

# An Analysis of the Writing Techniques of *The Secret Garden*

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**Abstract**—*The Secret Garden* is a classic work by American authoress Frances Hodgson Burnett. This paper mainly probes into the three necessary elements of the novel: characters, plot and environment, hoping to reveal the special writing techniques employed by Burnett and provide a new perspective and interpretation for the study of *The Secret Garden*.

**Keywords**—*The Secret Garden*; writing techniques; characters; plot; environment

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since its publication in 1911, *The Secret Garden*, the representative work of American authoress Frances Hodgson Burnett, has enjoyed great popularity among readers all over the world. For over a century, this breath-taking and absorbing masterpiece has been reprinted, translated into a number of different languages and adapted into movies, TV plays, animated films and stage plays. Besides, the novel's various derivatives also emerge in endlessly, ranging from audio books, children's books, and toy books to various stationery, toys and exquisite handicrafts. It can be said that this is a classical literary masterpiece that transcends age boundaries, times and cultural differences. Although it has gone through a century of vicissitudes, it still maintains vigorous vitality, which is the most powerful affirmation of Burnett's superb writing skills. This paper mainly probes into the three necessary elements of the novel: characters, plot and environment, hoping to reveal the special writing techniques employed by Burnett and provide a new perspective and interpretation for the study of *The Secret Garden*.

## II. CHARACTERIZATION

Burnett's way of characterization individualizes her work. In *The Secret Garden*, Burnett creates three little protagonists with completely different images and personalities. Mary, the heroine, was born into an upper-class British family in exotic India. The great material satisfaction did not breed a noble lady in the traditional sense. On the contrary, the sultry weather and the lack of parental love turned her into a selfish and self-willed Indian bully. Colin, the male protagonist and Mary's cousin, was also from the British upper-class society. Although the boy grew up in Yorkshire in northern England with a pleasant climate, he still became fragile, paranoid and unreasonable due to the

early death of his mother and the lack of father's love. On the surface, Mary and Colin seem to have a lot in common. Both are unattractive, unhealthy, bad-tempered and desperate for love. However, they are widely apart in personality. Mary is a courageous girl with great determination and perseverance, while Colin is extremely vulnerable and hopelessly helpless. In *The Secret Garden*, Burnett also presents the readers with another male protagonist Dicken whom is absolutely distinct from Mary and Colin. If Mary and Colin are depicted as evil twins in the first few chapters of the novel, Dicken is just like an angel from the heaven. This farm boy is a composite of truth, goodness and beauty, and embodies the best qualities of all children in the world. He is close to nature, cares for animals, and treats people sincerely. He is like the brightest and warmest spring sunshine, soothing the pain of all animals and bringing warmth and comfort to the people around him. Through the clear contrast, Burnett successfully portrays three vivid characters with distinct fascination, leaving a deep impression on the readers.

The "unpleasant" protagonists Mary and Colin are the most ingenious parts of the novel's characterization. Mary is the most disagreeable-looking girl ever seen, which is depicted vividly at the very beginning of the novel. "She had a little thin face and a little thin body, thin light hair and a sour expression." (Burnett 1) She was sickly and fretful all day long. "By the time she was six years old she was as tyrannical and selfish a little pig as ever lived." (Burnett 1) Colin, by contrast, is even more unpleasant. He has been bedridden since birth. This skinny boy is fragile, sensitive, arrogant and hysterical, terrifying his servants all day long. The characterization of Mary and Colin is the complete opposite of the traditional "agreeable" child. For many readers, especially children readers, this is a brand-new reading experience, which can effectively stimulate their interest and willingness to read. Of course, this "unpleasant" characterization is not unchanged. With the unfolding of the story, under the influence of different factors, the two little protagonists change gradually and eventually turn into well-adjusted teenagers who are physically and mentally healthy. The transformation of the two protagonists not only brings great shock to the readers, but also gives the readers a sense of spiritual satisfaction.

Another originality of *The Secret Garden* in characterization is that it breaks the binary opposition of

boys and girls depicted in the traditional novels, which is mainly reflected in the two protagonists Mary and Dicken. Mary has the most unattractive ways people ever saw in a girl. She is not as good-looking, sweet, polite and docile as normal girls. However, this disagreeable girl is endowed with some virtues which are usually regarded as the distinctive characteristics of boys. Unlike many other girls, she is courageous, resolute and always willing to take risks. The farm boy Dicken not only possesses all the good qualities of a boy: diligence, bravery, enthusiasm and generosity, but also shows great tenderness and patience peculiar to girls. He is kind and gentle to everything. He takes good care of the flowers, plants and animals on the wilderness. Even in the face of annoying Mary and Colin, he never shows a trace of impatience. Some scholars believe that the almost perfect characterization of Dicken reflects Burnett's affirmation of androgyny. (Zhang Ying, Su Fang 42-44) This brand-new way of portraying characters adds richness to the characters, showing the readers the possibility of combining male traits and female traits together.

*The Secret Garden's* long-lasting popularity also lies in its delicate depiction of the inner world of the leading protagonist Mary. In the novel, Burnett focuses her writing muscles on Mary, presenting a full picture of the young girl's changeable inner world, ranging from the grudge against her mother to the anxiety of leaving home after the death of her parents, from the uneasiness and fear when she first arrived at the manor to the curiosity and the intense desire to explore the manor, from the initial dislike and contempt of the Sowerby to the strong and involuntary intention to get close to them, from the abhorrence of her cousin Colin to the sympathy for him... The detailed inner portrayal helps to present a more vivid image of Mary, creating the possibility for the readers to resonate with the heroine.

### III. PLOT

Burnett designs the plot of *The Secret Garden* in a very individual way, which is one of the key reasons for its tremendous popularity all over the world. First of all, Burnett abandons the fixed plot paradigm of the traditional fairy tales. In the traditional fairy tales, the heroine tends to be soft, kind or lovely, but also weak and helpless. When she is persecuted or faced with difficulties, she desperately needs the help of a heroic hero. This pattern of male superiority and female inferiority has been running through the plots of the traditional fairy tales and it can be said to be deeply rooted in the traditional fairy tales. In *The Secret Garden*, Burnett makes a bold attempt to endow the heroine Mary with the ability to save herself and even other people. In Burnett's pen, the heroine Mary is bold, determined, and adventurous, while the male protagonist Colin is weak, sensitive, and helpless. It is Mary's persistent quest that brings Colin who is hidden in the secret room to the readers; it is Mary's perseverance that changes Colin's bad temper; it is Mary who uses the secret of "secret garden" to arouse Colin's longing for the outside world; it is Mary who helps Colin to avoid his servants and enter the secret garden; it is Mary who encourages Colin to try to stand up; it is Mary who accompanies Colin and shows him how to work in the

garden; it is with Mary's help that Colin can finally have a full recovery. It can be said that Mary changes Colin's entire life trajectory. For those readers who have long been immersed in the plot of the traditional fairy tale, this new model (strong women and weak men) is absolutely refreshing and intriguing.

In the process of conceiving the plot, Burnett also carefully crafts two secrets: the secret garden and the male protagonist Colin, both hidden for many years. It is not difficult to find that the plot of *The Secret Garden* is mainly built around the two secrets mentioned above. While revealing Mary's continuous exploration of the secrets, Burnett also skillfully presents the readers with Mary's mental growth. At the same time, secrets effectively arouse the readers' curiosity: Why is there always a vague cry at the end of the corridor? Why is the garden closed for such a long time? Why does the owner of the manor travel all year round? Why do those servants keep silent about the closed garden and the sobs at night? It can be said that the application of secrets is a major innovation in plot designing.

### IV. ENVIRONMENT

Environmental description is usually an indispensable part of novel writing. Basically, there are two types of environmental descriptions: the description of nature and the description of social environment. It is not difficult to find that Burnett gives a very detailed description of nature in *The Secret Garden*. Whether it is exotic, sultry and hot India, or dry and windy England; whether it is gloomy, desolate winter, or bright, warm springtime; whether it is the verdant grassland with energetic animals, or the lifeless garden locked for many years... everything depicted by Burnett is so vivid, giving the readers a feeling of actually being there, attracting them to keep reading. In addition, the portrayal of nature plays an important role in characterization. The heroine Mary was born and raised in India, a place notorious for hot and humid climate and troubled by mosquitoes. The harsh environment deprived her of good appetite and interest in anything, which gradually led to her physical weakness and bad temper. On the contrary, Dicken was born in England with a pleasant environment. He spent all day on the moor, breathing fresh air, bathing in the warm sunshine, playing with animals and surrounded by blooming flowers. The outdoor activities not only do wonders for Dicken's body, but also turn him into a nice teenager with a positive attitude towards life. The sharp contrast between Mary and Dicken brings a massive visual and psychological impact to the readers.

As mentioned above, the description of nature plays a significant role in character shaping, which is also manifested in the tremendous changes that Mary has undergone in different places. When she was in India, Mary was in poor health and didn't have the slightest interest in food. After arriving in England, due to frequent outdoor activities on the moor, she started to eat more. Gradually, her face became rosier, her dry hair grew glossier, and her body became stronger and stronger. Apart from that, the fresh environment of England gradually softened Mary's temperament. This tyrannical and selfish little girl began to

pay attention to the people and things around her. She even started to care for others. Undoubtedly, the pleasant environment of England not only changed the appearance of Mary, strengthened her physique, but also changed her bad temper. The great change achieved in the more pleasant natural environment not only adds to the richness of the heroine, but also brings further psychological shock to the readers, creating more space for the readers to think.

Burnett's description of the social environment focuses mainly on the Misselthwaite Manor in Yorkshire. In the process of creating the manor, Burnett adopts a strong Gothic style. Situated on the edge of the wilderness, the Misselthwaite Manor was an old and gloomy house with 600 years of history. Inside the manor, there were nearly 100 rooms filled with exquisite paintings and valuable furniture. However, most of the rooms were shut up and locked. In the depths of the tortuous corridor, there were often vague cries, which made Mary feel uneasy and curious, inspiring her to explore. Through the description of Gothic architecture, Burnett successfully creates a strange and blurred dream atmosphere with strong Gothic suspense and mystery, which not only helps to reveal Mary's psychological activities, but also effectively promotes the development of the plot.

## V. CONCLUSION

In summary, environmental description plays a significant role in designing plot, building suspense, shaping character and presenting theme. Through the careful description of nature and the skillful use of Gothic factors in depicting the social environment, Burnett succeeds in arousing the readers' attention and willingness to continue reading. Through her fantastic skills in characterization, plot designing and the portrayal of environment, Burnett has bred a gorgeous flower which is in full bloom in the garden of children's literature, bringing wonderful visual enjoyment and spiritual consolation to readers all over the world. It is beyond doubt that *The Secret Garden* is a classical literary masterpiece worth careful, repeated reading and study.

## REFERENCES

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