

WORLDVIEW GUIDE

SECRET GARDEN



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INTRODUCTION

The Secret Garden is Frances Hodgson Burnett's most famous novel. It came at a time when the romantic child-character of previous children's literature began to disappear and gave way to more "realistic depictions." The Secret Garden is often praised for pioneering, the character of the flawed-child. It tells the story of two spoiled, selfish children who are healed and transformed through the magic of Spring.



WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS

“The most misused word in the language is ‘realism,’” Frances Burnett once remarked. “It has come to stand solely for all that is hideous, sordid and repulsive in life. One would think, to judge from the way in which the word is bandied about, that no real things were beautiful or good.”³ In reaction to the idealism and sentimentality that marked Victorian literature, what became fashionable was the portrayal of discontents, anxieties, and injustices—sins that make people easily recognizable to each other. According to this trend, what was most realistic and meaningful in the world was its darkness, grit, and depravity and, therefore, was most worthy of serious storytelling.

After decades of a successful writing career, Burnett’s work had received both admiration for its realism, as well as criticism for a lack of it. *The Secret Garden*, in particular,

3 “Gloomy Plays Evil, Says Mrs. Burnett,” *Chicago Examiner*, February 14, 1909, 1.

was often lauded for the “psychological realism” of Mary and Colin, but sniffed at when the flowers began to grow and the magical healing takes place. Critics approved of the winter, but not of the spring.

In an interview given two years before publishing *The Secret Garden*, Burnett preemptively defends her work by seeking to widen our definition of realism. She remarks: “A rose, a spring day, the sun, kindness, tolerance, nobility, unselfishness—these are as real as poverty and sin and hopelessness.” These observations help illuminate Burnett’s possible motivation for writing her most enduring and beloved work. In *The Secret Garden*, Burnett shows the ugliness of human behavior and then, as if to shake her fists at her critics, overcomes human depravity with the power of Spring. Although her depictions of rebirth deserve criticism, the story’s message is one that Christians should heed—beauty and goodness will always triumph over the harsh “realism” of Winter.

Burnett starts with the gritty from the story’s get-go as she introduces her reader to one of her protagonists, Mary Lennox, a spoiled little degenerate who needs to change. The conflict of the story arises out of Mary’s need for transformation, a simple and common enough tale. But there’s a hitch—not only does Mary not know how to change, she has no idea that she needs to. “She did not know she was disagreeable. She often thought that other people were, but she did not know that she was so herself”