

The Magic of Eco-Therapy in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*

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Abstract

Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911) presents nature not merely as a decorative background but as an active force in the emotional, psychological, and physical transformation of its characters. The novel follows Mary Lennox, Colin Craven, and Dickon as they discover an abandoned garden and gradually restore it to life. At the same time, the children themselves experience remarkable changes in their attitudes, relationships, and physical well-being. This paper examines the novel through an ecocritical perspective, with particular attention to the contemporary concept of eco-therapy—the idea that meaningful interaction with the natural environment can contribute to psychological and physical well-being. Although “eco-therapy” is a modern term that postdates Burnett's novel, the narrative anticipates several ideas associated with it: contact with green spaces, gardening, physical activity, sensory engagement with nature, social connection, and care for nonhuman life. The garden becomes a therapeutic space in which the boundaries between human health and environmental well-being are interconnected. Mary's movement from isolation to curiosity, Colin's movement from fear and confinement toward confidence and physical activity, and Dickon's intimate relationship with animals and plants demonstrate the restorative possibilities of nature. At the same time, the novel's representation of nature is not entirely uncomplicated, since the garden is shaped and cultivated according to human purposes. Therefore, *The Secret Garden* can be read both as an early literary exploration of nature-based healing and as a text that invites reflection on the complex relationship between humans and the natural world.

Keywords: Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, eco-therapy, ecocriticism, nature, healing, gardening, children's literature

“There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature.” – *Rachel Carson*

Rachel Carson, American Marine Biologist and conservationist beautifully depicted the divine healing power of nature. The Romantic writers celebrated nature as a sacred entity as it offered solace, moral guidance and spiritual restoration to the troubled human soul. Wordsworth in his iconic work, *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*, describes nature as the “anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,/ The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul”. In Frances Hodgson Burnett’s classic novel *The Secret Garden*, the garden acts as a literal stage for eco therapy, proving that human healing is deeply tied to the natural world. This magic of eco-therapy is recognized by the modern science as the restorative power of nature based healing.

The central importance of the garden has attracted considerable critical attention. Recent scholarship emphasizes that gardening in the novel is not simply symbolic but is presented as a practical activity through which children acquire knowledge, cooperate, exercise agency, and interact with the natural world. Iversen and Jaquette argue that the novel presents gardening as a form of learning that occurs through both reading and practical experience. They also observe that gardening provides children with a temporary freedom from established social roles. MDPI

The idea of eco-therapy provides another productive way of understanding Burnett's novel. Eco-therapy is a contemporary concept associated with therapeutic engagement with the natural environment. While Burnett obviously does not use the modern terminology, *The Secret Garden* repeatedly connects contact with nature to emotional and physical improvement. Existing ecocritical studies have specifically identified nature as a source of mental and physical healing in the novel. Herdiana's ecocritical study, for example, argues that the children's movement from illness toward wellness is closely associated with their interaction with the garden and the natural world.

In the novel, the Nature as an extra ordinary force creates miracle in the life of Colin and Mary. The character, Dickinson is represented as a part of Nature. He keeps himself very close with animals and birds and has a better knowledge about gardening. He is always happy and spreads the joy around. When Mary lets herself get into the outside world and start mingling with the fellow beings, she finds herself happy. She turned to be an interesting and adventurous spirit.

She has ever gone to the extent of changing the ill-tempered Colin into a stronger and healthier soul. Using Nature as a medicine, she has helped him to get out of the psychological weaknesses and made him realize his own powers.

Mary compares the hot Indian climate with the Misselthwaite's cold and windy climate. She finds the moor climate pleasant, refreshing and cold. But Colin being in Misselthwaite right from his birth never feels the beauty of his place till Mary explained it to him and created an interest and inquisitiveness towards the beauty of nature. Colin experiences the same as Mary and admires the nature. The nature reveals its secret and unveils its magic, once they approach and nurture it with love and tremendous care. The wind creates goosebumps on their bodies and the fragrance of the flowers and earth refreshed their nostrils. The song of the Robin knocks their hearts. The sight of the fresh flowers pleased their eyes.

During her stay in India, Mary used to be an ill-tempered child. She played by herself making flowerbed. She is tired with her care taker Ayah and most of the time she is angry. During her stay in English Clergyman's house after her parents' demise she has played under a tree making paths for a garden. Mary naturally has a hidden interest in nature and specifically building up a garden. She is been taken to England to live in the manor of her guardian Mr. Craven. In the beginning, she has some dislike for the moor but changes her views on hearing about the secret garden and about Dickon, the one closely connected with the nature.

The young servant Martha creates interest in the mind of Mary saying that there are more children in her home who play all the day in the fresh air of the moor to get themselves fatter. Mary who happens to be a thin child wants to grow fatter. She says,

“Eh! It was pretty on th' moor with th' birds getting' up an' th' rabbits scamper in' about an' th' sun risin'. On hearing Martha on the moor with the birds getting up an' the rabbits saying about her siblings, she gets an idea of playing in the fresh air to grow better. Martha adds, 'I had 'em all pipin' hot when they came in from playin' on th' moor. An' th' cottage all smelt o' nice, clean, hot bakin' an' there was a good fire, an' they just shouted for joy. Our Dickon, he said our cottage was good enough for a king to live in' (60).

Further, she learns that Dickon possesses a pony which he got from the moor and he is very close with the animals and they like him. She has never owned a pet and she begins to find Dickon more interesting who possesses something which she never has. He becomes close with the animals by playing outdoors for long hours. This is also a reason that motivated Mary to go and play in the garden and becomes friend with Robin and the gardener Ben Weatherstaff. She learns through Martha, there is a secret garden in the house which is shut up for ten years after the death of Mrs. Craven. The adventurous spirit of Mary is awakened by Martha, and Mary begins to unveil the secret by associating herself with nature.

Mary likes Ben because she also has similar nature of him. When she asks some questions related to the garden, he shows rough expression and expressed rough words. In spite of his strange behavior, Mary likes him and considers him as her friend. When a serious looking Ben Weatherstaff smiles, she admires his smile. She admires people for the good qualities blessed by nature. Mary asks Ben whether he knows Dickon for which he answers, "Everybody knows him. Dickon's wanderin' about everywhere. Th' very blackberries an' heather-bells knows him. I warrant th' foxes shows him where their cubs lies an' th' skylarks doesn't hide their nests from him" (36). Mary becomes very curious about Dickon as he is very close with nature.

Mary hears a cry of someone and follows the sound. She finds a boy who seems to be of her age. She talks to him and comes to know that he is her cousin, Colin, son of Mr. Craven. She tells him about the secret garden and Dickon. Colin becomes curious to know about the secret garden and he likes the company of Mary. He used to be an adamant and a bad-tempered person who never enjoys being with people. He never goes out because he thinks that his back is not fine and he would also turn one day like his father who has hunch-back. This attitude has been built up by the people around. The windows are always shut up and do not allow the fresh air to peep in. Mary opens the window and facilitates him to feel the fresh breeze of the moor. She tells, "'That's fresh air,' she said. Lie on your back and draw in long breaths of it. That's what Dickon does when he's lying on the moor. He says he feels it in his veins and it makes him strong and he feels as if he could live forever and ever'" (171).

Colin orders that there should not be anyone in the garden when he goes to the garden with Mary and Dickon. Colin never listens to the Doctor who usually attends on him during his

sickness. He believes in Mary and Mary believes in the power of Nature. Mary and Colin decide to go to the secret garden. She says,

Things are crowding up out of earth, she ran on in a hurry. And there are flowers uncurling and buds on everything and the green veil has covered nearly all the grey and the birds are in such a hurry about their nests for fear they may be too late, that some of them are even fighting for places in the secret garden. And the rosebushes look as wick as wick can be, and there are primroses in the lanes and woods, and the seeds we planted are up, and Dickon has brought the fox and the crow and the squirrels and a new-born lamb. (171 - 172)

Colin notices Ben peeping into the secret garden from a ladder. When Ben threatens Mary for entering the secret garden, Colin says that he is his master and he is not a cripple. With an extraordinary strength, Colin who thought that he would not live stood up straight. The nature has worked out wonder on Colin as it did on Mary. The secret about the garden is shared with Mrs. Sowerby who sends fresh milk and bread to the children as they work more in the garden and eats very little just to avoid any doubts about what they do and why they eat more than before. Mrs. Sowerby writes a letter to Mr. Craven asks him to come to Misselthwaie soon. In the meantime Mr. Craven has a dream in which his wife wants him at the garden. Mr. Craven rushes to Misselthwaite and asks for Colin. He is informed that Colin is always in the garden with Mary and Dickon. Mr. Craven goes to the garden and searches for the key to the secret garden as it was locked by himself. But he hears the children making sounds of running and chasing; there were sounds of laughter, joy and excitement. When Mr. Craven opens the door, Colin rushes to fall into his arms. He finds him a tall and handsome boy shining with life and eyes with boyish laughter. Nature has turned dull Mary into an adventurous spirit, reserved Colin into a confident boy and moody Mr. Craven into a happy father. Nature with all its power and kindness brought out the best in everyone and changed the individuals as better beings. Nature has done its role of a healer with the utmost perfection.

A 2022 study by R. P. Putri identifies five major categories of pastoral imagery in *The Secret Garden*: land, plants, seasons, liquid elements, and animals. The study connects these natural elements with three consequences of healing: positive change, finding meaning, and the

realization of wholeness. These categories help demonstrate why the garden is so significant. Burnett constructs a complete ecological environment in which soil, plants, weather, animals, and human beings interact.

The garden can consequently be viewed as a therapeutic ecosystem. Its restoration parallels the restoration of the children. The neglected garden initially reflects abandonment, isolation, and emotional repression. As the children care for the garden, it becomes increasingly productive and beautiful. Similarly, Mary and Colin gradually move from emotional and physical stagnation toward vitality.

Although the eco-therapeutic interpretation is productive, it is important not to idealize the novel. The natural world in *The Secret Garden* is frequently valued because it benefits human beings. Plants are cultivated for beauty, and certain plants are classified as weeds and removed. Animals are also incorporated into the children's imaginative world according to human perceptions.

Recent scholarship has emphasized these complications. The 2025 study on children's "secret places" argues that the novel's relationships between children and nature are not entirely innocent: gardening involves human control over other species, and the novel contains broader tensions involving class, colonialism, and the privileging of particular childhood experiences.

The novel's colonial background is also significant. Mary's childhood in India is represented through the perspectives of a British child, and contemporary readers may recognize assumptions about race, class, empire, and British superiority that complicate the novel's celebration of nature.

Thus, an ecocritical reading should not claim that the novel presents an uncomplicated ecological ideal. Instead, *The Secret Garden* reveals both the possibilities and limitations of a human relationship with nature.

Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* offers a powerful literary representation of the relationship between nature and human well-being. Through Mary, Colin, and Dickon, the

novel demonstrates how contact with gardens, plants, animals, fresh air, physical activity, and outdoor spaces can contribute to emotional and physical transformation.

The secret garden functions as much more than a setting. It is a therapeutic environment, a classroom, a social space, and a symbol of renewal. Mary gains independence through exploration and gardening. Colin develops confidence by moving beyond the confinement of his bedroom. Dickon demonstrates a model of intimate engagement with the natural world. Their individual transformations occur simultaneously with the restoration of the garden.

Although the contemporary term “eco-therapy” did not exist when Burnett wrote the novel, *The Secret Garden* anticipates several principles associated with nature-based approaches to well-being. Its emphasis on outdoor activity, gardening, sensory engagement, social connection, and care for living things makes the novel particularly relevant to an ecocritical reading.

Ultimately, the “magic” of the garden lies not only in its mystery but in the relationships it creates. The garden transforms because the children care for it, and the children transform because they care for the garden. Burnett thus presents healing as a reciprocal process between human beings, other living organisms, and the spaces they inhabit. The novel's enduring appeal can therefore be understood partly through its imaginative recognition that a healthier relationship with the natural world can contribute to a fuller relationship with oneself and with others.

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