



Classics in Short No.3: The Secret Garden

Article Author:

[Helen Levene](#) [1]

[104](#) [2]

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Classics in Short

Byline:

Helen Levene on Frances Hodgson Burnett's **The Secret Garden**.

Helen Levene

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*Fresh air, ruddy complexions, plain-speaking and weeding? No, it's not **Gardeners? Question Time** but ...*

The Secret Garden

by Frances Hodgson Burnett

First published:

1911. Various editions available.

Who's it for?

Children of nine upwards, gardeners, nature-lovers.

Not suitable for:

Readers who like action-packed adventure.

Who was Frances Hodgson Burnett?

Born as Frances Eliza Hodgson in Manchester in 1849, as a child Frances loved making up stories and wrote many poems and short stories. Her father died when she was very young, and her mother took over the family hardware business. When it ran into difficulties, the family emigrated to America, at a relative's invitation, though they still faced poverty. In 1873 Frances married Dr Swan Burnett. She began to write stories for her sons Lionel and Vivian, and the result was the rags-to-riches tale **Little Lord Fauntleroy** (her first children's book to be published in 1885 which was received with great acclaim). In 1882 she moved back to England with her two sons, setting up an English home in a manor house in Kent. In 1898 she divorced Swan Burnett for failure to support her and the children, and married a young actor, but this marriage was no happier than the first. In 1909, while creating a garden at a new home on Long Island, she began **The Secret Garden**, her best and most important work. She went on to be a hugely successful writer for children and adults. She died in 1924. (Ann Thwaite's biography of Frances, **Waiting for the Party**, is worth reading.)

What secret garden?

At the beginning of the story, ten-year-old Mary Lennox arrives from India to live with her uncle, whom she has never met, in Misselthwaite Manor on the bleak Yorkshire moors – a far cry from the dusty heat of India, the only place she has ever known. Mary is (at least to begin with) an unlikeable, disagreeable child, always sour-faced and cross. She had been spoiled in India by servants who met her every command, and a mother who gave her everything but her time and love. She was lonely, neglected and is now orphaned.

With her uncle away for long stretches of time, and therefore left to her own devices, Mary begins to explore her new surroundings and learns that she is capable of liking people. Her first friend is a cheeky robin red-breast, and it is the bird who leads her to the secret garden which lies hidden within the huge grounds and orchards belonging to the house. Mary discovers that the secret garden once belonged to her uncle's wife, who died after an accident falling off a swing. Her uncle had the door to the garden locked and never wanted to set foot in it again. The garden has been untended for many years. Mary is determined to restore it to its former glory and does so with the help of another new-found friend – Martha's brother, Dickon.

Who she?

The maid, one of 12 children from a very poor family, but you will be glad to know she is always cheerful, as are her clean and scrubbed brothers and sisters and tireless mother. She and Dickon are loyal members of the lower orders who know their place.

It's OK to be poor as long as you wash a lot?

Got it in one.

Any more secrets?

Ever since she arrived at Misselthwaite Manor, Mary has been aware of strange crying noises in the night, but Martha tells her it is only the wind off the moors. One night Mary traces the source of the crying and finds her young cousin Colin, a supposed invalid, also living in the house. Colin is bedridden, unable to use his limbs and, like Mary when she first arrived, he is very lonely and scared, and desperate for his father's love. Mary, Dickon and the magical, powerful pull of the secret garden gradually coax Colin out of his bed, and towards a full recovery. A letter to her uncle persuades him to return and when he does he realises that he, too, has been lonely, running away from his fear that Colin might die, as his wife did. The secret garden, now no longer a hidden place, is the catalyst which changes Mary from a sullen, unhappy child into a fun-loving, kind and caring one; it changes Colin from a lonely, selfish, obnoxious boy into a healthy, friendly companion, and it changes Uncle from a recluse to a true father and Lord of the Manor.

Classic qualities:

The moral and material transformations of **The Secret Garden** have a powerful and inspirational appeal to young readers. It is perhaps the sense of achievement that the children in the story gain which fires readers' imaginations, i.e. you can make things happen if you really want them to, even if, like Mary Lennox, you are not a pretty or agreeable child. The child characters are self-reliant, independent, achieving change and growth without the help of adults, or adult interference – another highly appealing quality. The novel is not steeped in Victorian values or heavy morals, so each new generation has been able to identify with it. With its timeless storyline and richly woven text, this classic novel has been justly described as one of the most satisfying stories for children ever written.

Politically correct?

Apart from the faithful, plain-speaking family retainers? Not quite. Bedridden Colin is always whingeing and sorry for himself until, miraculously, he learns to walk. OK, his 'disability' is an expression of his state of mind but it could be implied that others with disabilities could also walk if they only pulled their socks up ... Uncle, who has a spinal deformity (described as a hunchback), is at first portrayed as someone fearful and frightening.

Other books by Frances Hodgson Burnett:

Little Lord Fauntleroy (1885), **A Little Princess** (1905), **The Lost Prince** (1915).

Film versions?

One and very good too. Directed by Agnieszka Holland, it stars John Lynch and Maggie Smith amongst others. A useful classroom study guide is available from Film Education, 41-42 Berners Street, London W1P 3AA.

Helen Levene works in publishing.

Page Number:

28

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