

Representations of illness and recovery in 'the secret garden'

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“ Explore The Secret Garden’s representation of illness and recovery. ” The Secret Garden, written by Frances Hodgson Burnett, is a children’s story that has endured enormous popularity since its publication in 1911. The novel centres round a young and lonely protagonist, Mary Lennox. Mary’s journeys in The Secret Garden- both physical and spiritual- have been followed by child readers and often remembered long into adulthood.

The text communicates to readers themes such as death, sickness, and recovery and it is largely because of this addressing of serious and sometimes relatable issues that the novel has been considered such a significant contribution to children’s literature. The notions that illness and unhappiness of all kinds can be ‘ cured’ by positive thinking is a concept that runs through the text and is generally attributed to the authors own belief in Christianscience.

Burnett was known to have found comfort in spirituality and this ‘ New thought’ ideology whilst dealing with the deaths that occurred in her own life and the resultingdepressionfrom them. By exploring the representations of illness and recovery within The Secret Garden readers are able to recognise the messages and lessons Burnett as an author was attempting to portray to children. From this, readers can also gain a greater contextual understanding of the kind of society Burnett- and in turn, her characters- would have existed within.

In many works of children’s literature, it is common for parental figures to either not be present or to be removed from the story in some way, to allow the child protagonist to have their own ‘ adventure’ without adult supervision. The Secret Garden is an example of this, but what stands apart <https://assignbuster.com/representations-of-illness-and-recovery-in-the-secret-garden/>

from other children's texts is the harshness of the situation that Mary as a character is immediately faced with. By the end of *The Secret Garden's* first chapter, both Mary's parents and any servants that provided care for her have been killed by an outbreak of cholera.

Mary Lennox is instantly surrounded by death at the beginning of the story, and her sudden physical loneliness only draws attention from readers to the fact that Mary was very much alone and uncared for in the first place; as Burnett writes, as soon as there is an outbreak, "...She was forgotten by everyone. Nobody thought of her, nobody wanted her..." . Death and sickness are the themes that open *The Secret Garden* to readers and in turn give readers the first impression that these themes are what largely define Mary Lennox as a protagonist. Before Mary is taken to live with her uncle in Yorkshire, she first stays in India with an English Clergyman and his family. What is interesting about where Mary is taken when she must leave her first home is that she is only seen as safe and away from disease when taken into a British setting- even if it is only made British by the people she is living with.

It is decisions like this one made by Burnett that affirms to readers that India is seen to her as a 'sickly' place; the novel in fact opens with a paragraph stating Mary "had been born in India and had always been ill in one way or another." It is important to consider that the first outbreak of Cholera is seen in the servants- those who are native to India- which is the cause of Mary's parent's death. India is frequently suggested to be an unhealthy place, especially in comparison to England, which as *The Secret Garden* progresses is shown to be the place where character's health improve.

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This apparent view of an English writer seeing England as a place of good health, whilst a foreign place to be somewhere that produces sickness and death, puts forward the question to readers of whether they are being presented with an accurate perception of settings, or if they are reading the descriptions of someone who is significantly biased. Understanding this, adult readers should consider if child readers could be negatively influenced by the writer's own opinions.

The locked away and hidden garden in Burnett's *The Secret Garden* is seen to be the symbolic centre of the novel even before its discovery. Its introduction through Martha, who tells Mary after some hesitation " One of th'gardens is locked up. No one has been in it for ten years. " is one that creates the first real mystery of the text, something to occupy Mary's thoughts while she begins life in Yorkshire and stir curiosity in readers, suggesting to them that there are more secrets to be discovered than just the many shut away and forbidden rooms of the old manor house.

Although Burnett claims the garden at Mary's first sight of it to be " The sweetest, most mysterious place anyone could imagine", the first description of the setting is decidedly centred round the fact that all the trees and flowers that were once there seem to no longer be alive. Like the opening scenes of *The Secret Garden*, this new scene is one largely defined by death. The garden has been hidden away and unwanted, much like Mary herself in the beginning of *The Secret Garden*, however, the situation is different in that upon discovery, someone wishes to care for it. Mary claims " Is it all a quite dead garden? I wish it wasn't. " These words from the protagonist could be seen as a kind of positive development in character; Mary is

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learning to feel compassion for other things. It could be argued that Mary's wish to look after this garden stems from an innate desire to 'get better' herself. Despite Mary's interest in caring for the garden, it is believed to be lifeless until Dickon is introduced into the text.

Mary confides in him and brings him to the garden, and almost immediately he is able to find traces of life in the otherwise decaying surroundings, telling Mary it is "as wick as you or me." Dickon as a character seems to represent both nature and health; Mary finds him surrounded by animals and the author describes him have "Cheeks as red as poppies". The way he seems to portray both health and a close bond with nature suggests to readers that Burnett herself sees a strong connotation between contact with nature and good health.

Nature is often used throughout *The Secret Garden* to describe healthy traits; The doctor at one point claims Dickon to be "as strong as a moor pony". Nature even outside of the garden or Moors is seen to be intrinsically linked with being healthy in the text; both Mary and Colin's wellbeing seems to depend on the changing of the seasons. It is only when spring arrives that Colin feels strong enough to sit up for breakfast with his cousin, claiming "I am breathing long breath of fresh air. It makes you strong." The two children's health and progress seem to rely heavily on the matching progress of nature and the seasons outside.

Considering this, readers could ask themselves if Burnett has intended this to be because of how she may see nature and health intrinsically linked- the two children must 'bloom' with the seasons and the flowers in the garden- or whether it is because she creates two characters so dependant on nature
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for their happiness. In the lonely, remote manor house with barely any other children around to play with, nature and the garden are some of the only things for Mary and Colin to build an attachment to. Colin is a character who is introduced to the text after much mystery; he is the cause of the crying Mary has been hearing every night.

His character of the 'invalid hidden away' is one that has been seen before in other works of fiction- a notable example to draw parallels to is the character of Bertha in Jane Eyre. Colin and Bertha represent the kind of characters that were created in a "Victorian fascination with the imaginative potential of disease". Sickness was something that could define a character and make it interesting to readers; a kind of morbid fascination with things that were not yet entirely understood. Being unwell in the Victorian period was itself not seen as an entirely negative experience.

Diane Price Herndl states in *Invalid Women* that "Invalidism has historically offered women a way . . . to achieve a kind of power when no other means opened up". This in theory could apply to Colin as a child character. Children, like women in the Victorian period, gained a kind of power from being unwell, as others are forced to attend to them and oblige to them for fear of sickening them further. Certainly, being treated for being unwell is the only kind of attention that Colin is able to receive until later in *The Secret Garden*.

The way Colin is treated for his illness seems to resemble the 'rest cure' treatment, a method that was developed in the 19th century. He is confined to his bed and isolated from other people, told to rest and never over-stress himself, isolated from anyone around him. Until Mary meets him, there seems to be no foreseeable time when he will 'get better'. Colin says <https://assignbuster.com/representations-of-illness-and-recovery-in-the-secret-garden/>

to Mary when they first meet “ If I live I may be a hunchback, but I shan’t live. ”. Colin has essentially resigned to waiting in his room to die.

Whilst Mary as a character strikes readers as having a fierce will to live, and a kind of innate desire to become more healthy, at this point in the novel Colin seems to contrast against her in that he does not see himself living past childhood- as he has been told his entire life. However, hope for his improvement is created through the situation that he and Mary are first introduced to each other. Mary meets Colin at a point where she herself is starting to improve in behaviour and become more like a normal, healthy child.

She is confused by the way that Colin acts, telling Martha later “ I think he’s a very spoiled boy. ”; scarcely recognising that she herself was not very different to him before she came to Yorkshire. The fact that Mary has found Colin whilst in the process of becoming more healthy herself is encouraging to readers, as if Mary can improve from being a spoilt, ‘ sickly’ child, then it seems likely that Colin is able to as well. In addition, Colin appears in the text as Mary is slowly learning to want to care for things and nurture them, implying that Mary can in turn look after and help Colin become more healthy. Colin’s actual state of health in *The Secret Garden* seems debatable. There is never an assigned name to the illness that keeps him from being mobile, other than being told that he may one day develop a hunchback like his father. His bouts of cold and fever seem to be directly related to how hysteric he becomes in his ‘ fits’, his weakness seemingly due to the fact that he has barely ventured outside of his bedroom during his lifetime.

It is Mary who is the first character to dismiss the idea of his 'sickness' and in turn his unavoidable premature death, telling him "There's nothing the matter with your horrid back- nothing but hysterics!". It is almost as if Colin's own belief in his ill health has been created through the negative beliefs of others, and Mary as a character who is new and unfamiliar with these negative presumptions is the only person who can see past them.

This concept that Colin is not truly unwell, but made to think he is and therefore acts as if he is disabled in some way, seems to align itself with Burnett's own beliefs in Christian science and New thought ideology. It also suggests to readers at this point in the novel that Colin is a character who can become better; he has willed himself into ill health, so there is no reason why he cannot similarly will himself into becoming more healthy.

Despite the authors own apparent perceptions of sickness being based on Christian Science beliefs- that sickness can be cured through positive thinking- it has been suggested by some that real forms of illness are present in some of the characters in the text. Mary and Colin are seen as neurotic figures; Mary's indifference to death and her solitary games have seen her diagnosed as pre-schizoid, whilst Colin's obsession with his own imaginary hunchback has been seen to class him as a hysteric.

Burnett admits herself that "Perhaps they were both of them thinking strange things children do not usually think". She as an author seems to understand that the child characters she has created do not act as normal, healthy children would. Though the possibility of Mary and Colin's mental illnesses are just theories, it brings the question to readers of whether the treatment, or rather lack of treatment, being provided to each child is <https://assignbuster.com/representations-of-illness-and-recovery-in-the-secret-garden/>

entirely appropriate. After all, each child has dealt with a great deal throughout their short lifetimes.

Mary has practically witnessed the deaths of all that she first knew, whilst Colin has been confined to one room for his entire life; perhaps most importantly, neither of them have ever had loving parental figures present, so would surely be psychologically affected by this in some way. Modern day readers must consider that treatment of illness was in the time Mary and Colin would have existed in, very different to what is used now- for example, the 'rest cure' of enforced confinement and bed rest has since been discredited as a treatment to any condition.

Whilst contact with nature and other children obviously shows signs of improvement in Colin and Mary's wellbeing, readers might ask themselves if this would be the case of 'real' children in the character's places, and if by the finishing chapters of *The Secret Garden*, Mary and Colin can be considered entirely 'cured' of their past problems. Word count: 2, 383

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