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## **The Children of the Empire**

### **Anti-imperialism in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden***

"It is the child no one ever saw!" exclaims a British officer when he finds in a cholera-ridden Indian compound Mary Lennox, the heroine of Frances Hodgson Burnett's 1911 novel *The Secret Garden*. These words refer to the actual character of Mary as much as the socio-political hierarchy of British imperialism. The little girl leads a life devoid of love, caring and sharing, while the Empire she lives in is ailed by the same malady: the cholera killing her parents stems from a blind authoritarian colonialism Mary must leave in order to have a chance for recovery. "She only knew that people were ill," and readers know little more when this one-sentence thesis is given to them at the outset of a novel which aims to investigate the cure of Mary's illness and in the course of doing so possibly uncovers the root causes. This paper shows that while Frances Hodgson Burnett's work may be considered a piece of children's literature because it places in the centre the healing process of children from parental neglect, its strong linkage of this theme with images of the colonial socio-political hierarchy and master-servant relationships also makes it more than a harmless bedside reading. *The Secret Garden's* question of whether Mary Lennox and Colin Craven can be cured of their illness can by implication be extended to a literary understanding of contemporary British society, and the novel can thus be interpreted not only as a creed of Rousseauistic pedagogy but also as a critique of the psychology, society and politics of British imperialism.

#### **1 Introduction**

All great empires leave marks that last long after the political structure proper has disappeared on the horizon of history. Whether it is ancient Rome, Napoleon's France, the Third Reich, or the United States of America in the late 20th,

early 21st century, these realms make their deep imprint on the environment, society, culture and the arts. Scorched ruins and blazing torches remind humanity of the awful potential of Empire for destruction or progress. The fate of any Empire depends on its ability to look beyond itself to the fringes and to rejuvenate itself by absorbing criticism approaching its own antithesis.

The 64 years of Queen Victoria's reign between 1837 and 1901 meant for Great Britain the height of her Empire. Her achievements and failures in this period have been portrayed on paintings, recorded in books, composed in music, and carved in stone. An invincible military and political force, the Victorian British Empire left a legacy pervasive long after its demise. A decade after Queen Victoria died, a British-American writer named Frances Hodgson Burnett published a novel about two ill children who are healed by a mysterious garden. For a keen-eyed scholar, *The Secret Garden* grapples with the problems of an aging Empire, pulsates with the anxiety of Victorian society, and tries to resolve its tensions by offering a pointed, albeit incoherent literary critique of contemporary socio-political structures. In a latently subversive novel infused with anti-imperialism, Frances Hodgson Burnett presents a beautiful story calling attention to the fate of the children of the Empire.

## **2 Gardening the Empire**

### **2.1 Empire in full bloom**

In order to understand the cultural connotations of the actual and metaphorical garden in Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel, one has to briefly survey the history of English gardening in the Late Victorian period and its relationship to British imperialism. Such a look at the social history of gardening in Britain and her colonies will highlight the intricate cultural network in which the movement was embedded and which *The Secret Garden* also cultivated.

Many scholars attribute both the rise of British imperialism to unprecedented heights and the emergence of gardening as a broad-based movement to the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent technological progress. By the late 19th century, British steam, naval transport and modern weaponry had acquired colonies for England in all parts of the world. Nature and the environment were subjects as well as a means in the scramble for Empire: while contemporary commercial geography explained imperialism with "nature,' fertility or infertil-

ity,”<sup>1</sup> the colonizers modified their new surroundings in the act of claiming and settling it. Alfred Crosby in his *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* defines this process as the physical modification and reworking of the environment through architecture and the development of domestic social elites, cultures and arts such as travel photography, exotic and Orientalist painting, poetry, fiction, music, monumental sculpture and journalism.<sup>2</sup> Besides such far-reaching cultural consequences, strict *ecological imperialism* meant that Europeans used the colonial environment to recreate their old habitat: the new flora and fauna was populated with home species, and architecture underwent the same process. This physical and biological colonization brought diseases to the native species, threats to the environment, redistricting to indigenous settlement patterns, and banishment for the natives.<sup>3</sup>

As the process of British colonization steadily continued, the home society was also experiencing new developments. Overseas markets combined with new technologies resulted in unparalleled prosperity in the Late Victorian period. Among other things, rising living standards meant that former luxury items were becoming common, electricity was available in more households, and more people had free time to spend as they liked. While the upper and some of the middle classes increasingly left their isle for continental travel, the middle and some of the working classes could now afford seaside holidays in England and Wales.<sup>4</sup> But above all, at home or abroad, the British took time to cultivate and admire gardens.

According to David Stuart, the movement of gardening received its social base when the concept gained ground among the English middle classes. The well-established acquired and maintained cottage gardens, while those with modest means either turned their small yards into home gardens or enjoyed strolling in public parks.<sup>5</sup> Part of an international gardening craze, such a “cult

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1. Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 272.

2. Quoted in Said, p. 131.

3. Quoted in Said, p. 271.

4. G. M. Trevelyan, *English Social History: A Survey of Six Centuries – Chaucer to Queen Victoria* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1965), pp. 558–561.

5. Pauline Fletcher, “Gardens and Parks,” in *Victorian Britain: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Sally Mitchell (New York, London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988), p. 320. Also see David Stuart, “Introduction,” in *The Garden Triumphant: A Victorian Legacy* (United Kingdom: Viking, 1988); <<http://www.cix.co.uk/~swinton/gardtriu.html>> (Date of access: 8 March 2003) and

of the garden” not only produced a home market for plants, seeds, magazines, newspapers, and gardening props and tools, but it also resulted in the incorporation of the idea of gardens and gardening into the philosophy of social reform: the noble aim of improving the living conditions of the urban poor brought into life gardening societies throughout England.<sup>6</sup> With the profession becoming important, some gardeners achieved prominence and social status through their work and connections. While the Victorian nouveau rich exhibited their wealth through extravagant gardens, most people followed the trends even if only by reading gardening publications offered in all price ranges.<sup>7</sup>

Such a convergence of imperial expansion and economic and social trends produced a cultural current in both the top echelons and the broad basis of British society. Although the new ecology inaugurated the new government in the colonies,<sup>8</sup> the colonizers were not insensitive to the environment of their dominions. They not only ‘exported’ their passion for gardening by building gardens in far-away places like Singapore, Calcutta, Hong Kong and Durban,<sup>9</sup> but they also brought to England the specimens of imperial flora. Out of the need to accommodate, care for, and experiment with exotic plants on the British Isles was born the style of *subtropical gardening*.

Subtropical gardening was the prime product of the meeting of British imperialism and the English passion for gardens. Since the style aimed to create the appearance of a tropical garden in a temperate climate,<sup>10</sup> any collection of plants native to the colonies and foreign to England necessarily pointed beyond itself and highlighted the technological, political and material feat of gathering, transporting and nurturing it in the centre of the Empire.<sup>11</sup> It is not by accident that subtropical gardening came to be in vogue first in the 1870s<sup>12</sup> – when the period of *high imperialism* was beginning.<sup>13</sup> The fact that subtropical gardening was

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Ian Barclay, “Subtropical Gardening,” *Paper for Horticulture* 425 (Spring 2001); <[http://www.angelfire.com/bc/eucalyptus/425\\_5html](http://www.angelfire.com/bc/eucalyptus/425_5html)> (Date of access: 5 March 2003).

6. Stuart.

7. Stuart, see also Robert M. Craig, “Landscape Architecture and Design,” in *Victorian Britain: An Encyclopedia*, p. 430.

8. Said, p. 272.

9. Barclay.

10. Barclay.

11. Fletcher, p. 320.

12. Barclay.

13. Said, p. 266.

present in misty Albion in the time of the Romans – themselves masters of a veritable world empire – before being revived in the 19th century also underscores the claim that it was closely connected to imperialism in one form or another.<sup>14</sup>

Tropical plants need shelter and the right temperatures to survive in cooler climates. The invention of the wrought iron glazing bar in 1816 had allowed for the building of glass houses and this supplied English gardeners with the means to accommodate non-native species on the island.<sup>15</sup> The stage was set for imperialist gardening on a large scale. The efforts of British travellers to recreate a colonial paradise were institutionalized with the formation of the Royal Horticultural Society in 1804, and subtropical gardens cropped up all over the milder parts of England.<sup>16</sup> The Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, London became the national depository of plant collections in 1840; before assuming the garden's directorship in 1865, Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker had travelled on board *H.M.S. Erebus* to Madeira, the Cape of South Africa and the Antarctic, and also went to northern India and Nepal, all the while sending rare collections to Kew; and his work culminated in the publication of a book with a telling name: *The Flora of British India*.<sup>17</sup> Subtropical gardens were categorized according to the region their plants were native to.<sup>18</sup> The last significant movement in pre-World War II English gardening, the turn-of-the-century Arts and Crafts style advocated a Homeric and Virgilian idyll of rural retirement and expressed patriotic admiration for old English gardens with native flora.<sup>19</sup>

Late Victorians thus cultivated their Empire by tending their gardens. Not only did their exotic and lavish gardens constantly remind visitors and owners that they were part of a vast and glorious kingdom, but they were also a vehicle which fundamentally influenced their thinking about their relationship to life and the world. According to Edward Said, by the turn of the century Empire came to mean “a massive colonial system whose economy, functioning, and his-

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14. Barclay.

15. Barclay.

16. Barclay, Fletcher, p. 320.

17. “History and Heritage,” *The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew*; <<http://www.rbgekew.org.uk/aboutus/herikew.html>> (Date of Access: 3 March 2003).

18. Barclay.

19. Craig, p. 430. See also “Arts and Crafts Style of Garden Design,” *Garden Design 1870–1999*; <<http://www.gardenvisit.com/t/c5s1.html>> (Date of access: 8 March 2003).

tory had acquired the status of a virtual fact of *nature*,”<sup>20</sup> and this ‘imperial nature’ was fostering sciences and ideologies perpetuating the British monopoly over power and knowledge. As highlighted earlier, European expeditions to remote corners of the world had long served the dual purpose of scientific discovery and political acquisitions.<sup>21</sup> Now the emerging disciplines of botany and anthropology concurred in the importance they both attributed to climate. While botanists attested to the fact that plants were profoundly influenced by weather, aspiring anthropologists spread the notion that climate likewise determined ethnic, racial and national character and abilities.<sup>22</sup> Darwin’s work and its alter ego, social Darwinism further strengthened this belief at the centre of which was the (Anglo-Saxon) white man’s supremacy.<sup>23</sup> As Said points out, curiosity and thirst for knowledge was essential for imperial expansion: the rationale of ethnography, *get to know them and rule them*, linked the new science very closely to the notion of the Empire.<sup>24</sup>

While subtropical gardens spoke volumes about Britain’s general power over other nations and the natural world, prevalent images of the human landscape were also heavily gendered. As late as 1942, the English social historian G. M. Trevelyan wrote of the period, “Europe was the Englishman’s playground.”<sup>25</sup> In his analysis of Kipling’s *Kim*, Edward Said observes that the novel’s world of the Empire is a *male* “playing field.”<sup>26</sup> Gardens, scholars argue, were the female equivalent of masculine turf: Michael Walters observes that “it is virtually impossible to say anything about the garden in Victorian fiction without reference to the concept of home and the place of women within it.”<sup>27</sup> “[A]n extension of the Victorian female sphere,” gardening was an accepted way of self-fulfilment for Victorian women.<sup>28</sup> An example for the combination of the image of the gar-

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20. Said, p. 162 (my emphasis).

21. Barclay.

22. Said, p. 182.

23. Clayton Roberts and David Roberts, *A History of England*, Vol. 2 (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1985), p. 663.

24. Said, p. 184.

25. Trevelyan, p. 584 (my emphasis).

26. Said, pp. 165–166.

27. Quoted in Anna Krugovoy Silver, “Domesticating Brontë’s Moors: Mothering in *The Secret Garden*,” *Victorian Studies Journal* 193–200, p. 200; <<http://iupjournals.org/victorian/>> (Date of access: 4 March 2003).

28. Krugovoy Silver, pp. 193, 195.

den and the nation is John Ruskin's "Of Queens' Gardens" in which he calls on women to transcend their closed gardens and look around in "the larger garden of England."<sup>29</sup>

## 2.2 "It isn't a quite dead garden"

With its roots in the Late Victorian gardening craze, Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel uses the image of the garden to frame and answer questions about parent-child and master-servant relationships in English society as well as to subversively criticize British imperialism. Burnett's language about the actual Secret Garden can reveal how her work feeds on, but also deviates from, Victorian concepts of the garden as a real and imaginary place.

References to Mary's attitude to gardening are rather telling about contemporary views on the activity. Early on in the novel, Burnett's heroine Mary Lennox makes attempts at creating a garden: in her parents' compound she pretends to make a flower bed by sticking hibiscus flowers into the earth (8),<sup>30</sup> while during her brief stay with the clergyman's family, she again tries to arrange soil and flowers to make a garden patch (14). The early introduction of the theme to the reader suggests that on Mary's part such uninvited attempts at gardening are manifestations of an intuitive quest to achieve harmony in life. It is not only the hot climate and the danger of cholera, however, that thwart her efforts to attain happiness through this activity. Basil's song mocking Mary is an explanation of why she fails much more than a cause of it:

Mistress Mary, quite contrary,  
How does your garden grow?  
With silver bells, and cockle shells,  
And marigolds all in a row.  
(14)

A term adopted by Burnett to denote Mary's short temper, the girl's being "contrary" prevents her from building an attractive and fertile garden. As long as Mary remains a "mistress," her garden will not flourish. Along with the heat and the threatening disease, this quality also seems to be peculiar to Indian conditions, and although this judgment is later compromised, Burnett makes the

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29. Quoted in Krugovoy Silver, p. 195.

30. Henceforth, all parenthesized references are to this edition: Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden* (London: Penguin Books, 1995).

problem clear: flowers and children cannot grow in conditions “contrary” to the nature of life and society. What this ‘nature’ consists in only gradually unfolds in the novel.

The metaphor ‘children-are-plants’ is carried on in the novel in speculations by various characters about Mary’s relationship to her late mother, and the little girl’s fate. Mrs. Medlock voices the hope that “[p]erhaps she will improve as she grows older,” much like a flower from a seed (16). Mary herself asks a version of the same question when she “wondered what [the secret garden] would look like and whether there were any flowers still alive in it” (35). It is here that Burnett presents the metaphorical thesis of the novel in the form of a question: what chances does Mary, a neglected and sickly child, have for a meaningful life – will she and the garden experience a full bloom?

Mary is taken to England in late winter-early spring, and the weather makes Misselthwaite appear bare and cold (36). Mr. Craven has a large estate which consists of a “queer” and “gloomy” old manor house with a multitude of rooms, antique furniture and strange portraits (19, 25, 54) – a conventional Gothic setting. Misselthwaite Manor has several kitchen gardens and an orchard, all opening into one another and enclosed by walls (36–37). The Misselthwaite gardens do not lack the *formal* axes of gaze other English landscape gardens utilized: their alleys and drives allow visitors to survey the expanse of land and accentuate the power and social status of the owner.<sup>31</sup> By contrast, the *informal* section is screened off and arranged in such a way that the sight of one garden from the other tends to lure and pull the visitor along.<sup>32</sup> In many cases *formal gardens* with axes and *informal gardens* with a circuitous layout were both built on the same estate, but it needs to be pointed out that the labyrinth-like landscape design of *The Secret Garden* suggests a spatial search for a centre and a meaning:

When [Mary] had passed through the shrubbery gate she found herself in great gardens, with wide lawns and winding walks with clipped borders. There were trees, and flower-beds, and evergreens clipped into strange shapes, and a large pool with an old gray fountain in its midst. . . . This was not the garden which was shut up. . . . She was just thinking this when she

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31. Examples for this are the so-called “avenue vistas” at Kew. Craig, p. 431. For more on the visual and social aspects of 18th and 19th century gardens, see Fletcher, pp. 320–321.

32. Interpretation taken from the tour of Oldfields Gardens (Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, Indiana, summer 2002). The professionalization of gardening also resulted in “specialized garden areas within larger gardens” (Craig, pp. 430–431).

saw that, at the end of the path she was following, there seemed to be a long wall, with ivy growing over it. She was not familiar enough with England to know that she was coming upon the kitchen-gardens where the vegetables and fruit were growing. She went toward the wall and found that there was a green door in the ivy, and that it stood open. This was not the closed garden, evidently, and she could go into it.

(35–36)

Thus Mary progresses in space and mind from a formal to an informal place; from an exposed public domain to a sheltered private sphere; and, as it will be explained later, from a strict hierarchy to relatively egalitarian interpersonal relationships.<sup>33</sup>

Mary does find the hidden garden, but whether she can revive it – and find her true self – is not clear at first. The Secret Garden is “still” and “mysterious-looking,” the “hazy tangle” of apparently lifeless branches and tendrils form “curtains” on the walls (75–76). This winter landscape is the antithesis of the lush vegetation of subtropical gardens where the Empire is so palpably present; for Mary, this “fairy place” rather invokes the image of the abandoned and overgrown garden in the tale of the Sleeping Beauty (86). It takes more close looking to find that the seeds in the soil are alive and ready to grow (77). “It isn’t a quite dead garden,” Mary exclaims, and her statement refers not only to the flora, but also to herself, and possibly to the society of the British Empire.

Mary promptly sets to work in the garden and she gradually acquires a helper in the person of Dickon Sowerby. Putting the place in order requires considerable labour, but the attitude of the ‘gardeners’ is rather peculiar:

“I wouldn’t want to make it look like a gardener’s garden, all clipped an’ spick an’ span, would you? It’s nicer like this with things runnin’ wild an’ swingin’ an’ catchin’ hold of each other.”

“Don’t let us make it tidy. It wouldn’t seem like a secret garden if it was tidy.”

(102)

Instead of untying the knots and straightening the lines, the children do only what is absolutely necessary for the maintenance of the garden, letting nature to do the rest of the work. Thus the ‘colonization’ of the environment by

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33. Analytical framework taken from Christopher Lindner’s “An Introduction to Historical Archaeology” (Course at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York: Spring 2002).

subduing and forcing it to follow preconceived models is replaced by a *laissez faire* attitude, which eliminates all control beyond the bare minimum. In this image of a wild rose garden Burnett compresses the creed of Rousseau about a free and healthy childhood,<sup>34</sup> the Romantic notion of unspoilt nature, and the ideal of female care and charity: “with things *runnin’ wild* an’ swingin’ an’ *catchin’ hold of each other*” (my emphasis, 102). Indeed, the author goes out of her way to emphasize that instead of forming a controlled, servile space, Mary and Dickon are creating a wild and egalitarian garden: “the lovely wild place was not likely to become a ‘gardener’s garden’ [but] it would be a wilderness of growing things” (155).

Although Mary receives from Mr. Craven “several beautiful books such as Colin had, and two of them were about gardens and were full of pictures” (163), and both children study these guides (189), most of the advice about gardening comes from an authentic source, Dickon (95, 100). This is in keeping with the early introduction of Mary as a child unconsciously searching for harmony through gardening. Her helpers in this quest are also products of nature: the robin belongs to the environment, while Dickon claims he sometimes feels as if he was also an animal (95).

The garden as a wilderness of plants may appear to be egalitarian, but much of the language Burnett uses to characterize it retains impressions of a monarchy. Blooming flowers are in successive passages “royal purple” and yellow (146), purple, orange and gold (148), purple, gold and white (199), again purple, gold, “violet blue,” scarlet, white and ruby (275), both purple and gold suggesting imperial colours. Images of monarchy taken from fairy tales strongly resonate with contemporary concepts of the Empire: the blossoming plum tree over Colin’s wheelchair is like a fairy king’s canopy (201), the boy’s ride around the garden “was like being taken in state round the country of a magic king and queen and shown all the mysterious riches it contained” (202), while the old gardener tells Colin to “set [the rose] in the earth thysel’ same as th’ king does when he goes to a new place” (216). These similes of authority have contradictory functions, but as it will become clear later, they assume a new meaning in the Secret Garden: they signify not power *over* life, but the power *of* life.

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34. Owain Jones, “Tomboy Tales: The Rural, Nature and the Gender of Childhood,” *Gender, Place, and Culture* 6/2 (1999) 117–136, p. 121.

### 3 The disease: cholera and its colonies

#### 3.1 Colonial afternoons

“She only knew that people were ill,” Burnett writes of Mary Lennox, the daughter of a British crown official in India who “had always been busy and ill himself” (9, 7). This ‘illness’ with all its symptoms and consequences as well as the possible ways to cure it, is clearly at the centre of *The Secret Garden*. By mapping up some of the social, cultural and political meanings of the metaphor of cholera and hysterical convulsions, the present section will attempt to reach to the core of the notion and apply Burnett’s treatment of the theme to Victorian imperialism.

Michael W. Doyle defines the notion of Empire as “a relationship, formal or informal, in which the state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society. It can be achieved by force, by political collaboration, by economic, social, or political dependence. Imperialism is simply the process or policy of establishing or maintaining an empire.”<sup>35</sup> Edward Said in turn takes this strictly geopolitical description and extends it to include more abstract and elusive fields of life like the realm of psychology, society, identity and culture. For the purposes of this paper, Said’s view that imperialism is “the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory”<sup>36</sup> is a more useful device, because it orients the inquiry to these aspects of Britain in the age of Empire.

According to William Golant, the Indian subcontinent in the late 19th, early 20th century was a region rife with diseases. In addition to floods caused by the periodic monsoon, a multitude of people lived in a country with an inadequate system of sanitation: refuse rotting in streets and millions of pilgrims polluted the water, which flowed into the Ganges, and the great river carried the filth causing infections. Because there were few water closets and no extensive system for filtering drinking water, food and drink were often contaminated. Infectious diseases inflicting the population included the plague, smallpox, fever, dysentery, diarrhoea, malaria, tuberculosis, venereal diseases, leprosy, trachoma, diphtheria, whooping cough, pneumonia, meningitis and rabies. *Cholera*, which by the late 19th century had been almost completely eradicated in Europe, not

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35. Quoted in Said, p. 8.

36. Said, p. 8.

only persisted in the colony, but its presence earned Calcutta the title of “world headquarters of cholera,” and some remote villages worshipped the virus as a bloodthirsty goddess, offering sacrifices to pacify her. In 1900 alone, some 800,000 people died of cholera in British India.<sup>37</sup>

Contemporary theories of how cholera is transmitted mingled unfounded superstitions, educated guesses, and limited scientific research. The cause of the sweeping epidemics, *vibrio cholerae*, was discovered as late as 1883 by the German physician Robert Koch.<sup>38</sup> For much of the 19th century, however, views of the cause and vehicles of the disease were hazy at best. Besides fears that cholera was the wrath of God, was connected to the stars or was the result of supernatural forces, many scientists shared the belief that the illness was caused by bad air generated by rotting organic matter or *miasmata*.<sup>39</sup> Correspondingly, protection against cholera usually took the form of cleansing the household and neutralizing bad smells with camphor and herbs or by smoking. To combat the disease, public authorities conducted campaigns to detect and remove sources of bad smells, while the population hoped to protect themselves by consuming alcohol.<sup>40</sup> An indication of the extent to which Victorian society took diseases seriously<sup>41</sup> can be found in the 1876 edition of *The Scholar's Handbook of Household Management and Cookery*, which advises readers that in living quarters air must be “constantly changed” to remain breathable.<sup>42</sup>

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word *cholera* has been used to denote two different illnesses. Of these, the one already discussed is called *Asiatic, epidemic or Indian cholera*, and “is characterized by violent vomiting, purging with watery rice-coloured evacuations, severe cramps, and col-

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37. William Golant, *The Long Afternoon: British India 1601–1947* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1976), pp. 47–48.

38. Howard C. Baker, “Cholera,” in *Victorian Britain: An Encyclopedia*, p. 149. Also see “Competing Theories of Cholera,” *The John Snow Site* <<http://www.ph.ucla.edu/epi/snow/choleratheories.html>> (Date of access: 7 March 2003).

39. Baker, p. 149. Also see “Competing Theories of Cholera,” and “Cholera History,” *Super-course*; <<http://www.pitt.edu/~super1/lecture/lec1151>> (Date of access: 7 March 2003).

40. “Cholera History,” “Competing Theories of Cholera.”

41. Baker also points out that cholera was sometimes regarded as an economic and political tool. Baker, p. 149.

42. W. B. Tegetmeier, *The Scholars' Handbook of Household Management and Cookery* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1876), p.78. In *The Victorian Dictionary*, compiled by Lee Jackson; <<http://www.victorianlondon.org>> (Date of access: 4 March 2003).

lapse, death often occurring in a few hours.” The first significant epidemic of Asiatic cholera in Europe and England broke out in the 1830s.<sup>43</sup>

The other cholera, also called “colick” or *cholera infantum*, is “a disorder, attended with bilious diarrhoea, vomiting, stomach-ache, and cramps.” Labelled *British* or *English* cholera, this illness visited children during the summer months, and often proved to be fatal.<sup>44</sup>

Victorian children were in fact exposed to a host of actual and imagined diseases. As early as 1725, cholera was described as “a *Convulsive* Motion of the Stomach and Guts,”<sup>45</sup> and the term *convulsions* were probably used to classify a large group of disorders parents and physicians were alike uncertain about. Giving an outline of the social history of Victorian children’s diseases is beyond the scope and means of this article, but it is necessary to briefly touch on the topic in order to help clarify the cultural background and the functions of illness in *The Secret Garden*.

Published in the 1871, *Cassell’s Household Guide* has a section on child-rearing which discusses the most frequent children’s sicknesses and advises readers about prevention and treatment. According to the manual, youngsters are susceptible to diseases in general caused by “improper food, by bad air, by cold, and by heat.” Many of these illnesses are “affections of [children’s] nervous system, such as *convulsions*” which has to do with “the extreme sensitiveness” of the infants’ psyche. The author of the *Guide* seems to go out of their way to emphasize that “*fits* imply a morbid sensitiveness, which is often constitutional,” but hastily adds that “a child is not always *convulsed* when it is said to be so,” a qualification that signals uncertainty and doubts over feigned cases. With regard to the immediate sources of convulsions, the booklet lists as diverse causes as too much food, teething, diarrhoea, bad air, and worms. Accordingly, the *Guide* claims that fits can be prevented in general “[b]y good food, by pure air, by plenty of sleep, and regular living on the part of the parent.”<sup>46</sup>

Why are the notion of cholera and convulsions important to the understanding of Victorian society and Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Gar-*

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43. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, eds., *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), Vol. III, p. 157.

44. *OED*, Vol. III, p. 157.

45. Quoted in *OED*, Vol. III, p. 157 (my emphasis).

46. *Cassell’s Household Guide, New and Revised Edition* (London, 1871), p. 83 (my emphasis). In *The Victorian Dictionary*. Date of original publication from Michael M. Clarke, “Advice Manuals,” in *Victorian Britain: An Encyclopedia*, p. 7.

den? This paper will argue that, at least in the novel, similarly to female hysteria, both *cholera* and *convulsions* can be interpreted not only as actual pathological disorders, but as manifestations of tensions arising from the power-relations of imperialism and child-adult relationships.<sup>47</sup> Mary's illness and Colin's fears of premature death both stem from parental neglect, and may be understood as a symptom of the faults of the socio-political power structure of the Victorian British Empire. To make a convincing case for such a reading of *The Secret Garden*, this paper will now turn to look at the caste system in British Indian society, and Victorian views of discipline in child-rearing.

While naval power and trade were certainly instrumental in the acquisition of the British colonies, Noel Annan's observation that stable imperial rule in India depended on the social conventions forcing individuals to obey the system<sup>48</sup> highlights an important aspect of imperialism, namely the extent to which political hierarchy can be embedded in a given society. Edward Said asserts that the love-hate relationship of Britain and India was the product of the interaction of two hierarchical societies, both of which saw in the stratification of the other something similar to their own.<sup>49</sup> It is this contact between English class and Indian caste, as well as the tensions rising from the colonial hierarchy, which is the key to interpreting the theme of illness in Burnett's book.

The British rulers of India may have imagined it as an idyllic society based on deference, but they also experienced a great deal of anxiety about the stability of their hold over the subcontinent. While Jane Brown's term for the products of the Late Victorian Arts and Crafts landscape design movement, "the gardens of a golden afternoon"<sup>50</sup> invokes images of peace and leisure, the title of William Golant's book on the history of British rule in India, *The Long Afternoon* suggests a gradual eclipse of imperial power. Behind this serene picture lay doubts and nightmares about what might happen should the tables be turned.

Much of the social unease was suppressed by denigrating "the Indian race."<sup>51</sup> The white masters quelled their fears from rebellion by depicting their native subjects as they are portrayed in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*. Here indigenous

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47. About the psychosomatic and social aspects of some illnesses in the Victorian era see Rosa Lynn Pinkus, "Health," in *Victorian Britain: An Encyclopedia*, p. 355.

48. Quoted in Said, p. 186.

49. Said, p. 187.

50. Quoted in "Arts and Crafts Style of Garden Design."

51. Golant, p. 22.

characters are almost exclusively products of the climate: untruthful, illogical, lazy, and lacking moral steadfastness.<sup>52</sup> Another expression of imperial apprehensions was a concern with the weather and various diseases: “[s]ensing danger, both real and symbolic, proper English ladies protected themselves from ‘the harsh Indian light,’ remained behind drawn curtains during the day, rode in the sun wrapped from head to toe and crowned by large umbrellas.”<sup>53</sup> The perceived gap between Victorian ‘refinement’ and Indian ‘primitiveness’ has prompted William Golant to remark that “[t]he British presence in India was engulfed in *miasma*.”<sup>54</sup> Metaphors from climatology, temperament and humour, and Victorian epidemiology all helped to frame and make palatable the sometimes violent and often precarious colonial power structure. Golant’s keen observations highlight the dynamics of this political and social pathology:

Dislike of the Indian people [by the English] was a corollary of feeling ‘out of place’ in India. Home was not here but in a land far away. The unending conversations about ‘foul weather’ were symptomatic of deeper discontents with immediate surroundings. Unable to have a natural rapport with the Indian world around them, the Raj had to rely on its own small community to reiterate the values of England, though this might only be a memory of people and places. Ultimately, Indians could be blamed as the cause of their misery, for India ‘called’ them and alienated them. ‘Here we stand on the face of the broad earth, a scanty pale-faced band in the midst of three hundred millions of unfriendly vassals.’<sup>55</sup>

The abusive excesses of the ruling Raj,<sup>56</sup> including the frequent beating of Indian servants, can be thus explained by the need for “some form of psychological relief which reassured the master of his superiority.”<sup>57</sup> According to Clayton and David Roberts, “hard, insensitive, and too exacting” morality created “in the Victorians a streak of cruelty dramatic in the case of flogging and fifty-round, bare-knuckled prize fights, coldly quiet in the severe rules in the workhouse, the repressive codes of the family, and men’s insensitivity toward women,”<sup>58</sup> but

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52. Said, p. 182. For the role of evolutionary anthropology in colonial rule, see David K. Van Keuren, “Race,” in *Victorian Britain: An Encyclopedia*, p. 658.

53. Golant, p. 23.

54. Golant, p. 23 (my emphasis).

55. Golant, p. 22.

56. Said, p. 185.

57. Golant, p. 24.

58. Roberts and Roberts, pp. 628–629.

surprisingly enough, they forget to add that such expressions of frustration were at least as widespread in the British colonies as they were in Merry England. At the same time, colonial servant-master relationships had another remarkable quality:

In one sense the Englishman's life in India induced a return to childhood, a time of fears when a person is dependent on others and insignificant. The average English household had eight servants, with the family dog having a servant of its own, while the school-age child had a 'boy' to carry his satchel.<sup>59</sup>

Golant goes as far as to assert that British Indian society experienced the infantile repressed sexual desires of the colonizers towards exotic "Mother India."<sup>60</sup> Substantiating such a psychoanalytic view of colonial culture falls beyond the scope of this paper. The child-like uncertainty of the Raj, who by Charles Trevelyan were dubbed the "Platonic *Guardians*" of India,<sup>61</sup> is nevertheless central to the understanding of child-adult relationships as portrayed in *The Secret Garden*.

If the colonial power structure was fraught with trepidation about submission and non-compliance, the Late Victorian home society was likewise concerned about discipline, albeit in another field: child-rearing. Mothers, the "appointed *guardian[s]*" of babies, were in charge of instilling in them obedience to parents.<sup>62</sup> Victorian morals demanded that children be kept under control as much as – if not much more – natives in the imperial colonies. While the latter used metaphors of the family to achieve a harmonious social order, discipline in child-rearing was sometimes conceptualized in terms of master-servant relationships: giving youngsters all they want was thought to be wrong because "[b]y thus inverting the order of things, and making themselves instead of their rulers, slaves to their children, [parents] create a double misery – neither themselves nor the children are happy."<sup>63</sup>

Apparently, the metaphor 'master-servant' was prevalent enough to be used to frame and permeate the most intimate of circles: family life. Although upper and middle-class children were cared for in nurseries and schools and had toys,

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59. Golant, p. 22.

60. Golant, p. 23.

61. Quoted in Trevelyan, p. 131 (my emphasis).

62. "Moral Influence – Obedience," *Cassell's Household Guide, New and Revised Edition* (London, 1871), p. 38 (my emphasis).

63. "Moral Influence – Obedience," p. 38.

governesses, nurses, housemaids and cooks, the young of the working class were perceived to be largely unattended when not in school.<sup>64</sup> The overall concern with obedience is apparent in a mother's journal entry published in 1896:

I find in giving any order to a child it is always better not to look to see if he obeys, but to take it for granted it will be done. If one appears to doubt the obedience, there is occasion given for the child to hesitate. 'Shall I do it or no?' If you seem not to question the possibility of non-compliance, he feels a trust committed to him to keep and fulfils it. It is best never to repeat a command, never to answer the oft-asked question 'why?'<sup>65</sup>

The connection between family and imperial discipline is not apparent at first sight, and it is useful to conclude by a review of the elements of this link. Here Julia Briggs' summary of Late Victorian portrayals of the figure of the child provides a keen insight into the interaction of science, politics, literature and society, clarifying some of the child characters of Dickens, Kipling, and indeed, Frances Hodgson Burnett. According to Briggs,

As childhood came to be seen as a state distinct from and potentially opposed to being 'grown-up,' so it came to be figured as 'other,' with all the idealization, horror, and projection that such a status implies. . . . [T]he theological doctrine of original sin came to be replaced by scientific theories of evolution which represented the child as biologically, intellectually, or socially primitive. Children were 'savages,' awaiting the education that would transform them into civilized adults. The children of the poor . . . were referred to as 'street arabs,' that is, alien and homeless wanderers who shared with the criminal classes 'degenerate' elements. And as such theories of origin began to take hold, the concept of 'recapitulation' became popular, the idea that childhood was a process during which different stages of animal or human development were progressively transcended, eventually reaching the evolutionary summit of fully formed adulthood. The uninhibited high spirits of childhood were equated with those of supposedly 'primitive' societies, and progress towards socialization was identified with progress towards civilization. Both the family and the extended family of empire required to be ruled with a mixture of kindness, firmness, and self-confidence.<sup>66</sup>

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64. Trevelyan, p. 562.

65. Augustus Hare, *The Story of My Life* (1896). No pagination. In *The Victorian Dictionary*.

66. Peter Hunt, ed., *Children's Literature: An Illustrated History* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 168–169. After permeating ethnography in the 1870s, Dar-

### 3.2 *Fury in the garden*

Among its many connotations, the term *choleric* designates a person who is “[i]nclined to wrath, irascible, hot-tempered, passionate, fiery: these being the characteristics of the choleric ‘complexion’ or temperament.”<sup>67</sup> This social sense of a word otherwise denoting medical categories is what much of *The Secret Garden* utilizes. Accordingly, what follows is an examination of the manifestations of this convulsive social pathology in the novel with a special emphasis on Mary’s illness and her experiences in and memories of India.

Charting reflections of history and society in American film adaptations of *The Secret Garden*, Julaine Gillispie aptly points out that because of its Gothic elements the novel lends itself for cinematographic dramatization, and she also observes that the 1949 Metro Goldwyn Mayer version directed by Fred M. Wilcox expresses post-war social anxieties.<sup>68</sup> Interestingly enough, most scholars only highlight the cryptic setting and themes introduced *after* Mary arrives in Misselthwaite. Looked at from the angle of imperialism, it becomes clear that the darkest and most disheartening episode is in fact the first major scene of Burnett’s work: Mary’s abandonment in the compound can be interpreted as the worst nightmare of colonial rulers.

“When Mary Lennox was sent to Misselthwaite Manor to live with her uncle everybody said she was the most disagreeable-looking child ever seen” (7). With this opening, the author not only attracts the reader’s attention, but she also establishes the central problem she later explicitly formulates. Mary’s thin body, yellow hair and face, and unattractive expression are the results of her being born in India and of her recurring illness. The daughter of a “busy and ill” father serving an apparently “busy and ill” Empire, and of a mother only caring about being celebrated at parties, Mary is raised “out of sight as much as possible” by an Indian Ayah, who “always obeyed her and gave her her own way in everything, because the Mem Sahib would be angry if she was disturbed by her crying” (7–8).

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win’s ideas also filtered into the psychology of childhood from the 1880s. Michael Shortland, “Psychology,” in *Victorian Britain: An Encyclopedia*, p. 648.

67. *OED*, Vol. III, p. 157.

68. Julaine Gillispie, “American Film Adaptations of *The Secret Garden*: Reflections of Sociological and Historical Change,” *Victorian Studies Journal*. 132–146, pp. 133, 134 <<http://iupjournals.org/victorian/>> (Date of access: 4 March 2003).

Burnett's heroine has thus been alienated from her parents who gave her out to be raised in the arms of strangers, the Others. Mary's utter selfishness, insensitivity and lack of affection are direct consequences of this situation, as is the onset of the *cholera* epidemic which threatens a *choleric* child infected by the colonial master-servant hierarchy: "[B]y the time she was six years old [Mary] was as tyrannical and selfish a little pig as ever lived," chasing away English nurses and terrorizing the native servants. A sign of the extent to which the little girl has already identified with the imperial socio-political structure is the fact that, albeit through narration, she calls her own mother "Mem Sahib" (9). For a 21st-century reader imbued with Western notions of equality, this hint that Mary has already settled in a conqueror-conquered relationship is more chilling than any dark secret of Gothic Misselthwaite. A subsequent mention that as a punishment for some perceived fault, the child calls her Ayah a pig because she knows such an epithet is culturally charged (8)<sup>69</sup> confirms that in typical colonizer-fashion Mary has mastered just enough of the native Indian ethos to make her aggression understood.

In accordance with contemporary imagination, Burnett portrays India as a place where climate profoundly influences people. "One frightfully hot morning . . . [Mary] awakened feeling very cross" (8), her irritation obviously stemming from the weather. Later references to her Indian environment, although gradually becoming infrequent and rather shallow, include two instances of the sentence repeated almost word-for-word: "[i]n India she had always felt hot and too languid to care much about anything" (47, 67). The abandonment episode is introduced by dark premonitions – "There was something mysterious in the air that morning" – and hints of chaos – "Nothing was done in its regular order" – the latter of which again conjuring a nightmarish vision of colonial anarchy for a society obsessed with decency and deference (8).

Following the scene where the Mem Sahib's fatal vanity is revealed comes a period of menacing lull. Awaiting her fate in the nursery, Mary is upset about neither her mother nor her Ayah, because she never loved either (11). More than frightened, the child is angry that no servants come to attend to her, a behaviour atypical of children but rather characteristic of leaders or monarchs whose authority is being eclipsed.

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69. As Islam forbids contact with pigs and the consumption of pork, Mary's native nurse was probably meant to be Muslim.

“When people had the cholera it seemed that they remembered nothing but themselves. But if everyone had got well again, surely someone would remember and come to look for her” (11), Mary ponders, and on a more abstract level her thoughts are a diagnosis of imperialist socio-politics communicated through the perspective of a child. Mary, herself inflicted with the same pathological self-centeredness of which cholera is only a metaphorical symptom, unconsciously wonders whether the British Empire will ever notice how it is causing its own decay by maintaining a rule founded on submission and fear, and a society based on deference.

If such a verdict is unnerving, the next event is deeply upsetting. Two British officers enter the house in search of survivors, and Mary overhears their conversation. “I heard there was a child though no one ever saw her,” one of them says, unaware that the little girl is just a few doors away (11). The ensuing several-minute pause constitutes the lowest point of Burnett’s novel: the officer’s remark puts into doubt the very existence of Mary, the fertility of her parents who represent the white colonial elite, and questions the productivity and continuity of the British Empire. All these hang in the balance as the soldiers ponder about how to proceed with the search. On their next step depends not only the dramaturgy of *The Secret Garden*, but also whether their whole realm and culture can be rescued from the impending cholera. This Conradian scene of the ‘imperial Gothic’ by far surpasses all of the later horrors produced by the ‘native’ genre in Frances Hodgson Burnett’s novel.

“[T]he child no one ever saw” (12) is rescued, but she has a long way to go until she is healed of her illness. The officer’s answer to her query “[t]here’s nobody left to come” (12), clearly refers not only to the immediate situation, but also to the inhospitable ‘climate’ of colonial society as a whole: in order to have a chance to be cured, Mary must leave British India for good.

The heroine’s short sojourn with an English clergyman’s family while still in the sub-continent does not leave pleasant memories. Of her foster parents and siblings Mary expects servile obedience (13), and her attitude prevents her both from forming healthy relationships and achieving harmony through building a garden. Subsequently, both the clergyman and his wife and Mrs. Medlock speculate how the child of a beautiful woman can be such an ugly creature (15–16), really posing a question about the impressive appearance and nasty underbelly of the Empire. Mary in turn wonders why she never meets people who would love her (17), a sign that she in fact craves for positive emotions.

Crave, she does. So do her uncle and cousin she is headed to meet in England. The names of Archibald *Craven* and his son *Colin* can be easily seen as telling about their *craving* and *calling* for love and harmony. Interestingly enough, the person who will help them restore health and peace of mind will be a little colonial girl who herself suffers from the same disease of neglect. This neglect is likewise present in British India and the gloomy Misselthwaite Manor, the master of which orders his servants to cater for Mary in a room out of sight to “make sure that he’s not disturbed and that he doesn’t see what he doesn’t want to see” (26).

Mary’s first real ‘culture shock’ is generated by her encounter with Martha Sowerby. A highly ambiguous character, Martha not only does not conform to the child’s expectations of how servants should behave, but conversing about India, the only place Mary knows, she deeply upsets the child: after voicing the view that colonial society is servile because there are so many blacks “instead o’ respectable white people,” Martha admits that she thought Mary too was black, like most Indians (30). Here Burnett’s writing is clever and her psychology is credible: by turning contemporary stereotypes and imperialist apologies against the heroine (and perhaps the reader!), the servant causes Mary’s bitter breakdown over eroding notions of black service and white mastery.

Old habits are hard to die, and Mary’s attitude is slow to change. Recurring fits of imperialistic choleric temper, possessiveness, stubbornness and pride punctuate the gravity of her illness (96–97, 110, 138, 164). Burnett’s phrasing in passages like “[s]he knew she felt contrary again, and obstinate, and she did not care at all. She was *imperious* and *Indian*, and at the same time hot and sorrowful” (97) is deliberate and as explicit as such writing can get about the downside of the contemporary socio-political landscape.

The frequent references to servant-master relationships in *The Secret Garden* constitute the core of the novel’s anti-imperialistic streak. In connection with Mary, Burnett refers to British-Indian interpersonal relations at least seven times (17, 28, 32, 41, 53, 135, 157). While Mr. Craven is mostly characterized *in absentia*, the author does not fail to drive home the point that the estrangement of Colin’s father has to do not only with the death of his wife, but also with his being around (non-English) servants “accustomed . . . to accepting without question any strange thing [their] foreign master might do” (267). Of special interest, however, are Colin Craven’s interactions with manorial domestics.

If Mary can be regarded as a key to the enigmatic illness of the British Empire, Colin's character is another figure constituting an intricate network of mysteries. For one, the boy himself is a secret, hidden by his father who shuns him not to be reminded of his late wife (120). Archibald Craven suppresses his affection for his son because inside he fears that Colin will go the way of his mother. Secondly, Mary's cousin himself *has* a secret: he knows that people believe he will not live to grow up (125). What results from this double burden on Colin is his refusal to live a full life combined with an aversion of death: the boy voluntarily keeps to his room (121). It is perhaps not an impermissible stretch of analysis to read adult attitudes toward Colin as foreboding later views of an Empire in decline.

Considering his heavily repressed psychology, it is no wonder that Colin Craven has a *convulsive* temper. "It makes me ill to be angry," the boy explains his tantrums (122), and this rationalization of violent fits is fully in keeping with an imperialist ideology blaming native subjects' disobedience for any aggression perpetrated by the colonizers. Colin's behaviour is accordingly given metaphoric lenses by Mary, the 'Indian' child when she tells him about the Indian Rajah and his servants (135). It is important to point out that this imaginary ruler is not the *white Raj* but a "young *native* Prince" with "a small *dark* hand" (my emphasis, 181) – this 'nativization' of imperial power structure being necessary to take away the edge of Burnett's sharp social criticism.

"As [Mary] listened to the sobbing scream she did not wonder that people were so frightened that they gave [Colin] his own way in everything rather than hear them" (163). A reformed Mary unconsciously reflects Victorian views of child-rearing, as does Colin's nurse when she asserts that "[h]ysterics and temper are half what ails him" (160). On one level, the tantrums of a child-master to his adult-servants constitute emotional blackmail, while on another plane they are the mental cholera plaguing this projection of colonizer-colonized / ruler-subjects relationship onto the rapport between child and adult. To be sure, Mary tells Colin off by echoing the opinion of the nurse and contemporary society: "You can [stop]! Half that ails you is hysterics and temper – just hysterics – hysterics – hysterics!" (165), although what *cures* the boy will involve more than a simple diagnosis. In subsequent passages, the healing process of Colin will make the appearances of his Rajah-persona increasingly stylized and weightless (180–181, 182, 186, 194, 227). Burnett also takes pains to show the boy's unstable 'rule' from the servants' point of view, who, as opposed to the narrator's stock designation "Master Colin," mockingly call him "His Royal Highness" (192, 195, 197).

## 4 The cure

### 4.1 Children's gardens

Writing about the history of England, Clayton and David Roberts term the period between 1873 and 1914 “an age of crisis.” Among the reasons for such a designation are a slowing British economy, escalating conflicts in the labour market, and the appalling gap between rich and poor.<sup>70</sup> In many cases, Late Victorians conceptualized these crises and the solutions for them in terms of their relationship to nature.

According to G. M. Trevelyan, American competition in a market created by free trade doctrines facilitated the collapse of British agriculture and alienated the home society from land and nature.<sup>71</sup> With the number and importance of agricultural workers dramatically decreasing,<sup>72</sup> former farm workers flocked to the cities, and the separation of urban segments from the countryside only intensified.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, a number of authors had started exposing in detail the conditions and lifestyle of the cities' poor in the 1880s,<sup>74</sup> significantly influencing public opinion by awakening the conscience of a society preoccupied with sanitation and moral purity in the first place.

If the British lower classes were impacted by economic inequalities, the Empire's intelligentsia also faced crises in science and ideology. Charles Darwin's 1859 book *On the Origin of Species* had revolutionized the natural sciences but it was also steadily undermining religious beliefs.<sup>75</sup> To be sure, reading of the Bible and family prayers were common until the end of the 19th century, but “[i]n literature and thought [this] was a period of quasi-religious movement away from religion.”<sup>76</sup> The spread of agnosticism was only a manifestation of a process in which the truth and principles of the early Victorian era were giving way to doubt and free inquiry.<sup>77</sup>

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70. Roberts and Roberts, p. 668.

71. Trevelyan, p. 553.

72. Jane Darcy, “The Representation of Nature in *The Wind in the Willows* and *The Secret Garden*,” *Victorian Studies Journal* 211–221; <<http://iupjournals.org/victorian/>> (Date of access: 4 March 2003), p. 212.

73. Trevelyan, pp. 554, 579.

74. Roberts and Roberts, pp. 674, 678.

75. Roberts and Roberts, p. 611, Trevelyan, pp. 551, 565.

76. Trevelyan, pp. 564, 565.

77. Trevelyan, pp. 551, 563.

The perceived and actual dilemmas received different answers from different quarters of British society. As G. M. Trevelyan points out, Late Victorians social reform reacted to, rather than anticipated, emerging problems.<sup>78</sup> While in 1883 a group of literati established the Fabian Society to achieve a “democratic, peaceful, gradualist, and pragmatic socialism,”<sup>79</sup> both the celebrated art critic John Ruskin and the influential thinker John Stuart Mill urged a more equal distribution of wealth.<sup>80</sup> Besides advocating women’s suffrage, the latter with novelist George Eliot believed that Christ’s example communicated the message that religion consisted in leading a humane life.<sup>81</sup>

While social engineers were pushing for practical measures, much of the intellectual and art community conceived of the situation in terms of an idyllic nature versus a corrupt civilization. According to this widespread view, humans have strayed from a pure and healthy nature and have surrounded themselves with the physical and spiritual filth of the city. G. M. Trevelyan, a social historian writing during World War Two, still referred to the agricultural lifestyle of pre-Victorian ages as an environment in which “the mind and character of ploughmen and craftsmen were formed by the *influences of nature*.”<sup>82</sup> The concept of society’s return to and reconnection with nature – and this golden age – permeated the social planning and art of the period.

Gardening societies for the alleviation of the misery of the poor have already been mentioned; with them the garden as a space assumed a role in Victorian social reform. Surveying the institutions caring for the children of London, Thomas Archer recommends “a *‘kinder-garten’* school-of a place where the infant life is made bright and genial, and instruction is like a pleasant round game, carried on with zest and ardent gaiety.” Such nurseries have “swings and hoops and a *flower-bed*” that provide an opportunity to play and enjoy nature.<sup>83</sup> In his exhortation, Archer laments the present bleak conditions, but also envisions a bright future:

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78. Trevelyan, pp. 556–557.

79. Roberts and Roberts, p. 680.

80. Trevelyan, pp. 557–558.

81. Trevelyan, p. 558, Roberts and Roberts, p. 622.

82. Trevelyan, p. 582 (my emphasis).

83. Thomas Archer, *Terrible Sights of London and Labours of Love in the Midst of Them* (London: Stanley Rivers and Co., 1870), pp. 45–46 (my emphasis). In *The Victorian Dictionary*.

[B]ut we have not yet learnt to be liberal enough of space and air. We are too much afraid of profaning the name of 'learning' by making it easy and pleasant; we have certain theories about 'hard work,' which bind us to certain mouldy old scholastic fetishes that oppress the child-life, and make the class-room with its dim walls and frouzy windows, still more gloomy. Happy will it be for us, and for that rising generation of Somebody's children which is to form the future men and women of England, when we ourselves have learnt the lesson of a mud-pie, and practically remember that child's play is man's work.<sup>84</sup>

The *kinder-garten*, literally meaning 'children's garden,' was taken up as an actual and metaphoric solution for British problems both by society and the arts. The concept of 'natural' childhood was popular, and the British countryside was considered an idyllic setting for infancy: with its outdoors, fresh air, green spaces and minimal adult supervision, it seemed to provide a harmonious symbolic and real space for growth.<sup>85</sup> Rousseau's *Emile*, first published in 1762, was still affecting the literary picture of the child in England more than a century later, making many believe that the naturally innocent infant ought to be protected from the corrupting influence of civilization.<sup>86</sup> Growing up in the countryside was thought to endow the children of the Empire with "a purified identity of rural childhood,"<sup>87</sup> and it dispelled fears "of children becoming in some ways 'knowing' beyond their years."<sup>88</sup> As Julia Briggs observes, "the child occupied an Eden before the fall that was puberty. The proper place of the child was in the lost playground – an Arcadia not yet touched by mortality, a past not yet burdened by the guilts of adult sexuality . . ."<sup>89</sup>

In English literature and the British popular mind, the countryside was also a place of physical and psychological healing.<sup>90</sup> According to Edward Said, imaginary experiences of revival by contact with nature already had precursors in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady*<sup>91</sup> before Rudyard Kipling depicted in *Kim* what literary critic J. M. Tompkins calls

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84. Archer, p. 46.

85. Jones, pp. 117–118.

86. Jones, p. 121.

87. Colin Ward quoted in Jones, p. 119.

88. Jones, p. 121.

89. Hunt, p. 167.

90. Jones, p. 120.

91. Said, p. 173.

the “theme of healing.”<sup>92</sup> Here Kim’s encounter with “Mother Earth” “restores India to health,” and Said sees in the hero’s awakening from a healing slumber a re-conquest of the subcontinent by Britain.<sup>93</sup> In his *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space*, Neil Smith expands on the ideas of Hegel, Marx and Lukács when he argues that if the imperial world is “second nature,” anti-imperialism must search for a “third nature,” a nature “not pristine and pre-historical . . . but deriving from the deprivations of the present.”<sup>94</sup> Whether Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* indeed offers such a nature is yet to be seen.

#### 4.2 A Kind of Magic

Several scholars of Burnett’s oeuvre have noted the author’s talent for non-confrontational criticism. Her biographer Ann Thwaite points out that the young Burnett questioned conventional views on marriage, smoking and religion, and that she supported her family by writing, a career still rather unusual for Late Victorian and Edwardian women.<sup>95</sup> Phyllis Bixler observes that in her writing the novelist “often expressed anger at male domination and suggested a more equitable balance between the two sexes” and “shared with late-nineteenth-century feminist novelists an exaltation of female virtue and power.”<sup>96</sup> Even John Rowe Townsend acknowledges that the values of *The Secret Garden*, independence and teamwork, radically deviate from Victorian ideals of submission and obedience, adding that the novel’s value system is “potentially subversive.”<sup>97</sup>

Yet Burnett mostly refrained from openly challenging contemporary power structures. Julaine Gillispie maintains that “[d]espite her feminist stance, Burnett understandably and shrewdly (given her era, goals, and breadwinner status) masqueraded behind an ‘ultrafeminine romantic public image that gained her economic and social independence.’”<sup>98</sup> Interpreting the shift of focus from Mary to Colin in *The Secret Garden*, feminist critic Lissa Paul concludes that “Burnett

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92. Quoted in Said, p. 169.

93. Said, pp. 174, 190.

94. Quoted in Said, p. 272.

95. Quoted in Gillispie, p. 134.

96. Quoted in Gillispie, p. 134.

97. John Rowe Townsend, *Written for Children: An Outline of English-Language Children’s Literature* (London: The Bodley Head, 1990), p. 66.

98. Gillispie, p. 134.

ends the story in accordance with the social and economic truths and values of her particular time and place.”<sup>99</sup> These views are in accordance with the analysis put forth by the present paper, namely that *The Secret Garden*'s depiction of master-servant and child-adult relationships constitutes a latently subversive criticism of British imperialism.

Burnett's streak of veiled dissent can be tracked by examining her careful portrayal of the healing process in *The Secret Garden*. The author's treatment of religion, equality, evolutionism, and 'the Gothic secret' all constitute elements of anti-imperialism.

Of the group of characters communicating a healing egalitarianism, the first to be encountered by the heroine is Martha Sowerby. While it is possible to be seen merely as dysfunctional characterization, the remarkable ambiguity of Martha's figure may in fact be an instance of Burnett's disguised criticism. The author first introduces Martha as the antithesis of Indian servants:

Mary listened to her with a grave, puzzled expression. The native servants she had been used to in India were not in the least like this. They were obsequious and servile and did not presume to talk to their masters as if they were equals. They made salaams and called them 'protector of the poor' and names of that sort. Indian servants were commanded to do things, not asked. It was not the custom to say 'please' and 'thank you' and Mary had always slapped her Ayah in the face when she was angry. She wondered a little what this girl would do if one slapped her in the face. She was a round, rosy, good-natured-looking creature, but she had a sturdy way which made Mistress Mary wonder if she might not even slap back – if the person who slapped her was only a little girl.

(28)

By connecting Martha's *healthy* appearance with the notion of *reciprocity* (returning a hypothetical blow), Burnett creates a pervasive atmosphere of restorative equality. It is Martha herself, however, who compromises this egalitarianism when she acknowledges that she is unusual. She is too "common" and speaks Yorkshire, the local dialect, instead of standard English. Martha claims that she was hired as a personal maid because of the frequent absence of the lord: "[s]eems like there's neither Master nor Mistress except Mr. Pitcher and Mrs. Medlock." (29). The maid's apology is deliberately ambiguous: Martha can

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99. Quoted in Gillispie, p. 133.

indeed be seen as deviantly egalitarian, but she can also be considered a figure representing a redemptive force. By confirming and questioning the socio-political structure at the same time, Burnett makes sure to maintain a way out for herself and her writing.

While Martha's behaviour and messages are certainly contradictory, the role of the Yorkshire vernacular in *The Secret Garden* is somewhat less ambiguous. At first reading, one cannot help but associate the dialect with the English of the King James Bible, even though all the native characters insist that it is 'common.' At the same time, the "Yorkshire habit" of "blunt frankness" in speech (41) is contrasted with the Indian "custom" of servitude (32) and its contrived formulae of communication seen above (28). The Yorkshire of Misselthwaite Manor is clearly the language of love, belonging, nature and equality (30–31, 215), and Mary and Colin as impressionable children acquire it in the course of the healing process (173–174, 201). Mary's subsequent remarks on the use of Yorkshire being similar to that of an Indian dialect – clever people learn the local language to win over the natives (181, 105) – are not so much a memory as an imperialist prescription.

The character of Martha's brother Dickon is another example of the author's use of complex portrayal. From very early on, the boy is held up as a model for Mary – and a curious model for that. Dickon, whose name suggests Christianity (*deacon*), turns out to be a Pan-like figure, a free spirit of the Yorkshire moors (35, 42, 51, 79, 92–94, 106). For his part, Colin is convinced that Martha's brother is an animal charmer, and he has power over the other characters because *humans are animals* (144, 222), and the boy himself acknowledges a kinship with wild beasts (95). Thus in Dickon's person converge traditional religion, a pagan nature-cult, and upstart evolutionism.

To be sure, Christianity wins out in the end. Burnett feeds the reader hints long before she explicitly formulates a creed: the theme of the forbidden garden harkens back to the Bible (35), while Dickon's and Mary's "exaltation" (102, 156) and Colin's suggestion that spring is like a great procession (196–197) all utilize religious imagery. The most pointed treatment of the theme, however, takes place with the mystic sessions in the garden, where the characters evoke the power of Magic by chanting in a circle (225–226, 238). Here, even though he reminds Ben that they are "not in church" (227), Colin appears like a solemn priest, he likens the setting to a temple while the gardener sees it as a "prayer meeting," and Dickon's pets take part in it as "creatures" (225–226). Burnett

herself experimented with various cults including Christian Science and spiritualism, and infused her novel with a concept of a “Life Force” (66). Again, the author makes sure that her characters return to conventional Christianity by singing the Doxology (255) – even though Mrs. Sowerby reminds them that what matters is not the language but the expression of praise to God, “th’ Joy Maker” (259).

“I am your guardian,” Mr. Archibald Craven tells Mary when they meet for the first time (112), conjuring the image of a colonizer adult man asserting control over a passive female child. By the end of the novel, the figure of the *guardian*, this icon of hierarchical and gendered power gives way to a new, more egalitarian and independent understanding of the role of the *gardener*. “When you see a bit of earth you want, take it, child, and make it come alive” (113) is Mary’s metaphorical mission, which consists in *reviving*, not *conquering*, the Secret Garden, and through it her own self. But before she can complete this mission, she has to face the Gothic secret of Misselthwaite Manor.

Frances Hodgson Burnett’s book abounds in secrets. The author is constantly presenting, reinterpreting and re-presenting the Gothic theme of mystery. From portraying Mary Lennox as a neglected child hidden away not to bother her parents, the novel moves to showing the parallel secrets of the long lost garden and the mysterious crying from some far corner of the house, and the appearance of Colin’s character brings a new twist to the reader’s understanding of what a secret may consist in.

Colin, it is revealed, has been sequestered at the order of his father, who cannot stand seeing him, because he reminds him of his late wife (120) – the same motivation that served as a reason for the closing of the rose garden (35). The son of a hunchback father (19), Colin is widely believed to be a cripple who will not live to grow up, and the knowledge of this lack of faith in his vitality is *his terrible secret* (125), as is a curtained portrait of his late mother in his room (128). The cripple hidden in some dark nook of a stately house and the likeness of an ancestor are certainly Gothic elements, and here they are complemented with the image of the tree with the broken branch in the blooming garden (203–204). Reminding the characters of the departed Mrs. Craven, the latter can be interpreted as Poe’s combination of beauty and death,<sup>100</sup> while Colin’s contradictory views on his own fate constitute the theme of premature death.

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100. Quoted in Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 141.

Laureen Tedesco in her review of Lois Keith's *Take Up Thy Bed & Walk: Death, Disability, and Cure in Classic Fiction for Girls* agrees that Late Victorian views routinely located the cause as well as the cure of illnesses and disabilities *within* the patient. A symbol of passage from infancy to adulthood for girls, disability was seen as a punishment for behaving badly, having evil thoughts or not being good enough, and it could be cured by self-respect and faith in one's self and God.<sup>101</sup> Accordingly, Colin needs to believe that he can become healthy, he needs to have the *will* to live.<sup>102</sup> Once the boy's thirst and curiosity for life is restored, he feels that he will live forever (199). Interestingly, Burnett decides to keep the children's healing process clandestine as well: Colin first abandons his own dark secret for the mystery of the garden (125); then he chooses to make Mary's visits a secret (128); and finally he forbids others to let on to the servants anything about his convalescence (210, 214, 228). Such a delay of gratification is rather uncharacteristic of children, therefore it is likely an authorial device used to prolong the special experience of seemingly forbidden, but nevertheless righteous pleasure.

It is precisely this transformation of a dark enigma to the secret of joy that makes Burnett's novel so enduring in its popularity. After Mary re-enacts her own culture shock on Colin by examining his back for non-existing lumps (166–167) “by almost brutal methods,”<sup>103</sup> the children spend more and more time in the hidden garden, and Colin's will to live is restored. Confronted with the view that he is an invalid unable to walk, the boy stands up (209), which makes it evident that his health is returning. Burnett nevertheless makes her characters continue their clandestine activities, now keeping a *secret* that is the *sacred* Magic of life. Although she presents several morals to the story including Mrs. Sowerby's common sense pedagogy “th' two worst things as can happen to a child is never to have his own way – or always to have it” (171), and the narrator's rather lengthy sermon on the power of thoughts and will (261–266), what is more in accordance with her streak of ambiguous social criticism is Dickon's depiction of the central characters: “Us'd be just two children watchin' a garden

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101. Laureen Tedesco, Review of *Take Up Thy Bed & Walk: Death, Disability, and Cure in Classic Fiction for Girls* by Lois Keith, *Victorian Studies Journal* 395–396; <<http://iupjournals.org/victorian/>> (Date of access: 4 March 2003).

102. Tedesco, p. 396.

103. Humphrey Carpenter and Mari Prichard, *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 473.

grow, an' he'd be another. Two lads an' a little lass just lookin' on at the spring-time. I warrant it'd be better than doctor's stuff" (153).

Dickon's message is that of a child consciously trying to be a child, and it reflects on many of the contemporary models of infants and child-rearing. The Rousseauistic image of children playing in and looking at untroubled nature shows the long forgotten real self behind the Empire's Gothic secret, its troubled façade and its crippled and bile-infected power structure. The Secret Garden is England's wild, beautiful youth, full of life, living free and in equality, and healing the wounds of a choleric imperialism. Seen by some scholars as a reaffirmation of contemporary views on man's power over nature,<sup>104</sup> Colin's subsequent personae of "the Athlete, the Lecturer, [and] the Scientific Discoverer" (275) are but the hopes and dreams of a *healthy* child lured by the romance of the adult world. The least a critical appraisal of Burnett's work can say is that it makes a case for a sheltered and carefree childhood, in which children should be allowed to follow Voltaire's advice from *Candide*: "il faut cultiver notre jardin."<sup>105</sup> The most *The Secret Garden* could give to contemporary readers is a pause to think about the fate of their children – the children of the Empire.

## 5 Conclusion

By drawing on disciplines as diverse as British social and intellectual history, postcolonial literary theory, the history of epidemiology, landscape architecture and gardening, and general Victorian Studies, this paper attempted to give an anti-imperialist reading of Frances Hodgson Burnett's children's classic *The Secret Garden*. A book with ambiguous and sometimes contradictory messages, Burnett's 1911 novel remains a reservoir of Victorian and imperialist notions about power structures in society and politics, coding the symptoms of, and offering possible cures for, the anxieties of Late Victorian and Edwardian Britain.

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104. Darcy, p. 217.

105. Hunt, p. 168.