

The Secret Garden By Frances Hodgson Burnett: a short textual analysis

The essay below explores a short extract from *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. A critical analysis will demonstrate aspects of historical context, ideology of the author, concepts of childhood, stylistic devices used, narrative voice, devices conveying mood and character, themes and how the scene moves the story forward.

The historical context of *The Secret Garden*, set in the Edwardian Era, shows the importance of the British Colony of the time.

'I didn't know about them in India'

Commonly highly regarded in this period, Hodgson Burnett reinforces the importance of the British Empire. Mary Lennox had recently moved back from India after the death of her parents. India was a part of the British Empire and 'was woven into the fabric of British life and hence into the fabric of British children's fiction' (Kutzer, 2000, pp.11). Like Mary Lennox had moved from India to England, the author had moved to America when she was just 14 years old (Carpenter & Shirley, 1990, pp.6).

From another perspective the author pushes the reader to see India as a negative place for a child to grow up in. This can be seen with Mary's innocent tone of not knowing about flowers in India – something Hodgson Burnett believes childhood should contain.

The author's ideology as expressed in *The Secret Garden* shows a life close to her own experiences.

'When you see a bit of earth you want,' with something like a smile, 'take it, child, and make it come alive.'

Her childhood was a struggle from being a wealthy middle class family, to a poorer family after the death of her father. Mr Craven's ideology of bringing the earth back to life, closely links to the author's ideology, alike to many of her stories which represented the theme of 'rags to riches, and so did her real life' (Carpenter & Shirley, 1990, pp.10). The slight pauses within the sentence reinforce the solidity of making something flourish again. The ideology of the garden is also represented here, as a personal link, her days as a young girl in America spending time learning the names of trees and bushes and birds; in the words of Hodgson Burnett herself described as the 'Dryad Days' (Carpenter & Shirley, 1990, pp.22). Mary Lennox's personality echoes the author's desire to explore nature and the earth.

The author's explicit concepts of childhood are represented through Mary Lennox as a whole. Mr Craven reinforces how a childhood should be.

'She must be less delicate before she begins lessons. Give her simple, healthy food. Let her run wild in the garden. Don't look after her too much. She needs liberty and fresh air and romping about.'

Her effective use of the word 'delicate' shows children of the time, especially Mary are becoming sensitive to the environment. It is evident that she believes children should be enriched outdoors with 'simple, healthy food' to allow them to enjoy the wonders of nature. Mr Craven is to the point with short sharp sentences, allowing Mrs Medlock to understand Mary should not need looking after every second of the day. Hodgson Burnett believes that Mary should be 'free' with 'fresh air' and exploring. This is how she sees that a good childhood should be.

Implicit concepts of childhood are expressed through the portrayal of a disagreeable child and the nature a child needs to flourish in life.

'She had felt her a tiresome charge and had indeed seen as little of her as she dared.'

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Mary Lennox is described as an 'unattractive, unlikeable and disagreeable' (Keyser, 1983, pp.1) child hence Mrs Medlock made no attempt to spend time with Mary if she did not have to. Instead of presenting Mrs Medlock as a compassionate woman who spent time with Mary to encourage her to flourish as a child, the author reinforces the fact that Mary does not belong to anyone. She can be seen as showing the representation of parents at the time; and that however 'unattractive' Mary may be, a parent should be able to nurture their child through childhood. This may also be the reason Hodgson Burnett uses the metaphor of the garden as the parent Mary needed to encourage her growth and exploration through life.

The stylistic device of the metaphor of the garden is tremendously important within *The Secret Garden*.

'A bit of earth,' he said to himself, and Mary thought that somehow she must have reminded him of something. When he stopped and spoke to her his dark eyes looked almost soft and kind.'

The garden metaphorically represents something so much more for both Mary and Mr Craven. For Mary the garden is something that will nurture her mind and allow her to grow with the same ingredients as the garden needs. For Mr Craven it is a connection to his late wife, a memory. The memory that grows throughout the story will be nurtured by Mary who brings the garden back to its former glory. A link to the historical context is seen by the emerging psychological connection to one's conscious and unconscious mind, Mary has an environmental connection to the garden as she 'takes the first steps towards proper girlhood and woman hood. She will trade her sickliness for health, her yellow skin for white and her Indian nature for an English one' (Price, 2001, pp.4), as she develops alongside the garden.

The Secret Garden uses a third-person omniscient narrative voice throughout, although as a reader the opinions of Hodgson Burnett are shown.

'Mrs Medlock looked please. She was relieved to hear that she need not 'look after' Mary too much. (...) In addition to this she was fond of Martha's mother.'

Although the story is based around the secret garden and Mary's view of this, the narrator remains as third person and follows the rules of using 'she' as the narrator talks about Mrs Medlock as another person not the person attempting to tell the story. The omniscient narrator shows they know 'everything' including Mrs Medlock's feelings of 'relief'.

Mr Craven's dismissive tone is used to convey his mood and character.

"Anywhere," he answered. "There! You must go now, I am tired." He touched the bell to call Mrs Medlock. "Good-bye. I shall be away all summer."

Mr Craven's character shows a lack of emotion towards Mary and is reinforced by his dismissive tone. Mary has just reminded him of his late wife's passion for the garden – although the reader has yet to find this information until later in the story. Mr Craven's depressive state of mind is portrayed through his short sentences towards Mary and the use of punctuation such as an exclamation mark; showing he dislikes talking to Mary. Again Hodgson Burnett cleverly uses the theme of illness, Mr Craven is 'tired' or perhaps does not have anything more to say to Mary. The dismissive tone shows no remorse for the sharp language pointing out he 'shall be away all summer'. There is no sense of fatherhood towards Mary.

There is a re occurring theme of children being unhealthy and illness represented in Mary Lennox. The consistent notion of Christian Science is shown, portrayed using the character Susan Sowerby's and her 'healthy mind'. Hodgson Burnett uses every opportunity to remind the reader about being healthier and the Christian Science belief that no disease is corporeal, therefore 'no harm' can come from Mary spending time with them. Also shown is the necessity for her to have the human companionship, clearly previously lacking in Mary's life.

This scene moves the story forward as the reader is able to learn more about Mary's interest in the garden and now she has asked permission from Mr Craven, she can achieve her goal of opening the secret garden. The reader also learns a great deal about the author's idea of a childhood, one where Mary should experience 'fresh air'. Also the theme of Christian Science is first revealed through Susan Sowerby's ideology and 'healthy-mind'.

References:

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