

The secret garden and the path to physical and emotional wellbeing



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In *The Secret Garden*, by Frances Hodgson Burnett, a young girl discovers the importance of the relationship between humans and the natural world. At the start of the novel the orphaned and contrary Mary Lennox is brought from her home in India to her mysterious Uncle Archibald's manor in England. It is there on the moor and in a secret locked garden that Mary begins to heal her mind and body. In the process she exorcises the demons of Misselthwaite manor and betters the lives of its inhabitants. In this paper I argue *The Secret Garden* claims that human's emotional and physical wellbeing is inextricably tied to their relationship with the natural world. Positive relationships cause health and good temperament while negative relationships cause illness and bad temperament. This claim is evident in the dichotomy between Dickon Sowerby and Mrs. Medlock and in the healing process of Mary Lennox and Colin Craven. Ben Weatherstaff and Archibald Craven, however, divert from this pattern. Despite their positive relationship to nature, they are portrayed as ill and bad tempered. This seeming contradiction in fact only qualifies the initial claim by contributing the idea that a second factor is also necessary for a person's physical and emotional wellbeing. This second factor is the practice of the " Magic" of positive thinking.

The Secret Garden claims a person's relationship to nature determines their physical and emotional wellbeing. Characters with positive relationships to nature are portrayed as healthy and good tempered while characters who have a negative relationship to nature are portrayed as ill or bad tempered. This is supported by the character of Dickon Sowerby and Mrs. Medlock. Dickon has the strongest connection to nature of anyone in the novel. When

he understands the needs of flowers and trees, makes friends with wild animals such as robins, crows, ponies, and squirrels, and speaks to them in their native languages he is reminiscent of a sprite or woodland fairy. This positive relationship with nature is evident in his physical and emotional health. Dickon's physical descriptions in the novel consistently emphasizes his strength, the ruddy color of his cheeks, and the bright blue of his eyes which highlights the life he has within him. In addition, he never gets sick because, as his mother says, "[He's] sniffed up too much fresh air for twelve year' to ever get to sniffing with cold" (106). Dickon is also emotionally healthy. He seems always to be in a jovial mood and Mary claims he is nicer than "any boy that ever lived...he's like an angel" (169). Dickon also practices the "Magic" of positive thinking, the powerful tool of saying "nice things are going to happen until you make them happen," used by all the children (237). This is shown in his optimism about the future of the seemingly dead garden. He says "A body might think this was dead wood, but I don't believe it...there'll be a fountain o' roses here this summer" (104). In contrast to Dickon, Mrs. Medlock has a decidedly negative relationship to nature. Mrs. Medlock is rarely shown to leave the manor and she expresses her dislike for the moor directly when she says, "It's a wild, dreary enough place to my mind" (21). This negative relationship with nature causes her to be emotionally unwell resulting in her being cross and mean. Mary's first impression of Mrs. Medlock is that she is, "the most disagreeable person she had ever seen" (13). Mrs. Medlock lives up to this description by often commanding Mary in a severe way and threatening to "box [her] ears" or "lock her up" if she doesn't obey (58). Dickon and Mrs. Medlock exemplify the

claim that a person's relationship to nature, be it positive or negative, is related to their physical and emotional wellbeing.

The claim The Secret Garden makes, that human's relationship with nature is tied to their wellbeing, is also supported by the healing processes of Mary Lennox and Colin Craven. Mary begins the novel as a sickly, disagreeable, and altogether wretched child who loves nothing and is loved by no one. She spends her childhood locked up in the nursery and playing in the hot dust of India so when she arrives at Misselthwaite, with its many lush gardens and the cold wild moor, she hates it. As she has nothing to do inside, however, and at the insistence of her servant Martha, Mary takes to exploring outdoors during the day. As Mary strengthens her relationship with nature, running through the gardens, breathing the air off the moor, and making friends with the robin, she begins to grow stronger in body and mind. Mary gains weight, grows thick healthy hair, loses the jaundice color from her complexion, and begins to be a kind and agreeable girl, to the point where she selflessly decides to share her secret garden with Colin, in order to help him heal as well. Mary also practices the " Magic" of positive thinking in her attempts to help Colin heal. This can be seen when Mary repeats fiercely, as Colin tries to stand, " You can do it! I told you you could! You can do it! You can!" the narrator explains that, " she was saying it to Colin because she wanted to make Magic and keep him on his feet" (227).

The healing process of the character Colin Craven similarly supports the main claim of the novel. Colin is Mary's cousin and the son of Archibald Craven. He has been sickly and bedridden all his life and is convinced he is going to die before adulthood. Similarly to Mary, Colin begins the novel with <https://assignbuster.com/the-secret-garden-and-the-path-to-physical-and-emotional-wellbeing/>

a negative relationship to nature. He says to Mary at their first encounter, " I hate fresh air and I don't want to go out" (127). Colin also begins the novel as disagreeably as Mary did. He gains himself the nickname " The Little Raja" for the way in which he orders everyone about and he often becomes so fretful that he throws himself into hysterical tantrums. Also like Mary, Colin finds the more he strengthens his relationship to nature, by coming out to the garden in his wheelchair every day to weed and sow, the stronger and more pleasant he becomes. By the end of the novel, not only does Colin find that " nothing disagrees with [him]," anymore, but he is also finally able to walk (252). Similarly to Mary, Colin believes in and practices the " Magic" of positive thinking. Colin says " I am sure there is Magic in everything...the magic in this garden has made me stand up and know I am going to live to be a man" (239-240). He practices the Magic by repeating to himself many times a day, " Magic is in me! Magic is making me well! I am going to be as strong as Dickon!" (240).

While *The Secret Garden* appears to claim that a person's positive relationship with nature causes them to be physically and emotionally healthy, the characters of Ben Weatherstaff and Archibald Craven seem to contradict this idea. Both characters have positive relationships to nature but neither are initially displayed as good tempered or healthy. Ben has one of the strongest connections to nature of the novel. He is a gardener at Misselthwaite and therefore spends his entire day outside. In addition, like Dickon, he has made friends with a moor animal. He calls the robin, " th' only friend I've got" (40). However despite his positive connection to nature Ben is often described in such disagreeable terms as " surly", " sour", and "

uncompanionable” and is plagued by painful rheumatics (34; 40; 42).

Similarly, Archibald Craven has a positive connection to nature because he surrounds himself with “ fjords and...valleys,” “ blue lakes”, and “ mountainsides” (283). Despite this positive relationship, however, he is physically unwell with, “ a drawn face and crooked shoulders,” and so deeply grieved “ it was as if he poisoned the air about him with gloom” (283).

While the characters of Ben and Archibald seem to contradict the claim of the novel, that a positive relationship with nature causes emotional and physical wellbeing, these characters actually only qualify this claim by contributing a second claim. The second claim states that to achieve wellbeing, a person must practice the “ Magic” of positive thinking in addition to upholding a positive relationship to nature. A person cannot be well by doing only one or the other, both are necessary. Dickon, Mary, and Colin espouse this “ Magic.” Colin says at the end of the novel when explaining to his father how he was healed, “ It was the garden that did it... and the Magic” (295). Colin recognizes that both maintaining a positive relationship to nature and practicing the “ Magic” are necessary to being emotionally and physically healthy. Neither Ben nor Archibald initially practice this “ Magic” and that is why, despite their positive relationship with nature, they are physically and emotionally unwell. The “ Magic” described in this novel is called by many names; Magic, science, religion, the “ Big Good Thing”, and the “ Joy Maker.” At its core the “ Magic” is the idea of positive thinking which says, “ to let a sad thought or a bad one into your mind is as dangerous as letting a scarlet fever germ get into your body,” and that, “ surprising things can happen to anyone who, when a disagreeable or

discouraged thought comes into his mind, just has the sense to remember in time and push it out by putting in an agreeable determinedly courageous one" (278-279; 281-282). The children believe in and practice this power to "say nice things are going to happen until you make them happen," and the narrator of *The Secret Garden* would seem to believe in its power as well because at the start of the chapter "In the Garden" on pages 281 and 282 the narrator's tone shifts from its usual lyrical tone to a didactic one to describe the nature of this power and to summarize the way in which it aided the healing of Mary and Colin (237).

Neither Ben nor Archibald practice this power. This is because Ben does not believe in the "Magic" and Archibald is simply not aware of it. Towards the end of the novel, however, both characters either begin to believe in or to practice the "Magic." While the children have faith that the "Magic" will help Colin safely walk about the garden Ben, "being a stubborn old party and not having entire faith in the Magic... had made up his mind that if he were sent away he would climb and look over the wall so that he might be ready to hobble back if there were any stumbling" (244). In another instance, when Colin insists the "Magic" is in his back Ben answers dryly "you said th' Magic was in my back. Th' doctor calls it rheumatics" (244). As the novel continues, however Ben's disbelief in the "Magic" begins to be challenged by watching the miraculous recovery of Colin. This change in Ben is seen in the second to last chapter. Ben begins the chapter with no "particular reverence" for the Doxology, which is portrayed as a song of thanks to the "Magic", and takes off his hat for the song "with a sort of puzzled half-resentful look on his old face" (273-274). However, in the third line Ben

vigorously joins in with the singing and at the end of the song begins weeping and says “ I never seed no sense in th’ Doxology afore...but I may change my mind I’ time” (275). While Ben does not begin to practice the “ Magic,” and therefore cannot yet benefit from it, he accepts that in time he may change his mind about its existence. Similarly, Archibald Craven does not initially practice the “ Magic.” He has “ never tried to put any other thoughts in the place of the dark ones” (283). Therefore, like Ben, he is prevented from being physically and emotionally well, despite his connection to nature. Unlike Ben, however, Archibald begins to practice the “ Magic” and benefit from it by the end of the novel. Archibald’s change in mindset is more unconscious than Ben’s because he does not have the children to teach him the ideology behind what he experiences, but his experience is nonetheless the beginnings of acceptance and practice of the “ Magic.” It begins when he allows himself to notice the beauty of a flower. This positive thought fills his mind and pushes out the negative thoughts of sickness, loss, and isolation which have governed him since the loss of his wife. This unconscious use of the “ Magic” of positive thinking has an immediate effect on his emotional wellbeing. He feels that “ something seemed to have been unbound and released in him, very quietly,” and he says to himself, “ What is it? I almost feel as if— I were alive!” (285). As Archibald continues to practice the “ Magic” he notices that in addition to his emotional healing his “ body is growing stronger,” as well (286). Archibald is able to begin healing emotionally and physically because he has both a preexisting positive relationship with nature and he begins to practice the “ Magic” of positive thinking. Throughout the novel Ben and Archibald are not physically or emotionally well despite their strong connection to nature because they do <https://assignbuster.com/the-secret-garden-and-the-path-to-physical-and-emotional-wellbeing/>

not practice the “ Magic” of positive thinking. Towards the end of the novel, however, Ben’s disbelief in the “ Magic” is challenged and Archibald begins to practice the “ Magic” which, in addition to his positive relationship to nature, causes him to begin growing both emotionally and physically well.

The Secret Garden appears to believe that two factors are necessary for physical and emotional wellbeing. The first is a positive relationship to nature. This is most obviously supported in the novel by the dichotomy between the characters of Dickon and Mrs. Medlock and by the healing processes of Mary and Colin. The second is the practice of the “ Magic” of positive thinking. This is supported in the novel by the characters of Ben and Archibald. While The Secret Garden continues to be a classic in part because of its lyrical storytelling centered on enduring themes of loss, family, and healing, the novel also doubles as a sort of guide for the acquirement of physical and emotional wellbeing.

Works Cited

Burnett, Frances Hodgson. *The Secret Garden*. 1911. New York: Scholastic, 1999. Print.