a green parrot on her finger.”*

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