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Uwe Baumann, Marion Gymnich
and Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp

Marion Gymnich / Imke Lichterfeld (eds.)

A Hundred Years of *The Secret Garden*

Frances Hodgson Burnett’s Children’s Classic
Revisited

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**The Secret Garden Revisited**

Although Frances Hodgson Burnett published numerous works for an adult readership, she is mainly remembered today for three novels written for children: Little Lord Fauntleroy (1886), A Little Princess (1905) and The Secret Garden (1911). The Secret Garden, serialized from autumn 1910 to summer 1911 in monthly instalments in The American Magazine, has often been referred to as Burnett’s best novel – despite the fact that “for the first fifty years after its publication The Secret Garden was never as popular as Little Lord Fauntleroy or A Little Princess”. Critics who consider The Secret Garden Burnett’s masterpiece tend to emphasise in particular “the increasing depth and subtlety in the portrayal of her main child characters” and argue that “the work as a whole is richer than its predecessors in thematic development and symbolic resonance”.

One of the crucial differences between her earlier novels and The Secret Garden is the strong focus on nature and its healing properties and the loving attention to both plants and animals, which turns the novel into a celebration of nature and its beauty. The description of the robin is certainly a particularly striking example of this tendency. Due to the way nature is depicted in The Secret Garden, the novel has to be seen in the tradition of pastoral literature, and,

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1 Today most readers are presumably not aware of the fact that Burnett was a prolific and enormously successful writer: “Burnett published more than fifty novels, most of them for adults, and wrote and produced thirteen plays. She was the highest-paid and best-known woman author of her time, and from the time she was eighteen and published a short story in Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine her work was never turned down by any publisher.” (GERZINA, Gretchen Holmes. “Preface.” In: Frances Hodgson Burnett. The Secret Garden. Edited by Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina. New York: Norton, 2006 [1911]. ix–x, ix.)


definition: False

Angelika Zirker

**Redemptive Children in Frances Hodgson Burnett's Novels: Little Lord Fauntleroy and The Secret Garden**

The protagonists in Burnett's most famous novels for children, *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1886) and *The Secret Garden* (1910–11), share a few common traits, above all the fact that they arrive at a new place where eventually they act as redeeming figures on their surroundings because they are good and help others. This pattern applies to Cedric Erroll in *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1886), who crosses the Atlantic to live with his grandfather whom he 'saves' from his misanthropy; and it also applies to Mary Lennox in *The Secret Garden*, who comes to England from India because her parents died during a cholera epidemic. She differs from Cedric in that she first has to be 'saved' from her being a 'cross' and 'contrary' child so that she can subsequently save her sickly cousin and the whole household of Misselthwaite Manor.\(^1\)


\(^2\) Mary is, from the beginning of the novel, labelled as a 'cross' and as a 'contrary' child; cf. Burnett, Frances Hodgson. *The Secret Garden*. Edited by Dennis Butts. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1910–11]. The term 'cross' appears, e.g., when she is first presented: "One frightfully hot morning, when she was about nine years old, she awakened feeling very cross" (*Secret Garden* 2). The children of the family she stays with after the death of her parents nickname her as "Mistress Mary Quite Contrary" — thereby referring to the nursery rhyme — "by the second day" (*Secret Garden* 8–9) of her sojourn.

\(^3\) Yet another related pattern applies to Sara Crewe in *A Little Princess* (1905), who returns to England from India to go to a boarding school, is shortly afterwards orphaned and poor but is still able and willing to help others, which rescues her from her miserable state. The focus of this paper will, however, be on *Little Lord Fauntleroy* and *The Secret Garden*, not only because they are probably the most popular writings of Burnett, but also because they epitomize her...
This difference in character between Cedric in the earlier *Little Lord Fauntleroy* and Mary in the later *The Secret Garden* might be described in terms of a change in the depiction of children from ideal to real, from sentimental to authentic and, hence, also in terms of a development in Burnett's writing that reflects a more general development in the portrayal of children in the nineteenth century (that would go on well into the twentieth). While Cedric shows strong resemblances with, e.g., Oliver Twist and also with Romantic notions of childhood, Mary is akin to girls like Laura Graham in Catherine Sinclair's *Holiday House* (1839), Jane Eyre in Charlotte Brontë's novel (1847), and even Maggie Tulliver in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) as well as Alice in Lewis Carroll's tales *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872), who all are mischievous and at times even disobedient. If one considers *Little Lord Fauntleroy* as an early example of Burnett's writing and *The Secret Garden* as a later (and maybe even more accomplished) one, one gets the impression that, in the course of her life as a novelist, Burnett makes use of and varies the pattern of the redemptive child from ideal to authentic. While Cedric Erroll is a model child who behaves perfectly in every situation, Mary starts out as an anti-heroine who, however, eventually turns into a heroine, yet without becoming 'perfect' or ideal. Burnett seems to turn the attributes that are at the basis of Cedric's character into their opposite to create Mary. A few close readings of passages from these two novels shall serve to illustrate the change in style and tone that is linked to the change in presentation.

early and her late work and are therefore particularly apt to illustrate a change in her presentation of children.


6 They are not so by ill-will but mostly also because they are neglected or given too much freedom. Laura, for instance, is often simply thoughtless, e.g. when she and her brother invite all kinds of children to a tea-party without telling their own grandmother, so that there is no food (cf. chapter 2, "The Grand Feast" of *Holiday House*). Jane Eyre, for instance, is an orphan and has never been loved. Alice is designed against the grain of an idealized childhood (cf. my book on Carroll's *Alice* books). And Maggie Tulliver has a rebellious spirit that is, however, not based on a bad character.

I. Beginnings and Introductions

Both children are introduced in the first chapter of the novel. In the case of Cedric Erroll, the reader is first introduced to him after the death of his father when he is trying to comfort his grief-stricken mother. The background story is told first: how his father married an American woman that the old Earl, the boy's grandfather, would not agree to, and how he was subsequently told never to return to England and settled in New York. Then follows a rather long characterisation of the little boy, a perfect child despite the circumstances of his birth and family life so far:

Though he was born in so quiet and cheap a little home, it seemed as if there never had been a more fortunate baby. In the first place he was always well, and so he never gave anyone trouble; in the second place he had so sweet a temper and ways so charming that he was a pleasure to everyone; and in the third place he was so beautiful to look at that he was quite a picture. Instead of being a bald-headed baby, he started in life with a quantity of soft, fine, gold-coloured hair, which curled up at the ends, and went into loose rings by the time he was six months old; he had big brown eyes and long eyelashes and a darling little face; he had so strong a back and splendid sturdy legs that at nine months he learned suddenly to walk; his manners were so good for a baby, that it was delightful to make his acquaintance. He seemed to feel that everyone was his friend, and when anyone spoke to him, when he was in his carriage in the street, he would give the stranger one sweet serious look with the brown eyes, and then follow in with a lovely, friendly smile; and the consequence was, that there was not a person in the neighbourhood of the quiet street where he lived – even to the grocery-man at the corner, who was considered the crossest creature alive – who was not pleased to see him, and speak to him. And every month of his life he grew handsomer and more interesting. [...] His greatest charm was his cheerful, fearless, quaint little way of making friends with people. I think it arose from his having a very confiding nature, and a kind little heart that sympathized with everyone, and wished to make everyone as comfortable as he liked to be himself. [...] He had never heard an unkind or uncourteous word spoken at home; he had always been loved and caressed and treated tenderly, and so his childish soul was full of kindness and innocent warm feeling. 7

This is the description of a child that is thoroughly happy and good: he is not only good-looking but also never ill, pleasing, friendly, warm-hearted, cheerful – almost too good to be true. Cedric Erroll is described by the narrator in positive terms only. He is an innately good child who grows up in a loving family who care very much for him. His looks confirm and go hand in hand with his inner goodness: "He is a friend of the whole world because he considers everyone in the world his friend." When the New York housemaid thinks that "[i]t's like a


young lord he looks” (Little Lord Fauntleroy 10), she states a kind of nobility that does not only show on the outside but also corresponds to an inner quality. He is a child very much in the tradition of both Romantic poetry and also of formulaic stories: uncorrupted and pleasant, representing an ideal state of human existence, he never does anything to trouble his relations – neither intentionally nor by mistake! – and he is eventually rewarded for his good behaviour by inheriting a large fortune which enables him to help others. Things are quite different with Mary Lennox in The Secret Garden. She is introduced in the very first paragraph of the story as follows:

When Mary Lennox was sent to Misselthwaite Manor to live with her uncle everybody said she was the most disagreeable-looking child ever seen. It was true, too. She had a little thin face and a little thin body, thin light hair and a sour expression. Her hair was yellow, and her face was yellow because she had always been ill in one way or another. Her father had held a position under the English Government and had always been busy and ill himself, and her mother had been a great beauty who cared only to go to parties and amuse herself with gay people. She had not wanted a little girl at all, and when Mary was born she handed her over to the care of an Ayah, who was made to understand that if she wished to please the Mem Sahib she must keep the child out of sight as much as possible. So when she was a sickly, fretful, ugly little baby she was kept out of the way, and when she became a sickly, fretful, toddling thing she was kept out of the way also. She never remembered seeing familiarly anything but the dark faces of her Ayah and the other native servants, and as they always obeyed her and gave her her own way in everything, because the Mem Sahib would be angry if she was disturbed by her crying, by the time she was six years old she was as tyrannical and selfish a little pig as ever lived. (Secret Garden 1–2; emphasis AZ)
This juxtaposition of a few characteristics from the texts illustrates that Burnett in her presentation of Mary actually draws on contrasts with Cedric: she turns the positive character traits which she uses to portray Cedric into their opposites to describe the character of Mary. In some cases - a fortunate baby vs. a sickly, fretful, ugly little baby; always well vs. had always been ill; beautiful to look at vs. most disagreeable-looking child - the contrasts are almost verbatim or founded on a variation of the same concepts in the negative. In this respect, Burnett's novels are indeed formulaic as she makes use of standard characteristics from other children's books - either in a positive or a negative way.

Despite this rather negative introduction of Mary, the narrator does not blame the child but emphasises that it is really the fault of the parents, who never took care of their child and did not really want her, and that this is the reason why Mary has developed into such a miserable creature. Still, Burnett makes sure to portray her still as a child: early in the story she is shown to be playing in the garden and pretending “that she was making a flower-bed” (Secret Garden 2). Pretend-play is characteristic of children - one of the prime examples is Lewis Carroll’s Alice, who always pretends all kinds of different things. However, Mary is not a happy child - and she is not being loved. The difference between the stories is therefore also grounded on a difference between the respective parents: while the narrator stresses the loving relationship between Cedric and his parents - “He had never heard an unkind or un courteous word spoken at home; he had always been loved” (Little Lord Fauntleroy 7) -, the relationship between Mary and her parents is virtually non-existent and based on alienation rather than love. Cedric is taken care of, and his parents are very fond of him, while Mary is neglected by her mother, who prefers to go to parties, and by her father, who is busy and ill. After the cholera epidemic, for instance, nobody at the manor, with one foot on a gout-stool, and with no other diversion than flying into a rage, had ever heard an unkind or un courteous word spoken at home; he had always been loved.

It is well known that Mary changes after having spent some time at Misselthwaite Manor in Yorkshire - she is transformed both with regard to her appearance and to her attitude and behaviour. On her uncle’s estate she does not have to pretend to play in the garden, but finds a garden that belongs to her alone and where she grows happier and healthier every day. But Mary does not only change herself, she also brings a change over the whole household of her uncle’s manor: she discovers Colin and helps him get well, and this results in her uncle’s return home at the end of the novel and his reconciliation with his only son.

Cedric, on the other hand, does not change: there is no need for him to alter his constitution or his behaviour. He is already good at the beginning, and whatever happens to him, he stays so. Yet, despite the overall and overarching differences in character and attitude between Cedric and Mary, there is also an interesting parallel between the two: they both have a healthy and a healing effect on their surroundings that are in need of such good and restorative influence.

Although things are in a graver condition in Misselthwaite Manor - where rooms have been locked since the death of Lilias Craven, Colin’s mother, and where everything is governed by grief - also Dorincourt Castle is not in the happiest of states, although a few changes are perceptible already soon after Cedric’s appearance on the scene:

Lord Dorincourt had occasion to wear his grim smile many a time as the days passed by. Indeed, as his acquaintance with his grandson progressed, he wore the smile so often that there were moments when it almost lost its grimness. There is no denying that before Lord Fauntleroy had appeared on the scene the old man had been growing very tired of his loneliness and his gout and his seventy-years. After so long a life of excitement and amusement, it was not agreeable to sit alone even in the most splendid room, with one foot on a gout-stool, and with no other diversion than flying into a rage, and shouting at a frightened footman who hated the sight of him. [...] He hated the long nights and days, and he grew more and more savage and irritable.

Until the arrival of Cedric, Dorincourt Castle was mostly determined by its owner’s bad moods and grimness that were caused by his loneliness and his gout. It is quite telling with regard to the old Lord’s character that he sought

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14 For the first time in her life, Mary experiences friendship. Martha Sowerby is the first person to approach her on a friendly basis: "the way in which Martha reacts to and affects Mary resembles the way in which Mary later reacts to and affects Colin." Keyser, “Quite Contrary.” 4. But it is Dickon in particular who evokes her interest and whom she befriends: "she began to feel a slight interest in Dickon, and as she had never before been interested in any one but herself, it was the dawning of a healthy sentiment" (Secret Garden 31; my emphasis).
“diversion” in flying into a rage and shouting at his servants. But his attitude changes – he even learns to smile again. Cedric wins over people with his kindness, which is already highlighted in his introduction at the beginning of the novel: even the grocery-man, who is known as “the crossest creature alive”, is “pleased to see him, and speak to him”. He has the same effect on his grandfather:

And then Fauntleroy came; and when the Earl saw the lad, fortunately for the little fellow, the secret pride of the grandfather was gratified at the outset. If Cedric had been a less handsome little fellow the old man might have taken so strong a dislike to the boy that he would not have given himself the chance to see his grandson’s finer qualities. But he chose to think that Cedric’s beauty and fearless spirit were the results of Dorincourt blood and a credit to the Dorincourt rank. And then when he heard the lad talk, and saw what a well-bred little fellow he was, notwithstanding his boyish ignorance of all that his new position meant, the Earl liked his grandson more, and actually began to find himself rather entertained. (Little Lord Fauntleroy 140)

The words “And then Fauntleroy came” mark the change that his arrival causes. He helps his grandfather lose his “savage and irritable” behaviour merely by being himself. Although it is mostly old Dorincourt’s pride that is being gratified, he is able to show some affection for the little boy and finds pleasure in him – thereby ignoring that the boy’s mother might have had her share in his good behaviour and attributing it solely to his heritage. He watches his grandson when he learns to ride and is “so pleased that he […] almost forg[ets] his gout” (Little Lord Fauntleroy 141). Cedric’s good looks and his being well-bred help him in gaining his grandfather’s good opinion. He makes the old man forget his ailments: Lord Dorincourt feels better because of the boy’s companionship. It is Cedric’s inner nobility that is important.

At the same time, he is not spoilt nor does he take advantage of his privileged position with the old Lord but rather makes use of it for altruistic motives. His inner nobility shows very directly when he helps a poor lame boy by allowing him to ride his pony and by getting crutches for him. His grandfather is more pleased that he [ … ] almost forg[ets] his gout” (Little Lord Fauntleroy 141). Cedric’s good looks and his being well-bred help him in gaining his grandfather’s good opinion. He makes the old man forget his ailments: Lord Dorincourt feels better because of the boy’s companionship. It is Cedric’s inner nobility that is important.

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15 Cedric’s qualities have clearly been moulded by his mother, and it is this nurture that Mary – and also Sara Crewe in A Little Princess – lacks. See also Silver on this aspect. Silver, Anna Krugovoy. "Domesticating Bronte’s Moors: Motherhood in The Secret Garden.” In: The Lion and the Unicorn 21,2 (1997): 193–203.

16 The narrator explicitly comments on this: “Apparently he was to have everything he wanted, and to do everything he wished to do. And though this would certainly not have been a very wise plan to pursue with all small boys, his young lordship bore it amazingly well. Perhaps, notwithstanding his sweet nature, he might have been somewhat spoiled by it, if it had not been for the hours he spent with his mother at Court Lodge.” (Little Lord Fauntleroy 146) Again the mother’s positive influence is emphasized (cf. n15).

Redemptive Children in Frances Hodgson Burnett’s Novels

day” as it helps “Fauntleroy’s faith in his lordship’s benevolence and virtue increase[ … ]” (Little Lord Fauntleroy 146).17

When Cedric’s inheritance is in danger – a woman claims to have been married to the Earl’s older son and have a boy with him who is slightly older than Cedric – the Earl realizes how much he loves Cedric and to what great extent he has got used to having him around:

‘If anyone had told me I could be fond of a child,’ he said, his harsh voice low and unsteady, ‘I should not have believed him. I always detested children – my own more than the rest. I am fond of this one; he is fond of me’ (with a bitter smile). ‘I am not popular; I never was. But he is fond of me. He never was afraid of me – he always trusted me. He would have filled my place better than I have filled it. I know that. He would have been an honour to the name.’ (Little Lord Fauntleroy 185)

These words are spoken while Lord Dorincourt is watching his grandson sleep. He has just come over his rage about the woman who claims the inheritance and he now regrets his impending loss. The change in his overall attitude is explicitly mentioned, as his rage is different from his usual rages: “this one had been worse than the rest because there had been something more than rage in it” (Little Lord Fauntleroy 185). The narrator is as yet vague as to what that “something more” might be and becomes only slightly more explicit when the lord continues to watch his grandson: “He bent down and stood a minute or so looking at the happy, sleeping face. His shaggy eyebrows were knitted fiercely, and yet somehow he did not seem fierce at all.” (Little Lord Fauntleroy 185; my emphasis) It is not spelt out here, but what becomes apparent is that the old man is sad and that he seems to genuinely love the boy and to care for him. This becomes particularly evident when, shortly afterwards, he even goes to visit his younger son’s wife, whom he separated from Cedric to live in a different house. It is then that he admits that he is fond of Cedric: “He pleased me from the first. I am an old man, and was tired of my life. He has given me something to live for, I am proud of myself. He would have filled my place better than I have filled it, I admit.” (Little Lord Fauntleroy 211) Subsequently, he acknowledges his daughter-in-law for the first time because he recognizes that Cedric owes a great deal of his gentleness and kindness to his mother as well. In the end, the woman who claims to be the real heir’s mother turns out to be an impostor, Cedric is re-installed as the true heir, and the story ends happily. The point of possibly losing his grandson, however, has definitely led to some sort of anagnorisis on behalf of the Earl and to a more healthy attitude.

17 “It is Fauntleroy’s unquestioning love and innocent belief in him that works upon the embittered old Earl […] His efforts change the old man from a gout-ridden roué […] into a peaceable occupant of the parlor [sic] armchair whence he may fall under the influence of Dearest.” (Wilson, “Little Lord Fauntleroy: The Darling of Mothers and the Abomination of a Generation.” 240)
Mary's situation is quite different: she is not at all welcome at her uncle's house – during her journey to Misselthwaite, Mrs Medlock tells her: "You mustn't expect that there will be people to talk to you. You'll have to play about and look after yourself." (The Secret Garden) Moreover, it is hard for her to make friends, and for the first time in her life she realizes that she is lonely and becomes much more aware of herself. When she meets the gardener Ben Weatherstaff, he tells her "the truth about herself in her life" (Secret Garden 40):

'Tha' an' me are a good bit alike,' he said. 'We was wove out of th' same cloth. We're neither of us good-lookin' an' we're both of us as sour as we look. We've got the same nasty tempers, both of us. I'll warrant.' (Secret Garden 40)

For the first time in her life, Mary starts to think about herself and is then able to make friends, first with a robin, next with Martha and Dickon, and, eventually, with her newly-discovered cousin Colin Craven, an invalid.

Here is another similarity with the story of Little Lord Fauntleroy. In both stories, an invalid and miserable character is transformed into a healthy and happy one. In the case of Cedric and his grandfather, this transformation is based on the influence of the good character on the 'bad': the Earl changes for the better when exposed to his grandson's grimness and misanthropy, but "the principle of Good surviv[es] through every adverse circumstance, and triumph[s] at last," as Dickens put it in the Preface to the third edition of his novel.18

In the case of Mary and Colin, however, who are both "contrary" and rather selfish, the transformation is based on their similarity. This becomes particularly clear when Colin throws a tantrum during one night and Mary cannot sleep because of him:

As she listened to the sobbing screams she did not wonder that people were so frightened that they gave him his own way in everything rather than hear them. She put her hands over her ears and felt sick and shivering. [...] She hated them [the sobbing screams] so and was so terrified by them that suddenly they began to make her angry and she felt as if she should like to fly into a tantrum herself and frighten him as he was frightening her. She was not used to any one's tempers but her own. She took down her hands from her ears and sprang up and stamped her foot. (Secret Garden 177 – 78)

While Mary is listening to Colin's "sobbing screams", she becomes so angry that she starts to feel like throwing a tantrum herself; she loses all self-control and wants to cure him by his own means: she wants to frighten him as he frightens her. Subsequently, she runs to his room and starts to yell at him:

'You stop!' she almost shouted. 'You stop! I hate you! Everybody hates you! I wish everybody would run out of the house and let you scream yourself to death! You will scream yourself to death in a minute, and I wish you would!'

A nice sympathetic child could neither have thought nor said such things, but it just happened that the shock of hearing them was the best possible thing for this hysterical boy whom no one had ever dared to restrain or contradict.

He had been lying on his face beating his pillow with his hands and he actually almost jumped around, he turned so quickly at the sound of the furious little voice. His face looked dreadful, white and red, and swollen, and he was gasping and choking; but savage little Mary did not care an atom.

'If you scream another scream,' she said, 'I'll scream too – and I can scream louder than you can, and I'll frighten you, I'll frighten you!' (Secret Garden 178 – 79)

It is exactly her contrariness and her naughty temper that is healthy for him – a nice child would never have achieved the same. The problem is that neither Colin nor Mary ever knew any "constraint" or contradiction, which led to their becoming "contrary" and "hysterical".

As it turns out, Colin is sure that he has felt a lump on his back and will turn into a hunchback, like his father. When he explains this to Mary, she takes his fear seriously and is able to convince him of the truth, namely that he is not an invalid. Colin's healing is based on the ancient medical principle (resurfacing in our culture in homeopathy) of "similis similibus curatur",19 that like cures like. Mary and Colin see themselves as in a mirror: Colin only realises his bad behaviour when Mary acts just like him – and vice versa. Thus, they are both healed from their headstrong and contrary behaviour.20 The happy ending of the


story is well-known, but it is remarkable that Burnett would base this on "an angry unsympathetic girl [who] insisted that he was not as ill as he thought he was" (Secret Garden 181) and that “he actually felt as if she might be speaking the truth” (Secret Garden 181) – instead of having a “nice sympathetic child” caress and indulge him.

III. Endings

In both novels, Little Lord Fauntleroy and The Secret Garden, the happy ending is brought about by means of the redemptive force of children. In Little Lord Fauntleroy, the “Eighth Birthday” of the little earl is celebrated in the last chapter; and in The Secret Garden, the novel ends with the reconciliation of Colin and his father and the surprise of the whole household when they walk to the house together.

In the very last passage of each novel, however, the redemptive children are conspicuously absent. It almost seems as if their presence is no longer needed now that their redemptive task is accomplished. Little Lord Fauntleroy ends with a short passage on the future of Mr Hobbs, who moved to England in the course of the resolution of the affair about the impostor heir:

And that would be the end of my story; but I must add one curious piece of information, which is that Mr Hobbs became so fascinated with high life and was so reluctant to leave his young friend that he actually sold his corner store in New York, and settled in the English village of Erlesboro [...]. And about ten years after, when Dick who had finished his education and was going to visit his brother in California, asked the good grocer if he did not wish to return, he shook his head seriously.

‘Not to live there,’ he said. ‘Not to live there; I want to be near him, an’ sort a’ look after him. It’s a good enough country for them that’s young an’ stirrin’ – but there’s faults in it. There’s not an aunt-sister among’em – nor a earl!’ (Little Lord Fauntleroy 237–38)

Mr Hobbs is so attached to Cedric that he does not want to leave him. But he adds an interesting piece of information: he prefers England to America, although he always had been prejudiced towards the old world, especially after reading a book about the English monarchy where he finds out about Queen Mary and the conspiracies. It is an interesting piece of information: he prefers England to America, although he always had been prejudiced towards the old world, especially after reading a book about the English monarchy where he finds out about Queen Mary and the

In The Secret Garden, the ending focuses on Colin and his father: Archibald Craven returns to his estate to find his son healthy and running in the garden. Colin being at the centre and Mary fading out towards the end has been regarded as an “antifeminist narrative shift”22; “Colin, in the final episode of the novel, leaves the garden behind and returns to the real power centre, the house, which he is to inherit as master. Mary, the prime mover of his recovery, is significantly absent from the closing tableau”23. But the reading of her being left out at the end is not necessarily and exclusively negative. The concluding tableau emphasizes that the healing of the whole estate has been accomplished – through Mary’s agency.

But Mary is not the only redemptive child in The Secret Garden, and there is indeed a child in the novel who is, very much like Cedric, thoroughly good and even idealised: Dickon Sowerby.24 It is his influence that helps Mary develop into a happy and healthy girl in the first place, and she is then able to help her cousin Colin. But Dickon is not the central character, and he appears only after Mary has already started to change for the better; yet he has a central role in the overall development of the novel.


[24] The major difference between Cedric and Dickon lies in their social backgrounds: while Cedric grows up to be an earl, Dickon lives in a poor family with many children. Moreover, he completely lacks Cedric’s prettiness; his sister Martha states that “us never thought he was handsome” (Secret Garden 114). Dickon is also more mature: while Cedric’s behaviour often gives away his childish naivety, Dickon has a grown-up sense for all different kinds of matters, e.g., he knows immediately, by instinct, how to treat Colin when he first meets him. What they share is their innate goodness that has been influenced by their mothers.
Burnett put Mary at the centre of her story, and then Colin beside her. Both are not likeable at first but then are ‘redeemed’ from their being contrary and stubborn. The stylistic device of mirroring the two is one of the ways that makes the story of The Secret Garden more complex than the earlier Little Lord Fauntleroy. The children are now no longer depicted as ideal or as being entirely good, but as ‘real’ children, which does not mean that they are not good and redemptive but much more interesting, complex and likeable. One can also see that Burnett’s focus shifted in her later story: it is no longer so much about an individual child but rather about a place and how it transforms this child – which is probably why she did not call the story “Mistress/Mary Mary quite Contrary”, as planned originally,25 while her earlier books were entitled as Editha’s Burglar, Little Lord Fauntleroy, and A Little Princess, thus focussing very much on the central character. The Secret Garden really is about the magic of a particular place;26 the children who act as redemptive forces within it are agents that are enabled to do so through the garden.

By modifying the portrayal of the children in her later novel, Burnett moved away from the imagery of the romantic child and from her earlier (more formulaic) presentation of idealized children. Thus, her story gains complexity, and, maybe, this is one of the reasons why we tend to still talk so much more about The Secret Garden than about any of her other books today.

References


References


Stefanie Krüger

Life in the Domestic Realm – Male Identity in The Secret Garden

I. Introduction

As one of the most popular all-time favourites of children's literature Burnett's The Secret Garden (1911) has received a huge amount of criticism, has been adapted into various movies and thus, together with A Little Princess (1905) and Little Lord Fauntleroy (1885), constitutes some of the best and most impressive of children's literature from the Victorian and Edwardian periods. It is hardly surprising that much of the aforementioned criticism concentrates on themes like constructions of childhood, Victorian and Edwardian values, class ideology or the garden as a metaphor. Most criticism, however, focuses on the development and the psychology of the female protagonist, Mary Lennox, and her relationship to the garden or other characters in the novel – an understandable focus as Burnett's book was "written specifically for juvenile female readers", as Anrhea Trodd points out in her Reader's Guide to Edwardian Literature.1 The idea of The Secret Garden as a novel for girls rather than boys – which I certainly agree with – has, on the one hand, indeed led to thorough analyses of Mary's character; on the other hand, other inhabitants of Misselthwaite Manor and even some of the main protagonists of the story have been widely neglected. Particularly the male characters of The Secret Garden have played a somewhat minor role, in the shadow of Mary and her fellow female characters – that is, the abundance of Burnett's larger-than-life mother figures. Research and criticism on the male protagonists is usually satisfied with Dickon's role as "a Pan figure"2 (rarely indeed have critics so unanimously agreed on the interpretation of a character than in Dickon's case, as can be seen in the writings of Jane Darcy, Linda T. Parsons, Elizabeth Lennox Keyser, Danielle E. Price, and many others),
