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## Between Misselthwaite Manor and The “Wild, Dreary” Moor: Children and Enclosures in *The Secret Garden*

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### ABSTRACT

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In this article, I focus on the distinct ways that child characters interpret, negotiate, and interact with space in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*. Spatial analysis, rarely used in the field of children's literature, emerges as the focal point of my reading of *The Secret Garden*. Key spaces, such as the secret garden and Archibald Craven's manor, embed different meanings and experiences for the main character, Mary Lennox. I argue that her negotiation of these spaces ultimately strengthens her agency and addresses her liminal identity. In children's literature, the dichotomy between nature and culture is typically emphasized to associate the connection of child characters and bucolic settings. In Burnett's narrative, I reveal that the children are similarly alienated from fully natural and civilized spaces. In fact, their moral and personal development does not result from full immersion in nature. Rather, spaces that have both natural and cultural elements allow characters like Mary to exert their own agency and experience personal growth. As the secret garden exists between the wild moor and English manor, its connection to both nature and culture construct the garden as a liminal space. Ironically, Mary is most intimately associated with the garden; I understand her liminal identity through the garden's spatiality.

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### KEYWORDS

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children's literature, enclosures, liminality, *The Secret Garden*, space

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“Two things cannot be in one place. Where you tend a rose, my lad, a thistle cannot grow.”

—Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden*

## CHILDHOOD AND PERCEPTIONS OF SPACE

As a beloved classic in the canon of children’s literature, Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* has been critically examined by scholars and bibliophiles alike since its 1911 debut. While many literary critics have analyzed the novel in terms of colonial influence and Mary’s sexuality, I examine how children employ agency to negotiate space, specifically in the garden. In Burnett’s narrative, each physical space encodes regeneration and death to the child characters. In particular, the garden operates as a key site of influence in Mary’s personal development. Mediated through the division of nature and culture (and to an extent, between England and India), enclosed spaces become cyclically life giving and death inducing.

Although *The Secret Garden* does not directly factor into her analysis, Jenny Bavidge explores how children’s literature, despite its traditionally bucolic settings, also describes and rationalizes urban spaces. In her 2006 article “Stories In Space”, she argues for the study of “geography” in children’s literature, as specific places and spaces shape readers’ understandings of children (Bavidge). In children’s literature, the way that space is constructed incompletely represents the child’s experience. Rather, Bavidge claims this genre reflects the “powerful manifestation of the ways in which the world is interpreted and explained to children” (3). These spaces are not reflective of the world—they reveal how adults idealize the world of the child. In a sense, spatiality suggests nostalgia for child perceptions of nature in a way that accepts its distance. Bavidge claims that “children’s literary criticism has not paid enough attention to questions of spatiality (particularly urban space) and has rarely attempted to theorize the nature of place and space in children’s literature” (5). While I acknowledge Bavidge’s precaution on how space is constructed by adult authors and explained to young readers, I contend that spatial symbolism in *The Secret Garden* uniquely enables the child characters—not to mention young readers- to interact with and exert agency through specific places. Recognizing the lack of spatial

analyses in theorizing children's literature, I analyze *The Secret Garden* for the different and distinct ways in which children and space interact.

In analyzing imperialist literature, Mary Goodwin champions the importance of spatiality in relation to the "moral climate" of texts. Focusing on both *The Secret Garden* and Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, Goodwin examines imperialist undertones through the characteristics of specific spaces. According to her essay, each space in *The Secret Garden* conveys a certain moral affect:

The setting of *The Secret Garden* spans...worlds, each of which offers its own moral climate to mirror the meteorological and topographical environment: India, a fen of deadly vapours and punishing heat that causes physical, moral and spiritual lassitude; the bleak and desolate Misselthwaite Manor in the Yorkshire moors, whose inmates languish in a Gothic maze of dark lonely rooms; and the gardens and countryside beyond the manor, alive with secret power to breathe spirit back into dying matter. (Goodwin 2)

As Goodwin delineates, spaces construct emotional and moral perceptions of self. The foreboding house at first provides Mary with security; the Edenic garden frightens Mary before she becomes intrigued by its upkeep. Neither the English manor nor the landscape of India sufficiently nourishes the characters. In India, Mary is "forgotten" in the "perfectly still" bungalow (Burnett 8, 10); similarly, Mary laments how "lost and odd" she feels in the "gloomy" English mansion (22). Goodwin's presentation of the garden as rejuvenating has some support in the text, but rejuvenation does not fully account for Mary's complex agency in the garden. Mary is not only ostracized from the moor and manor, but the lure of the garden is in its otherness: like Mary herself, the "garden [is] secret and closed-up" (Evans 2). While the garden may contain "secret power", its enclosed spatiality remains just as problematic for Mary as the "frightfully hot" Indian climate and the "wild, dreary" English moors (Burnett 8, 21).

To apply a spatial lens to the novel, I read *The Secret Garden* for its "engage[ment] with the ways in which children make and experience space" (Bavidge 2). In children's

literature, the spectrum of natural and cultural spaces facilitates perceptions of childhood. The enclosures in *The Secret Garden* simultaneously prove problematic and nurturing for the liminal character, Mary Lennox. Each instance of compartmentalized space conveys a womb/tomb oscillation: the novel uses spatiality to alternately create domestic safety and connote death. Burnett's novel uniquely allows liminal children, like Mary Lennox and Colin Craven, to exercise agency and reconstruct their understanding of self through their navigation of space.

## IMPLICATIONS OF GEOGRAPHIC SPATIALITY

Despite the geographic variance, Burnett consistently describes Indian and English wildlife as dangerous, while Mary's homes in both countries facilitate her alienation. The "frightfully hot" (Burnett 8) climate of India breeds exotic species like "scarlet hibiscus blossoms" and "rustling snakes" that clearly differ from the milder English weather. Even when Mary leaves India, her perception of nature is shaped by "cholera" causing her family to "die like flies" (9). While Indian skies were "hot and blazing", the "awful dreary gray" moor prompts Mary to conclude, "I thought perhaps it always rained or looked dark in England" (51). Notably, Mary first experiences nature in England through the "wide, bleak moor" that looked like "a wide expanse of black ocean" emitting a "wild, low, rushing sound" (Burnett 21). In both countries, Mary's experiences construct nature as inaccessible or frightening.

While Mary's interactions with nature connote danger, her experiences in domestic spaces result in alienation, rather than belonging. Even in the midst of exotic scenery, Mary's life in India predominantly remains within the bungalow. The "sickly, fretful child" (1) reappears in different scenes of society: the nursery, drinking wine in the dining room, and "waiting in the house... staring at the wall" (10). Compartmentalization defines Mary's life in India: her mother keeps her in a separate room, where "Mistress Mary" (35) receives attention and care exclusively from her Ayah. Her tumultuous relationship with her home in India reappears in her move to her uncle's mansion. Craven's house, with its compartmentalized spaces, is originally seen as a symbol of wealth, despite the obvious

sense of foreboding: “a house with a hundred rooms, nearly all shut up and with their doors locked” (18). Burnett employs elements of the gothic in the illusory and distant Archibald Craven and the hauntingly empty mansion, further hindering Mary from belonging to her home. Despite Mary’s lack of belonging, Burnett does acknowledge some forms of life within the enclosure. Exploring the “hundred rooms with closed doors” (46), Mary discovers a “comfortable nest” in a sofa cushion, containing “six baby mice” that “cuddled up asleep” near their mother. Even in this death-inducing house, the nest that hosted “seven mice who did not look lonely at all” proves that life can be produced and sustained in the enclosure (49). However, the house of a hundred rooms camouflages Colin in the opposite sense: his confinement in his nursery seems more like a grave. His sickness—and presence in general—is contained in a single room; his life, sickness, and the implications of the two only exist within those four walls. Not coincidentally, the only picture of his deceased mother is also kept in the room in yet another enclosure of draperies. The compartmentalization of the rooms suffocates life and familial relations through the separation.

Whether in India or England, significantly polarized spaces import danger or alienation for their child occupants. Be it the compartmentalized manor or the chilling moors, extreme examples of both nature and civilization compromise the familial dynamic. In contrast, the tomb/womb dichotomy disappears when a balance between extremities is negotiated. While the compartmentalized Gothic manor produces chronically depressed Archibald and his career invalid son Colin, the Sowerby family, who ““wouldn’t live away from th’ moor for anythin”” (24), exude healthiness and happiness. Whereas Mary’s contrariness must be cured over the course of the novel, Martha and the Sowerby clan remain the “good-natured Yorkshire” family throughout the narrative (26). The locale of these celebrated characters cannot be ignored: the “untrained Yorkshire rustic” family resides in a “moorland cottage with a swarm” of fourteen children (27). Though the Sowerbys intersect with the moor, their cottage, and the manor, Burnett refuses to relegate them to one fixed space. Martha works as a servant in the manor, while her siblings ““tumble about on th’ moor an’ play there all day”” when they leave their ““cottage fit for a

king’” (27, 58). As the Sowerbys occupy the liminal space between the mansion and the moor, their earnest characters reflect the optimal nature of their spatiality: Susan Sowerby is “sensible an’ hard-workin’ an’ good-natured an’ clean that no one could help likin’ her” (Burnett 52). Jan Marsh claims that “old manor house(s)”, such as Misselthwaite Manor, became less favored than “country cottages”, much like the Sowerby’s abode (171); the return to “plainness and simplicity” (171) evokes the tradition of the pastoral. Given that the “moral climate mirror[s] the meteorological and topographical environment” (Goodwin 2) in *The Secret Garden*, the Sowerbys’ respectability denotes their idealized existence between the extreme of the moor and the manor.

## ROMANTIC ORIGINS OF ORGANIZED SPACE AND GARDENING

To create the aesthetic of the garden, Burnett inherits a long history of child characters engaging with the pastoral: partially from Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s proposal for “natural education out of doors to train children’s bodies” and to teach “ownership through cultivation”, gardens became celebrated throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe (Goodwin 6). Burnett certainly employs the secret garden as a space of instruction, community, and engagement with nature for Mary and her comrades. In a broader domain than gardens, Wilkie claims that the “nurturing, pastoral qualities of Romanticism, emphasizing Bildungsroman characteristics of growth and change” (3) inspired the children’s canon long before Burnett’s novel. From as early as the prototypical children’s picture book, “nostalgia for a fast-retreating idyll” (Bavidge 5) appeared as a central theme of pastoral children’s literature. The Romantic tradition idealizes nature at the expense of urbanization: “children’s literature implicitly constructs ‘the child’ and ‘the city’ as mutually incongruous or, even, incompatible entities” (2). In contrast, there is a “powerful cultural association of childhood with the rural and natural” (5). The dichotomy between civilization and nature has historically aligned the child with nature, often at the expense of urban spaces.

Inarguably, the most significant compartmentalized space in this book is the secret garden. The garden operates as a transitional space between the natural and cultural, physically located between the moor and the manor. The garden exemplifies the tension

between the symbolisms of womb/tomb. On one hand, the garden has been left nearly wild for many years (save the occasional pruning of Ben Weatherstaff), suggesting the potentially mortal danger that could occur. However, its operation as both “secret” and enclosed connotes domestic safety, as a nest. Commenting on the natural and social aspects of gardening, sociologists Mark Bhatti and Andrew Church assess gardens as “sites where human agency and social relations can have a considerable influence on the use and meaning of space which may have implications for how nature is known and interpreted” (5). Essentially, Burnett’s garden is contingent on how characters like Mary Lennox exert agency over their own development, as well how people interact within the enclosure. While gardens are “key sites within English cultural landscape”, literary critic Mandy Morris explains the contested interpretation of these “civilizing agents”: “The garden, too, is an ambiguous symbol: The tensions it encompasses give *The Secret Garden* much of its fascination. It is both alfresco and enclosed. It is private, but it is also a place to meet strangers. The open air, the natural and vegetative, the wild” (3, 6). While gardens necessarily exist both in nature and civilization, the implications of such liminality complicate the role of these spaces. As theorized in the study of landscapes, liminality references the garden as an “in-between space” (Thomassen 21) between nature and culture; physically, the garden occupies the space between the moor and Misselthwaite Manor. Further, the garden’s liminality includes “cultural and ritual passages” (24): Mary, not to mention Colin and his father, undergoes moral and physical improvement from her time in the garden. Milne articulates the tension surrounding the garden: “humans are in a perpetual struggle to control and adapt the natural world to their needs- to civilize it” (3). According to her interpretation, gardens represent the constant—yet impossible—task of civilizing nature while dissolving cultural boundaries. These spaces of exclusion attempt to “tame” and “reproduce” what Wilkie calls the “The Wild” in “fashionably natural gardens” (Wilkie 5; Morris 16). The ambiguity surrounding gardens represents the tomb and womb potential. When Lillias Craven suffered a severe injury in the garden, her subsequent death caused Archibald to lock the garden up for ten years. Thus, the clandestine enclosure imported associations of death and estrangement. Upon its reentrance ten years later, Mary

proclaims that “it isn’t a quite dead garden... Even if the roses are dead, there are other things alive” (Burnett 67). Thus, Mary articulates the garden’s ability to cultivate life, even with the impending potential of death. Her sentiment reveals the synergy of the contradiction: due to the mortal potential of the garden, new life can be produced and sustained.

## LIMINALITY IN MARY AND THE GARDEN

From the onset of the novel, when Mary “embarks...on a journey out of India to the English Yorkshire moors” (Morris 6), her identity is defined by a perpetual state of liminality. Not only does she float between two countries, but Mary’s constant state of transitioning from family to family also marks her as liminal. From physical to social to familial, Mary can be classified as a liminal character because she does not belong to a single country, space, or family, but fluxes between spaces and people. Just like Mary, the garden represents a space in transition. While composed of shrubbery and wildlife, a garden directly results from cultural intrusion upon nature. Without human intervention, the garden would stay an uninterrupted natural space. Thus, the garden remains partly natural and exotic, while necessarily incorporating the influence of civilization. Further, the garden spatially exists between Misselthwaite Manor and the whistling moorland. Not only does the garden negotiate nature and culture, but it also represents communal space for all strata of English society. At the onset of the novel, Mary’s isolation from her familial ties and uprooting from national identity tie her character to the neglected garden. Her gained interest in discovering the entrance to the flowery enclosure and cultivating a “piece of earth” (Burnett 95) demonstrate her heightened comfort in the space, in stark contrast to her alienation in Indian and English society. In fact, the garden becomes the central space to which Mary belongs; the close association between the two constructs her as liminal character, much as the garden remains a liminal space.

Ultimately, Mary establishes her identity by inhabiting perhaps the only space in which she feels comfortable: the secret garden. In fact, Morris argues that many facets of Mary’s identity are “linked with the English walled garden” (1). The only place Mary seems

to actually belong is in this enclosure. However, that existence is unlike any other: she must keep it a secret; she alone controls the gatekeeping (she found the entrance and has the key); and she frolics in a place associated with her aunt's death. The garden allows Mary to exercise "spatial agency" that liberates her from the "deforming secularism and the 'civilizing' influences" of the manor to the "freedom the garden offers in its wild state" (Wilkie 7). In each space, Mary is foreign in comparison to her environment; India is exoticized while the manor remains cold and distant to her. Her solace becomes the secret garden, despite its ability to both sustain life and incur death. Before discovering the garden, Mary positively interacts with the outdoors in England and India. In England, she enjoyed the "delightful gusts of wind" (Burnett 61), while she "wander[ed]" and played in "little heaps of earth" in India (8). However, she does not undergo any significant physical or psychological change from her outdoor interactions until she is in the garden. In the space of the garden, Mary herself is transformed—she sheds her contrariness and becomes more likeable, prettier, and plumper.

Thus, Mary's interactions with the garden fuel the betterment of her character, in a space that refuses to be entirely in nature or civilization. Mary's likeness to the garden originates in the intentional and painful abandonment that could only be reconciled through human interaction:

[Craven] abandons his son as well to the care of servants, much as Mary was shunned to one side in India. The garden's narrative—picturesque, fragile, feminine, dependent and hidden; erstwhile site of leisure, intimacy, romance, and tragedy—requires human intervention on a number of levels and by a number of participants to reach its optimal "conclusion." (Goodwin 107)

The contradictory nature of the garden reflects the "contrariness" of Mary Lennox. From ongoing neglect, their eventual revitalization necessitates the pruning of others: through Martha's advice and nagging, Mary eventually learns to trade her privileged Indian lifestyle

for comparatively more self-sufficiency in England. Mary's "growing up wild" presents her with the "choice of entering human society" or refusing civilization (Goodwin 12).

While Mary clearly remains distant from natural and cultural spaces in India and England alike, her "belonging" to the garden still induces a subtle irony. Even though she is finally able to "establish her place in the world", she "put[s] down roots" (Burnett 5) in a space that is liminal itself: the secret garden. Thus, her sense of belonging cannot be permanently tied to the moors or the mansion, nature or culture, nor England or India. The garden space mediates her transition from being a "rootless, neglected, and uncared for 'disagreeable-looking' girl" (Morris 6) to "growing stronger and fatter" with "a bit o' red in tha' cheeks" (Burnett 121). Ultimately, Mary negotiates her liminality by connecting to the ambiguous symbol of the garden.

## **FACETS OF MARY'S LIMINALITY**

Given Mary's association with the secret garden, her liminality defines how she understands her own identity, interacts with other characters, and engages with distinct spaces. In many ways, the garden's liminality between natural and cultural space is reproduced through Mary's liminality between families and countries. Specifically, the deconstruction and reconstruction of social class complicate the imperialist narrative that Goodwin articulates: the wealthy Cravens submit to the natural knowledge of the humble Sowerby clan.

Within the first few pages of the narrative, Mary not only moves from one country to another, but also shifts from being a daughter to an orphan, through three sets of guardians. Her initial mark of being "the child alone...the child no one ever saw!" (Burnett 11) dissolves any lasting familial connection between Mary and her parents. Further, Mary constantly transitions between caretakers, from her parents in India to a clergyman's family in England to her Uncle Archibald at Misselthwaite Manor. While she remains vaguely in a family structure, Mary perceives her own distance from any relations: "she had been living in other people's houses and had had no Ayah...she had never seemed to belong to anyone

even when her father and mother had been alive” (15). Even within her own family, Mary’s role deconstructed any chance of permanence or belonging.

Besides the familial distance, Mary also remains liminal in terms of national identity. In India, the “dark faces” (Burnett 7) of the natives clearly marked Mary as an Other. Her “little thin face, little thin body, thin light hair, and sour expression” (Burnett 7) convey her Englishness, in a country where all other inhabitants are Indian. While Mary is of English descent, her cultural experiences have all been located in India; even her reappearance in England defines her as a foreigner on her own soil. Although Mary nationally identifies as English, her perception of England reflects estrangement rather than belonging: “she felt so horribly lonely and far away from everything she understood and which understood her” (Burnett 45). Thus, Mary’s background in India contests her English nationality; she does not identify with either England or India, but exists in a liminal space between the two as an Anglo-Indian.

Mary’s existence between India and England, as well as her estrangement from the manor and the moor, situate her most aptly in the garden. Her identification with the garden has significant spatial implications. The garden exists between the moor, where the Sowerbys reside, and Misselthwaite Manor, home to the Craven clan. Thus, Mary’s transience is reflected in the garden’s physical liminality. Further, Mary’s operation in the garden seems to condense class distinctions. Just as the manor clearly suggests upper-class wealth, the Sowerby’s cottage connotes their rural, lower-class lifestyle. However, the interactions with the garden initially transcend, and sometimes even reserve, social order. Whereas the Cravens hold financial capital in their property, Dickon (not to mention his mother) emanates knowledge of the natural world. Even Dickon’s ability to converse with animals conveys his superior position within the outdoors.

Superiority, through wealth and social status, seemingly depends on the occupied space. Even with Mary’s wealth, she is marked as inferior or foreign when she refuses to dress herself with Martha and exudes ignorance about the natural world with Dickon. However, Mary’s superiority seems to be slowly reaffirmed throughout the novel. While Burnett champions the Sowerbys as rustic, the Craven/Lennox clan ultimately reasserts the

superiority granted by their social status. While the outdoor knowledge of the Sowerbys is celebrated, their social status is eventually maintained; at the conclusion of the work, the upper class regains mastery at the expense of the lower class. In the imperialist tradition, the colonization dynamic between India and England clearly surfaces in Burnett's *The Secret Garden*. It functions in a somewhat atypical manner: an English girl, who grew up in India, returns to her homeland. In England, Mary finds that she does not seamlessly align with English culture; in fact, her English background is less significant to others than her more overt signs of "otherness". Just as imperialism functions on a large-scale geographic and historic sense, Mary's relationship with Colin and Dickon also operates in the colonial tradition. When Colin, representing aristocratic England, encounters Dickon, representing the natural world, they initially clash; Colin does not understand Dickon's oneness with nature, and Dickon recognizes that Colin's malady derives more from paranoia than disease. In similar trajectory to Mary's experience, Dickon's mastery of nature ultimately cannot elevate his social status. Rather, the culmination of the novel resituates each character in their original social class.

## FROM LIMINALITY TO RAPTURE

In *The Secret Garden*, enclosed spaces situate characters in places that both breed new life and yield death. Through Mary Lennox, Burnett demonstrates how children negotiate both natural and cultural spaces. While extreme instances of culture and nature prove dangerous for the child, spaces that interweave natural and civilized elements become safe havens. In particular, the secret garden surfaces as the iconic space of life, death, and, as other readers note, rebirth. In its liminality, the pastoral tradition coincides with the burgeoning agency of Mary; the transitional space not only represents the blending of nature and culture, but reflects Mary's own flux between families and countries.

In the final scene of the novel, the "long forsaken" garden (Burnett 223) sheds its secretive barrier to host a reunion with the Sowerbys, Ben Weatherstaff, Mary, Colin, and Archibald Craven. Whereas the garden previously conjured associations of death (from Lilies's tragic accident), the reunion scene bursts with "glowing life", "splendid color", and

“joyous cries” (223). The exultations of rapture not only describe the temperament of Colin, but construct the garden as an “embowered temple of gold” (225). Through this scene, Burnett crystallizes her narrative of spatiality through the garden. Whereas other enclosures house the possibility of both life and death, the garden further revitalizes landscapes, characters, and the familial dynamic through rebirth. Its unique capability of rebirth resolves the womb/tomb dichotomy present throughout the narrative. Even in the final pages of the novel, Burnett conveys the powerful, albeit transient, nature of spaces. The garden, initially associated with death and secrecy, evolves to a communal space of rejuvenation. The progressive trajectory of the garden becomes superimposed on other facets of the story. For instance, Mary and Colin, initially forgotten and ornery, experience revitalization through their engagement with the garden. Thus, the notion of spatiality frames *The Secret Garden*. Not only does Burnett connect seemingly disparate perceptions of nature and culture through places, but she also examines the nature of childhood in relation to spaces. Through enclosures, children traverse the womb/tomb cycle as a means of negotiating the balance between life-giving and death-inducing spaces. Ultimately, Mary navigates her transition through cultivating the liminal space of the garden. Through reading the space in *The Secret Garden*, I focus on the agency of child characters and readers in negotiating the liminal facets of their own identities.

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