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A Hundred Years of *The Secret Garden*

Frances Hodgson Burnett’s Children’s Classic Revisited

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Contents

Marion Gymnich and Imke Lichterfeld
*The Secret Garden Revisited* .................... 7

Raimund Borgmeier
The Garden in Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* in the
Context of Cultural History .......................... 15

Imke Lichterfeld
‘There was every joy on earth in the secret garden’ – Nature and Female
Identity in Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* ............ 27

Anja Drautzburg
‘It was the garden that did it!’ – Spatial Representations with References
to Illness and Health in Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* . . 39

Angelika Zirker
Redemptive Children in Frances Hodgson Burnett’s Novels: *Little Lord
Fauntleroy* and *The Secret Garden* .......................... 53

Stefanie Krüger
Life in the Domestic Realm – Male Identity in *The Secret Garden* ........ 69

Sara Strauß
Constructions of ‘Otherness’ in Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret
Garden* .................................................. 77

Thomas Kullmann
*The Secret Garden* and the Redefinition of Englishness ............... 91

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Hanne Birk
Pink Cats and Dancing Daisies: A Narratological Approach to Anime and Film Versions of *The Secret Garden* ................................................. 105

Ramona Rossa
Forty Years On: Reimagining and Going Beyond *The Secret Garden* in Noel Streatfeild’s *The Painted Garden* .................................................. 125

Marion Gymnich
Porridge or Bertie Bott’s Every-Flavour Beans? – Attitudes towards Food in Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* and Other Children’s Classics ................................................................. 141

Gislind Rohwer-Happe
Edwardian Girlhood Fiction and the Tradition of the Female Novel of Development .................................................. 167

Contributors .................................................. 189
Marion Gymnich and Imke Lichterfeld

**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 Holbrook. “Preface.” In: Frances Hodgson Burnett. *The Secret Garden*. Edited by Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina. New York: Norton, 2006 [1911]. ix – x, ix.)
as Phyllis Bixler Koppes puts it, Burnett “gave symbolic enrichment and mythic enlargement to her poetic vision by adding tropes from a literary pastoral tradition at least as old as Virgil’s *Georgics*.” In her contribution to this volume Anja Drautzburg examines specifically the healing properties attributed to nature in Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* on the background of the concept of ‘therapeutic landscapes’ developed in health geography. While many readers may perhaps be tempted to consider the description of nature and of the garden as a relatively ‘timeless’ aspect of Burnett’s novel, the notions regulating the depiction of gardening in the text of course have been informed by discourses about nature and gardening that have been shaped by cultural tradition. In his article Raimund Borgmeier situates the notions of gardening which are alluded to or implied in *The Secret Garden* in the wider framework of the cultural history of gardening. Especially the garden’s location in a landscape that is typical of Yorkshire, Northern England adds a special quality of ‘rough Englishness’. In his contribution to the present volume Thomas Kullmann discusses the representation of Yorkshire as the ‘Other’ and the redefinition of Englishness in *The Secret Garden*.

With the rise of the English landscape garden, garden architecture was of great interest in the nineteenth century, which also led to a growing importance of gardening advice manuals. The development one can observe in this text type in the course of the nineteenth century shows striking parallels to the depiction of gardening in Burnett’s novel: “The earlier garden texts tend to be pragmatic advice to the middle-class woman; later Victorian garden writing is indebted to New Woman and aesthetic prose and presents the garden as a varied scene of both energetic activity and dreamy, languorous contemplation.” In *The Secret Garden* the garden discovered by Mary certainly turns into a place “of both energetic activity and dreamy, languorous contemplation”. Moreover, the fact that Mary works in the garden with male companions is reminiscent of the way gardening was presented in advice texts from the nineteenth century: “Gardening is conceived in these texts less as a hobby passed from one woman to another, like (for example) cookery or dressmaking, and more as a past-time a woman was likely to indulge on her own or, at best, with advice from a competent male relative or neighbour.” Although it is Mary who discovers the neglected garden, she needs Dickon’s advice on how to turn the wilderness into an attractive garden. Thus, the novel follows the pattern established in the gardening advice texts with respect to gender roles. Given the fact that the advice texts from

8 BILSTON. “Queens of the Garden.” 4.
the nineteenth century already “authorize[d] physical labour for women”, for instance digging and pruning, Mary’s work in the garden is certainly not a radical departure from a gendered division of labour. Yet *The Secret Garden* arguably explores the potential of the garden as a space in between the private, female sphere of the house and the public, male sphere, “push[ing] at the separation of public and private spheres”, which played such a prominent role in Victorian society. *The Secret Garden* thus allows analyses with regard to female and male gender roles and social expectations. Moreover, gardening “is not just about pottering picturesquely in the herbaceous borders in these works [the gardening advice texts], it is an opportunity both to act and to think”. On this background it seems hardly surprising that gardening contributes to turning Mary Lennox into a more mature, responsible and active individual.

*The Secret Garden* has managed to fascinate countless readers in the last one hundred years and has become a classic, appealing to both children and grown-up readers. Talking about her own (re-)reading experience in an article, Madelon S. Gohlke points out: “It [*The Secret Garden*] is one of the few books from my own childhood that I carried in memory with me into adulthood, not to be displaced by the books of greater density and magnitude which I read as I grew older.” In fact, one might argue that *The Secret Garden* can be seen as what has come to be called ‘all-ages literature’. Like other children’s classics, *The Secret Garden* may certainly give rise to multiple readings, depending on the age and (reading) experience of the reader, thus attracting young readers as well as more mature ones. *The Secret Garden* has been internationally successful, having “been translated into nearly every language”. Moreover, its place in cultural memory has been secured by a number of audiovisual adaptations based (more or less loosely) on Burnett’s novel. In her contribution to this volume Hanne Birk compares different audiovisual adaptations of *The Secret Garden*: Agnieszka Holland’s filmic adaptation of Burnett’s novel from 1993, an animated version directed by Dave Edwards from 1994 and a third version which has been shaped by the Asian tradition of the anime and thus can be seen as an intercultural

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translation of Burnett’s classic. Further evidence for the impact of *The Secret Garden* is provided by the fact that it has become the reference point for a rewriting, Noel Streatfeild’s *The Painted Garden* (1949), which transfers the story to California and modernizes many aspects of the text. Ramona Rossa explores the relationship between *The Secret Garden* and its intercultural translation in *The Painted Garden* in her article.

The fact that *The Secret Garden* is not just read by children, but also fondly remembered and (re-)read by adults may partially be due to Burnett’s experience as a writer of novels for a grown-up readership. In some respects, one may in fact argue that *The Secret Garden* resembles literary texts written for adults rather than other children’s novels. In particular the similarities with novels written by the Brontë sisters are striking. These similarities include, of course, the setting: The Yorkshire Moors provide an ominous background for *Wuthering Heights* as well as for *The Secret Garden*. Moreover, regarding the semanticisation of space, the isolation of Misselthwaite Manor is reminiscent of the location of the house of the Earnshaws in Emily Brontë’s novel. The description of Misselthwaite Manor, however, echoes the presentation of Thornfield in *Jane Eyre*, including the uncanny sounds emerging from a secret and well-guarded room in the building. In addition, Gothic features can be found in *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre* and *The Secret Garden*. The Yorkshire gardener Ben Weatherstaff may be seen as a significantly more genial version of the servant Joseph from *Wuthering Heights*. Gislind Rohwer-Happe argues in her contribution to this volume that the parallels to *Jane Eyre* also have to be seen in terms of the genre tradition of the female *bildungsroman*. Finally, *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre* and *The Secret Garden* all celebrate the potential healing power of nature. In *Wuthering Heights* the new beginning and the reconciliation of opposites in the second generation is captured in the image of the younger Catherine and Hareton Earnshaw gardening together. While Heathcliff and Catherine are associated with the wild and dangerous moors, those characters that have learnt to discipline their emotions and to live together peacefully are interested in gardening, in making things grow.

In many respects *The Secret Garden* is very much a product of the era in which

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it was written. Many literary critics have sought to identify the impact historical and political configurations have had on this children’s novel; after all, as Danielle E. Price argues:

The Secret Garden is a novel that only could be nurtured in the late nineteenth century and brought to fruition at the beginning of the twentieth century – a time when interest in gardens reached a frenzy, when gender roles were being hotly contested, and when England was adjusting to the return of its colonizing subjects.17

In terms of its depiction of female gender roles The Secret Garden seems to strike an at times uneasy compromise between traditional and progressive notions of femininity. While Mary Lennox is certainly no ‘New Woman’ in the making, she is no demure little angel in the house, either. Her hot temper, her strong will and her bonding with male characters on largely equal terms turn her into a predecessor of female heroines of later twentieth-century children’s literature ranging from Georgina/George in Enid Blyton’s The Famous Five adventure series (1942 – 1962) to Hermione Granger in J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series (1997 – 2007). Many literary critics have discussed the female characters (both Mary and the different mother figures) in the light of changing female gender roles, yet few critics have focussed exclusively on the male characters so far. In her contribution to this volume Stefanie Krüger examines the ways in which male identity is addressed in The Secret Garden.

Another aspect of the novel that clearly shows how much it was shaped by its time is the way spatial and interpersonal relations are seen in the context of colonialism. Both The Secret Garden and A Little Princess include references to (colonial) India. In this respect Burnett’s novel can be situated in a literary tradition which includes Wilkie Collins’ The Moonstone (1860), Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes story “The Adventure of the Speckled Band” (1892) and of course Kim (1901) and many other works by Rudyard Kipling. A number of literary critics have addressed the references to colonialism in Burnett’s novels and have sought to evaluate them. In addition to Mary’s childhood experiences in India, the references to Indian characters and the diamond mines in Burnett’s A Little Princess of course also lend themselves to a discussion from a postcolonial perspective. In this volume Sara Strauß re-examines The Secret Garden from the point of view of postcolonial criticism by discussing how both India and Yorkshire are constructed as a significant ‘Other’ in the course of the novel.

One of the features that contribute to rendering The Secret Garden fascinating to the present day seems to be its enigmatic character. The reader time and again

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is confronted with mysteries – some of which remain unresolved right to the end. In terms of cognitive narratology one can argue that The Secret Garden offers the reader a number of red herrings by employing features that induce the reader to draw upon the literary frame of Gothic fiction or the sensation novel. All of the necessary ingredients are there: the isolated location, the large, old mansion, the mysterious crying at night, the apparently sinister hunchback, forbidden rooms and the locked and forbidden garden. Ultimately, however, there are no evil supernatural powers, nor is there any sinister conspiracy. And Mary Lennox certainly is no maiden-in-distress. Right from the start, Mary’s demeanour prevents the reader from seeing her entirely as a helpless victim. She obviously has stamina and a will of her own, which eventually helps to make her own life better as well as Colin’s. On a more concrete level, the reader is invited to join Mary’s exploration of the unknown, be it her ‘mother country’ England, the halls and corridors of Misselthwaite Manor or the garden which has been locked for many years. What child can resist the lure of exploring the unknown?

The heterodiegetic narrator’s stance may certainly appear quite unusual in The Secret Garden. While narrators in children’s literature sometimes emphasise their superior knowledge, thus ‘looking down’ on the (child) protagonists (as well as occasionally ‘talking down’ to young readers), a narrator who at least at first expresses downright dislike for the protagonist is still rather uncommon. One can argue, however, that the narrative voice is quite effective. The denigrating comments on Mary Lennox will hardly convince the reader to dislike the protagonist. Given the fact that the reader gets a vivid description of the way Mary has been neglected by both of her parents and has been forgotten by everyone after the outbreak of the cholera epidemic, it is not particularly hard to account for Mary’s sour face. By emphasising Mary’s disagreeable nature and employing a narrative voice that criticises her instead of expressing pity for the lonely little girl, Burnett eschews the obvious danger of indulging in an overly sentimental depiction of the protagonist. In this respect The Secret Garden is very different from both Little Lord Fauntleroy and A Little Princess. The differences concerning the concept of the protagonist in The Secret Garden and Little Lord Fauntleroy as well as the linguistic and rhetorical implications of these differences are discussed in detail by Angelika Zirker in her article on “Redemptive Children in Frances Hodgson Burnett’s Novels” in this volume.

Many of the articles in the present volume are based on papers delivered in the context of a conference dedicated to Burnett’s The Secret Garden which took place at the University of Bonn in November 2010. We would like to thank the participants of this conference as well as the contributors to this volume for sharing with us their thoughts on one of the classics of English children’s literature. We are grateful to Anna Coogan, Katharina Engel, Hatice Karakurt, Elisabeth Rüb and Klaus Scheunemann for their help with the organization of
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“Oh! the things which happened in that garden! If you have never had a garden, you cannot understand, and if you have had a garden you will know that it would take a whole book to describe all that came to pass there.”

(Frances Hodgson Burnett, The Secret Garden 136)

References


Raimund Borgmeier

The Garden in Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* in the Context of Cultural History

In the opening paragraph of her relatively recent essay “Strip Mines in the Garden: Old Stories, New Formats, and the Challenge of Change”, Margaret Mackey asserts the central importance of the garden not only in Burnett’s novel but in literature generally; she writes:

> The image of the garden has a long and powerful literary and social history. It offers connotations of security, enclosure, beauty, and fruitfulness. It implies a convergence of the powers of nature and the powers of human intervention. It remains a primal image of paradise, lost but regainable. It can stand for safety but also for restriction.¹

This is certainly true, but it is not the complete picture. I would suggest that in addition to literary and social history one should also look at cultural history. And as far as the garden is concerned, there is, in British cultural history (one might even say European cultural history), the phenomenon of the English garden. As I intend to show, this concept plays a remarkable role in *The Secret Garden*. Considered from this point of view, the garden cannot only stand “for safety” and “for restriction”, as Mackey argues, but also for qualities like imaginative spontaneity and liberty.

The general importance of the concept of the English garden in the context of British and European cultural history can hardly be overestimated. The leading *History of British Gardening* expresses this with the following ironical but at the same time unmistakeable statement:

> The pundits – and the word inevitably, to an Englishman, must carry some of the jocularity attached to its secondary dictionary meaning – assure us that one of our few contributions to the visual arts is the landscape garden; long ago it became canonized in the world of taste as *le jardin anglais.*²

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