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# The Influence of the “Celtic” Revival: Quest for Paradise in Chwedl Iarllles y Ffynnon, Le Chevalier au Lion, and Frances Hodgson Burnett’s The Secret Garden

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**The Influence of the “Celtic” Revival: Quest for Paradise in *Chwedl Iarlles y Ffynnon*, *Le Chevalier au Lion*, and Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden***



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### *Introduction*

Despite attracting considerable critical interest and heightened popularity in the century since its release, Frances Hodgson Burnett’s classic *The Secret Garden* (1911; serialized in 1910) remains in many ways a mysterious creation. Scholars have debated over its influences, literary and otherwise, over the meaning of the enigmatic garden, and over the tonally divergent ending, as the book veers away from a fantastical fable into far more theological territory. Due in part to the general absence of documentation concerning the novel’s composition, reactions to *The Secret Garden* have been remarkably diverse, although as a children’s book it has always not received the sustained critical attention that a work of its prominence might normally receive.

Jen Cadwallader has called *The Secret Garden* a hybrid of literary traditions (157), which Phyllis Bixler Koppes argues works together to “create a work of thematic and symbolic richness” (204-5). In tackling this hybridity scholars have most consistently singled out the work’s colonial, (anti-)feminist, and Christian themes. An important line of inquiry, however, has been almost entirely excluded from scholarly criticism of *The Secret Garden*: the influence of the Medieval Revival, a prominent literary movement during the Victorian era that involved medieval, Arthurian, and ultimately Celtic texts. This paper seeks to examine the employment of Revival themes, narrative patterns, and images in the creation of Burnett’s work, specifically in her construction of the quest for paradise trope.

The quest for paradise appears across world literature. The “pagan”—that is to say non-Judeo-Christian—versions of this quest, exercised an increasingly strong appeal for nineteenth-century writers and readers, who found in old mythologies and folklore a new source of meaning in a century of rapid industrial development, new advances in sciences, societal upheaval, and

crises of faith. In Burnett's reweaving of this rich network of material, we find a powerful example of Victorian attempts to circumvent modern disillusionment through the framework of pagan myth and folklore. The "quest for paradise" undertaken by Mary Lennox thereby becomes an expression of human nostalgia for a purer state of being and, through this expression, a tentative solution to the leaching of wonder from modern life.

This discussion therefore rests on the rich nineteenth-century dialogue surrounding Celtic myth. The quantity and complexity of scholarship that this material inspired in so short a time is astonishing. While by modern standards late-Victorian scholarship romanticizes the Celt and glorifies the Celtic literary tradition, its focus on symbolism and thematic structure and its firm belief in the Celts' inherent creativity ushered the tales into the reservoir of nineteenth-century literary possibilities. Rebecca Welshman in "Dreams of Celtic Kings: Victorian Prehistory and the Notion of the 'Celtic'" (2012) notes that "The qualities of the Celts...intrigued and mystified the Victorians," to whom they offered "a form of reassurance amidst the spiritual uncertainty of an increasingly secular world." Given that the work of late-Victorian authors in particular "was deeply grounded in their native landscapes, the imagined lives of ancient communities was a fertile and popular line of inquiry." Described by Welshman as "a more grounded form than the Romantic ideal of achieving synthesis between man and nature" (60-2), the Revival connected these ancient tales with an inquest into spirituality and meaning, positioning them as vessels of long-lost truths.

I will aim to examine *The Secret Garden's* inquest into spirituality within the framework of the Revival. I will begin with a general discussion of the quest for paradise in literature, then examine the themes and significant texts of the Revival. After situating Burnett within this context, I will analyze Revival influences in *The Secret Garden* both on a surface level and on a

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structural level, using as a basis for comparison two texts depicting a Celtic-influenced “quest for paradise”: the fourteenth-century Welsh *Owain* and its French counterpart, Chrétien de Troyes’s late-twelfth-century *Le Chevalier au Lion*. Drawing some of Burnett’s other fiction into the discussion, I will conclude with a brief inquiry into the significance of *The Secret Garden* in relation to Burnett’s other works and to Revival-influenced texts in general.

## *Part I: Laying the Groundwork*

### **The History and Legacy of the Quest for Paradise**

Any inquiry into the quest for paradise requires an examination of the trope as it appears in world mythology. The field of mythological study is inevitably complex. There is rarely a straightforward, empirical way to confirm or reject theories, and mythologists have less to go on than scholars in most other fields, where conjectures are built upon more concrete evidence. A mythologist must attempt to reconstruct a way of perceiving and relating not simply to the natural world, but to the divine as well, although the two are of course connected.

These challenges may explain the diversity of opinions that have accumulated over the past century and a half in regards to the meaning, and the function, of myth. Jaan Puhvel writes that “in the course of human events...the historical landscape gets littered with the husks of desiccated myths” that function like “nonmaterial fossils of mankind’s recorded history” (2). Over time, even as society and religion change, these fossils survive in the form of sagas, legends, heroic pasts, and distant histories. As new receptor cultures retool inherited narratives, they often “[project] their own cultural experience into the source,” to the point where “[t]he other becomes a mirror for the self, the encounter with the other a confirmation of the self” (Lawall, 173). Nevertheless, the shadowy figures of anterior versions linger on in the form of legends, folktales, and fairy tales (Puhvel, 3). Although altered and distorted, these figures give us some access to older forms of thought and belief. The possibility of accessing older, and perhaps purer, narratives would prove remarkably attractive to many late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century minds.

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The founding of mythology as an academic field of study in the nineteenth century correlates closely with the simultaneous popular revival of local myths and folklore. In Britain, much of the newfound interest in non-Classical and non-Christian tales is credited to the Romantic tradition, as well as to nationalist and, later, imperialist sentiment. Romanticism’s proponents claimed that, in order to live authentically and escape “the dictatorship of reason,” myths were needed to “stir the imagination and reveal ancient wisdom” (Arvidsson).

Yet it is impossible to separate the publication of both scholarly and popular editions of legends, myths, and folklore from broader attempts to define the post-French Revolution world. The German states, for example, saw a resurgence of interest in so-called national epics such as the *Nibelungenlied*, which nationalists saw as cultural proof of a shared German identity. Imperial Britain would take the figure of Arthur as a means of justifying their cultural superiority and colonial ambitions, despite the medieval Arthur’s role as a repeller of Anglo-Saxon invaders; Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, however, would employ local myth—including, in Wales, the figure of Arthur—as a means of establishing an identity independent of England.

Myth, then, was positioned as a means of understanding identity on a national as well as an individual level, and perhaps of negotiating the relation of the individual to the whole. Like Romanticism, the field of mythography arose in reaction to both the rationalism of Enlightenment thinkers and new scientific developments, and to the excesses of the French Revolution, with its absolute rejection of spirituality. But its creation was very much a purposeful attempt on the part of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century antiquarians and medieval scholars to envision a better means of living. These early scholars did not only rewrite or republish old tales, but also embedded individual works within a much larger tradition through scholarly introductions and notes. As such, the nineteenth-century understanding of myth and



legend would be strongly structured by the framework of academia. One can argue that in situating myth and legend within a vast literary network, these academics detached old tales from a given cultural context and offered them up as essentially atemporal works of literature; the myths were in a sense imbued with immortal human truths by their transcribers.

We can find the purest distillation of the search for truth in the concept of the archetype. It is important to remember that many mythologies were used as proof of distinct *national* characteristics; yet, balancing out this impulse was an interest in essential human nature. Archetypes likewise permitted Christian authors to employ non-Christian mythologies to illuminate human nature. In a 1904 article from Alfred Nutt's *Popular Studies in Mythology, Romance, and Folklore* quixotically titled "Folklore: What is it and What is the Good of it?" Edward Sidney Hartland declares that, "Properly studied," the legends and practices of the "folk" may "unveil the past of the human race in way for which we look in vain in the material monuments of antiquity" (80). While maintaining that Christianity is "inseparably bound up with, a high form of civilisation [*sic*]" (75), he describes the Bible as another type of folklore (82) and holds it up in comparison with the English "fairy realm" as some of "the highest works of imagination" (81). Hartland is making the claim that disparate folkloric traditions, in their concern with "the mental and spiritual side of humanity" (46), can "thr[o]w at once a flood of light upon one another" (69).

Carl Jung was the first major figure to discuss the mythological archetype toward the turn of the twentieth century, but various other mythologists would take up his ideas, including contemporary scholars such as Miranda Green, who states that human beings use mythology to explain the unexplainable, from the forces of nature to cultural traditions to questions about life,

death, and the afterlife (*Dictionary* 21), and Dillon and Chadwick, who call myth “an attempt to define the infinite and the indefinable” in the form of “a symbol” (128).

Perhaps the most prevalent archetype in world mythology is that of the quest for paradise. Paradise, or something like it, occupies a central position in most belief systems, and yet it is not solely religious. In *Earthly Paradise: Myths and Philosophies* (2009), Milad Doueïhi defines paradise as “a promise of happiness marked throughout by nostalgia for a lost origin, often imagined as the final destination of humankind” (xi), a definition quite similar to Jung’s “wish-fulfilling fantasy of a child’s paradise” (46). Doueïhi explains this motif as a reaction to an internalized sense of loss or absence, which almost inevitably results in a quest to regain that which has been lost. Earthly paradise is undeniably spiritual, according to Doueïhi, and yet it can perhaps be better understood as a *structure* that both links and even transcends the spheres of the religious and the social. Positing utopia as “a nonplace or a neutral place,” Doueïhi argues that there is a necessary exchange between the spiritual, or the imaginative, and the mundane, which the human conception of paradise serves to mediate (135). The earthly paradise may reflect and expand upon a given culture’s reality, but its ultimate value lies in its fiction, within whose frame human problems may be dealt with and human yearnings answered. In the context of pagan literature, earthly paradise can also be understood in another way: as the meeting of the other and the self, and as the expansion or even transcendence of the self in the union with the other.<sup>1</sup>

While “Paradise” shares many basic features across diverse systems of belief, the concept of this Paradise varies according to individual customs and religions. In the Christian tradition, with its strongly vertical conception of the world, Heaven is elevated above and beyond the human world (and in strict opposition to Hell, which Christianity comes to believe exists below).

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Lawall calls the “case of Celtic literature...instructive regarding the role of alterity in the reception of foreign literary traditions,” so that the encounter with the other confirms the self (173).

The lighter something is, physically or morally, the higher it may ascend; thus, the soul rises while the body decays. Thus, too, the rewards of heaven are of the soul, and the punishments of hell are of the body. While the Garden of Eden exists more or less on the same plane of existence as Earth, there is never any thought of reattaining it; to quote Northrop Frye, “it was, but it cannot now be” (*The Secular Scripture* 98).

There thus exists no true *quest* for paradise in the Christian tradition—no quest, that is, beyond the daily preparation of the soul for the passage into the afterlife.<sup>2</sup> But in an increasingly secularized, rationalized, categorized world, as nineteenth-century Britain was becoming, a more earthly quest may have appealed to British readers to an unprecedented extent. In many ways, the Celtic otherworld offered a vital alternative to the Christian Paradise to Victorian writers and thinkers, many of who were intensely interested in the concept of an idealized existence. As will be explored, the Celtic otherworld was depicted not so much as separate from the human world but as parallel to it, to the point where the very landscape was impregnated with supernatural forces; every spring, cave, or tree represented a possible gateway into the otherworld, every animal a potential guide.

In addition, despite evident Christian influences, the realms of Celtic myth offer a radically different view of the world. In the 1909 work *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries*, Walter Yeeling Evans-Wentz states, “The Heaven-World of the ancient Celts, unlike that of the Christians, was not situated in some distant, unknown region of planetary space, but here on our own earth” (332). After touching briefly on the subterranean Sidhe mounds, Evans-Wentz pursues the image of islands in the west, a “hidden realm of subjectivity lying just beyond the

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<sup>2</sup> The Bible in its entirety in many ways constitutes a quest for paradise, beginning with the Fall and concluding with the Book of Revelation; John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* takes such a view. However, in contrast to, for instance, the Celtic Otherworld quests, no human individual takes a particularly active role in this quest; the prime actor is always God.

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horizon of mortal existence” (334); in an example of how fluidly the Victorian concepts of fairy- and folk-tales, Celtic myth, and Arthurian legend were, Evans-Wentz connects these western islands full of “fairy women” to “great Arthur wounded unto death” (333).

Yet what Evans-Wentz most interestingly glosses over, and which contemporary Celtic scholars like Green have corroborated, is that, despite his claim that the otherworld is a realm with “neither death nor pain nor scandal, nought save immortal and unfading youth, and endless joy and feasting” (333-4),

this western Otherworld...cannot be the realm of any one race of invisible beings to the exclusion of another. In it all alike—gods, Tuatha De Danann, fairies, demons, shades, and every sort of disembodied spirits—find their appropriate abode; for though it seems to surround and interpenetrate this planet even as the X-rays interpenetrate matter, it can have no other limits than those of the Universe itself. (335)

As Green has noted, the Celtic world was perceived, both by the Celts and by subsequent interpreters of Celtic texts, as full of natural forces capable of doing both good and harm, and it seemed that “every feature of the landscape...[was] possessed of a spirit” (*The Celtic* 465). In works such as the Irish *Táin bó Cúailnge* or the Welsh *Mabinogion*, unlike the strict, hierarchical organization of the Christian world, the divide between the supernatural and the natural is often porous to the point of nonexistence, so that the Celtic world seems to possess a multitude of coexisting realms, through which the unsuspecting mortal can easily slip.

Yet despite the numinous quality of the Celtic mythological landscape, otherworldly sites tend to be bounded in some way, which connects them to the tradition of the utopian garden, most famously exemplified by the Christian Eden. It should be noted that the term “garden” in a literary sense may apply to any bounded, natural sanctuary that holds the potential for

transformation or, in this case, for spiritual elevation. In “Garden Paradigms in 19th-Century Fiction” (1984), Gail Finney calls garden imagery “the incorporation of human dreams and desires” that “exist[s] along a continuum between nature and art or culture.” Because Eden is the most notable paradise garden, there is a tendency among Western scholars to interpret all such gardens as biblical allegories, an understandable interpretation given the universal internalization of Christian narratives among Europeans. But the literary garden, which is also one of the most widespread forms of the mythological earthly paradise, has a history that extends far beyond Christian tradition.

In literary traditions, gardens can function either as a haven protected from the wildness of surrounding nature, or as a human-sized version of nature through which man can access a purer state of being despite rising urbanization. We can observe an example of the latter in *The Secret Garden*; depicted as taking place sometime in the middle of the nineteenth century, just as the Industrial Revolution was picking up steam, *The Secret Garden* mediates the reconnection of man with nature, and of man with his own identity. Either way, as Leonard Lutwack explains in *The Role of Place in Literature* (1986), gardens “serve as synecdoches of earth, concentrating all of earth’s goodness into an easily comprehended area” (95). Through this glorified vision of the natural world that one might conceivably access at any time, the reader thus achieves entry into a sacred space, one near to and yet separated from the mundane world.

Within the garden, moreover, we find a potential for mutual transformation, as the hero who achieves entry has a corresponding and inevitable impact on the realm around him. Finney’s depiction of the garden as existing between nature and culture relates closely to Doueihi’s explication of “Paradise,” described as a liminal space that enables the religious and the social to come together within its bounds. We find an additional allegory for this union of the social and

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the religious in the Celtic tradition of the fertility goddess and the mortal hero who wins her. Many paradises feature countless beautiful women—occasionally virgins, but often not—yet most commonly a single goddess is the primary inhabitant of paradise, particularly of a garden paradise, whose bounded character parallels the goddess’s life-giving properties. These life-giving properties entail general “well-being,” not necessarily procreation (Green, *The Gods* 73), and therefore the goddess functions as the source of prosperity, both external and internal, that paradise promises to those who manage to attain it. The hero who undergoes the physical, mental, and spiritual ordeal necessary to reach the goddess’s domain finds the ultimate embodiment of paradise in the form of the goddess. The marriage between the two consummates the hero’s arrival at the heart of the sacred.

Yet the image of the goddess in the garden begs several questions. In the case of what Alfred Nutt termed the “remarkable” “union between a mortal hero and a sun-goddess” that was “the high destiny of every human king in Tara” (163), the conferring of sovereignty upon the worthy mortal implies time and cyclical succession. By dint of his own mortality, the individual’s arrival into paradise can never be more than temporary. At first glance this does not seem compatible with an immortal, timeless paradise, for the image of a cycle is inherently and inevitably linked with death. Nutt resolves this issue with a quote from the Irish myth *Bailé an Scáil*: “The husband of the crowned queen representing the sovereignty of Erin [Ireland] sat upon a king’s throne and made two strangely contradictory statements—on the one hand, that he was a dead man (‘It is after death I have come, and I am of the race of Adam’); on the other hand, that he was the sun-god (‘Lug, son of Edlenn, son of Tighernmas, is my name’)” (163). Death thus becomes the means of transformation; in order to be fully worthy of Paradise, the hero dies and is reborn through the mother-goddess; yet the goddess likewise represents the immortal constant

to the mortal inconstant, ensuring balance and prosperity *in spite* of death, acting as the unceasing fount of wisdom and inspiration that helps to formulate and inform the mortal realm. She is, to paraphrase Doueihi, the spiritual force that unites with the mundane mortal and enables the mundane world to survive.

The real question, however, is why during the nineteenth century did so many turn to non-Christian models of Paradise—although no Western literary work of the time functioned entirely independently of Christianity’s influence, and in many cases authors explored Christian faith *through* the framework of Celtic lore, or fused them to create something entirely new—as a means of artistic inspiration?

There are multiple reasons behind this shift toward alternative literary forms. First of all, unlike the overtly religious nature of the Christian Eden, the Celtic otherworld is not explicitly religious.<sup>3</sup> Therein may lie its appeal for nineteenth-century writers. In a century of religious conflict and doubt, there suddenly arose a literary model that could easily encompass any doctrine, including the author’s independent belief system. Moreover, through personages of mythical or far-distant origin, the author could more easily grapple with issues of faith without having to simultaneously confront the implications this struggle might have for contemporary existence.

Secondly, the Celtic otherworld spoke to the increasing segment of the population who felt that the modern age had alienated man from nature. In a century of rapid social and physical change, a literary model in which the divine conceivably resided in every passing bird and in every ancient tree exercised immense imaginative power.

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<sup>3</sup> This may be attributed in part to the tales’ evolution over the course of time and judicious editing by monks in particular.

Thirdly, the Christian model of Paradise seems distinctly less appropriable as a framework for self-discovery. The irreversibility of Christian time, which Mircea Eliade discusses—and the contrasting reversibility of Celtic time—may explain the significance of guilt in Christianity, which is likewise central to Eden. By comparison, “No question of guilt, or punishment or judgment in an after life ever disturbs the serenity of what Gerard Murphy has called the ‘strange loveliness’ of Celtic mythology” (Dillon and Chadwick, 150). The oppositions between the two modes of belief in this respect are striking. On the one hand we encounter a religion that is temporally linear, organizationally hierarchical, deeply-influenced by the concepts of guilt and judgment, and preaching a vision of the natural world as raw material to be controlled and used by man. On the other hand, we find a world that is eternally cyclical, vacillating between chaos and order, moral but not dogmatic, and intensely connected to a highly numinous natural world.

I will mention a final essential difference between Christian and Celtic representations of Paradise. The Christian structuring of Paradise segregates life and death; death does not exist within Paradise, and when Adam and Eve lose their immortality in the Garden of Eden through the eating of the fruit, they are likewise banished from its protective confines to die in the mortal realm, while a flaming sword is planted in the entrance to prevent any mortal from reaching the Tree of Life. The only option for immortality handed down by Christian doctrine was through the death of the body and the ascension of the soul to Heaven, where there likewise exists no death or pain.

The Christian Paradise thus offers no space in which life and death may coexist, and in which the living hero may learn to coexist with the possibility of death, including his own. Death is, in a sense, not merely nullified but non-existent. The Christian Paradise is not truly a “mirror”



for the self; it is another creation entirely. While such a vision may console and inspire, it does not allow for the same exploration of the human psyche. Thus, in the form of an otherworld in which all that life encompasses (including death) coexisted, the nineteenth-century psyche may have found an ideal location for the exploration of human pain and the possibility of the soul's renewal.

### **Historical Context: The Medieval Revival and the Utopian Ideal**

The situating of a quest for paradise in a specific time period poses myriad challenges when trying to break down its influences. Not only does each age operate according to different influences, but any inherited narrative or image undergoes at times fundamental alterations either in the ways in which it is interpreted or rewritten. A Victorian's understanding of Celtic or Arthurian motifs is naturally different—in some respects, entirely different—from that of a man or woman exposed to the material at the time it was originally disseminated.

Historians and critics focus on these differences, and rightfully so. The material of newly revived myth, legend, folklore, and fairy tale is reworked or resituated in the nineteenth century in an attempt to discuss modern identity, to identify modern issues, and to present “solutions” from prior ages to modern problems, although such solutions are often represented in a highly ambivalent manner. This manner may indicate the artist's awareness of how untenable the solutions he or she presents truly are. One finds, particularly toward the end of the nineteenth century and the beginnings of the twentieth century, a deep-rooted melancholy in many reworkings, a despair of the state of the human condition.

And yet I would argue that the basic *impulse* of the authors of such texts remains remarkably similar across generations: the impulse, that is, to use figures from prior eras or

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otherworldly realms to explore the human experience in all its tragic and joyful possibilities, in a way that contemporary figures often cannot because these figures are so intimately connected with a specific historical or social context. Even during the medieval period, Arthur and the ancillary tales his legend incorporated were set in a mythic past, which explains in large part the canon’s durability as well as its interpretive flexibility across the ages.

When local British myth and folklore entered the scholarly and then the public consciousness toward the middle of the eighteenth century, they acted as both alternatives to and as rejuvenating forces to be fused with tired Classical and Biblical models. Such a fusing had, indeed, already occurred in old Irish, Welsh, Norse, and Icelandic texts, where origin stories tended to be merged by medieval transcribers with more acceptable religious and mythological narratives. Yet certain of each traditions’ distinctive characteristics survived to fascinate and puzzle modern audiences.

Much of the new interest in non-Classical myth owed a debt to what is now known as the Medieval Revival. Despite often-revolutionary shifts occurring across the continent, nineteenth century Europe remained in many ways deeply conservative. The Medieval Revival is one notable manifestation of this conservative quality, including not only a passion for all things medieval, but also for mythic texts and folklore often recorded by monks during the same period. This was in part due to the importance these tales accorded to the natural world, both as setting and as symbol, and in part because their representation of “primitive” thought appealed to artists attempting to access a purer form of being.

Nor was Celtic primitivism, which by the early to middle nineteenth century had “permeated British culture,” exclusively British. Brittany in France would prove a fertile imaginative source for artists and writers on both sides of the Channel. French artists in search of

the mystical or the primitive, such as Paul Gauguin, Odilon Redon, and Paul Sérusier, saw Brittany as “an ancient, spirit-filled garden with Brocéliande as its Sacred Wood” (Whitaker 252). Such an idealization, which is explored in Christine Poulson’s work *The Quest for the Grail: Arthurian Legend in British Art 1840-1920* (1999), reflected the multivalent identity of belief resulting from “the loss of conventional religious faith,” as well as a fear of and fascination with female power (xiii) that could be explored in the context of legend. Perhaps more significantly, the recovered Celtic-themed tales also enabled an idealization of remote provinces and peoples as possessing the true voice of the human spirit (Carruthers and Rawes 6), thus making “primitive” peoples a new spiritual and ethical authority.

The Medieval Revival was, as its name suggests, an expression of nostalgia for an imagined utopian past, and many of the works that grew out of it took the form of different visions of such a past. It is within this revival that Burnett’s own quest for paradise starts to take more definite shape. A struggle between new and old played out across nineteenth-century British society, as well as within the individual identity, that found expression in all artistic and creative fields of the period and exposed a deep-rooted desire for a cogent model in which to locate meaning. This struggle can be broken down into two opposing positions: on the one hand, there existed an adherence to rationalism and empiricism that often—but not always—allied itself with liberalism and notions of universality; and on the other hand an acknowledgement of the darker aspects of human nature, a quest for divine meaning and guidance, and an acknowledgement of man’s irrationality that often looked to conservative models of government as a means of discipline. The two positions overlapped in intriguing and even contradictory ways, but both—to grossly oversimplify their complexities—can be boiled down to an endeavor to create a workable model for living in a rapidly changing world. The Victorians—and, to a

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considerable extent, the entire European continent following the French Revolution—were suffering from a sense of spiritual loss that many blamed on an unstable societal model. James R. Moore writes

if there was a ‘Victorian crisis’—and I think there was—it was not merely a crisis ‘of faith’. For faith (which I take here to be synonymous with belief) was, as always, the corollary of action, and action based on faith embodied social purpose. Spiritual equipoise, moral rectitude, intellectual integrity—not merely these were at stake, but the very order and progress of society. The Victorian crisis was a crisis of legitimation. (153)

While realists explored current social problems through plausible settings and situations, members of the Medieval Revival opted for a more distant perspective from which to explore nineteenth-century psychology, and their own ennui in particular. They also, following the lead of the Romantics, tended to envision their mythicized model as pastoral.<sup>4</sup> This model is closely tied to “the quintessential degeneration myth,” so characteristic of the Victorians, of a fall from “an ideal community” or state of being (Chandler 241). Many Victorians watched the increasing urbanization of Britain with suspicion, and regarded the tools of the Industrial Revolution as a means of alienating man from his essential nature. George Levine states that ‘mechanism’ was a term applied by Arnold, Carlyle, and others to describe “the unspiritual, the morally banal, the merely pragmatic” (107). The instruments of industry are thus set up in opposition to the naturalness of a rural or feudal society, in which nature’s usefulness is not linked with man’s ability to manipulate it (Chandler 234). Within the revival of Celtic and Celtic-inspired material,

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<sup>4</sup> The Romantics cannot be entirely separated from the medievalists, given that their subject-matter often overlapped in significant ways. Michael Alexander in fact envisions Tennyson, the author of the *Idylls of the King*, as picking up where Keats left off in such work as “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” and “The Eve of St Agnes” (125). However, whereas Romantics were more closely associated with “sublime” nature, medievalists were simultaneously drawn to medieval economic structures and even, in the case of Carlyle, to industry.

of which Arthurian material was the most widely propagated, we can observe a preponderant belief that these tales depicted an earlier, and perhaps more fulfilled, state of being, particularly in their relationship to nature. This desire to interpret nature through the lens of literature (and vice versa) may have been even more exaggerated among Anglo Americans; in Burnett's *The Shuttle* (1907), New York heiress Betty Vanderpoel finds herself in the idyllic English countryside and says, "That is American...the habit of comparing every stick and stone and breathing thing to some literary parallel" (101) and, "with an ironic sense of her own reality," "resist[s] the feeling that she had been swept back into the Middle Ages" (118).

Yet while Burnett generally envisions the British countryside as untouched by industrialization—the omission does not derive from Burnett's ignorance, for she grew up in industrial Manchester, but likely from a willful nostalgia—industrialization was making its presence felt on even the most rural areas of Great Britain. These physical changes were as pressing a concern as the cultural ones, which also explains the new importance of pre-industrial literary models. The modern age was altering the very appearance and geography of the land to an unprecedented extent. The growth of manufacturing cities and the construction of railways, canals systems, and transportation systems had a transformative effect on Britain, and was often met with great opposition. In Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1851), the arrival of Captain Brown—who has committed the grave sins both of speaking about money matters and of being connected with "the obnoxious railway"—is met with a certain degree of hostility by the ladies of the provincial town (27-8). The combination of bourgeois economics and industry are thus perceived as invading sources into a more pastoral way of life.

Alice Chandler, in her benchmark work on medievalism, *An Ideal of Order* (1970), states, "As a source of political power, land in the eighteenth century was almost as important as

## 21 Influence of the “Celtic” Revival in *The Secret Garden*

it had been in the twelfth” (53). In the nineteenth century, however, this no longer held true. The significance of land as a source of wealth, prosperity, and power loomed large in the British mindset, but there was a growing detachment between the latter and the former, and a sense of a growing detachment between man and nature as well, due in part to rationalism and utilitarianism, but also to economic shifts that created new labor centers in cities.

Many of the Romantics, as well as the revivalists, dealt with this sense of detachment from the land with great intensity. The oeuvre of Sir Walter Scott, who is often considered the starting point for the nineteenth-century Arthurian revival and for historical novels in general, collapses the linear timeline of Scottish Highlands so that the romantic present and the mythic past are never fully separated. His 1813 poem *The Bridal of Triermain* intriguingly interweaves three literary branches of the Revival: an episode set in the pagan past concerning Arthur’s illegitimate daughter Gyneth; a medieval romance set in the twelfth century concerning the heroic Roland de Vaux, “sprung from Druid sires/And British bards,” who awakes Gyneth from an enchanted sleep; and the recounting of both these tales by a contemporary poet (also called Arthur), who seems to employ them as lessons for his own love, Lucy. Scott is not merely embedding “old” narratives within a contemporary tale, however, but embedding all three eras within a single landscape. As he narrates, the speaker of the poem repeatedly calls Lucy’s attention to their natural surroundings, so that nature becomes increasingly synonymous with the world of legends: “But, Lucy, turn thee now, to view/Up the fairy glen, our destined way.”

Scott’s poem can be categorized as an example of the Revival’s identification with nature, “with simpler and truer modes of feeling and expression and [with] nobler and more heroic codes of action that existed in the past” (195)—in a *fictional* past, that is, that could, “almost as well as the true past...teach a sense of the sublime” (185). Many Romantic writers

looked to the natural world for images with which to express the internal, and the natural world they drew from was in many ways as mythic as the tales of King Arthur. Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, as Chandler points out, "chose humble or rural life for his" subject matter "because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with beautiful and permanent forms of nature" (98). This fusion of the fleeting "passions of men" and beautifully permanent nature, which seeks to situate mortality within an immortal context, bears remarkable similarities to the Celtic sovereignty myth previously discussed.

Yet the incorporation of human emotion with natural expression also serves to translate the intangible into physical form. The fundamental link between immaterial myth and material space in nineteenth-century Britain cannot be overemphasized. As new mythologies and legends flooded the popular consciousness, a curious phenomenon known as Arthurian or Celtic tourism gained speed. On the one hand the Arthurian narrative was categorized as myth. Yet on the other hand, historians and travel writers worked to give such literature a topographical focus (Bryden 122). Drove of "questers" embarked to places in Cornwall, Wales, and rural parts of England that had supposedly been the sites of legendary happenings. Glastonbury, which claimed to be the "glassy city" of myth,<sup>5</sup> drew thousands of visitors each year fascinated "by the narrative of the otherworldly, mysterious nature of Arthur's 'grave'" (124). Stonehenge and castle ruins would draw similar attention, and Burnett seems to have participated in this tradition; in 1901, Frances took a friend's daughters "to the ruins of Bodiam Castle, telling medieval stories as she drove a pony carriage. She and the children toured the castle as twelfth-century characters in ancient stories, imitating their speech, and were thrilled when Burnett provided not a simple lunch of sandwiches but 'a fairy meal' under a tree" (Gerzina, *Frances* 228).

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<sup>5</sup> Avalon.

Thus, as much as this new British mythology was completely separating from the historical pretensions Geoffrey of Monmouth had given Arthur seven hundred years earlier, a strong urge existed to link myth with a physical, specifically *natural* location through which the ordinary man might gain access of some kind to this idealized world. Megan Morris calls this urge “historical necromancy” and states that it forms an example “not only of Victorian medieval revival, but also of a corporeally-centered aesthetic of history” that sought to resurrect in tangible form visions from the mythical past (7).

Thus, one of the primary things we can, for the purposes of this paper, take from the goals of medievalism is that it signified not a simple nostalgia for the medieval world, but an internal quest for a “better” way of living in the present day. Medievalists did not advocate “an impossible return to the practices of the past,” but they did often “wish to revive its principles of supervision and social harmony” (Chandler 111).

One of the most purely medieval visions in Victorian British literature comes from Thomas Carlyle, in his landmark *Past and Present* (1843). In the work, Carlyle fuses the two titular elements to create the image of a future utopian-like despotism. Praising the feudal order of the past for being “*Strong-Ones* in fact as well as etymology” and for responding to the eternal “Law of Nature,” Carlyle denounced the principles of democracy: “Liberty? The true liberty of a man, you would say, consisted in his finding out, or being forced to find out the right path, and to walk thereon” (263). While the idea of a utopian despotism might seem contradictory in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, to many Victorians it represented stability and even individual fulfillment.

At its most essential level, then, medievalism was a quest for paradise—a theoretical, literary quest for paradise, perhaps, and often acknowledged as such, but a quest for paradise



nonetheless. Even as realist novels depicted the dark underbelly of the industrial age, a variety of new genres focused instead on the concept utopia, often taking as their blueprint medieval and folkloric narratives. The prominent Arthurian works of Alfred Tennyson and the various reactions they elicited, in particular, helped open the field up to new literary models, drawing attention to long disregarded or inaccessible medieval texts.

Poet Laureate Robert Southey, one of the first major figures of medieval and Arthurian poetry and scholarly work, also explored different forms of paradise in his work; after failing to delineate a more democratically minded concern for the people, who “under their own leaders...might achieve Utopia,” Southey later conceived of a simpler and perhaps more workable vision based on the feudal system of the Middle Ages (Chandler 113). Later in the century, William Morris, a central figure of both the Arthurian Revival and the Pre-Raphaelite movement, as well as a founder of the contemporaneous Arts and Crafts movement, explored the concept of a pastoral paradise. In the opening lines of his popular poetic work *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70), Morris wrote,

Forget six counties overhung with smoke,  
 Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke  
 Forget the spearing of the hideous town;  
 Think rather of the pack-horse on the down,  
 And dream of London, small, and white, and clean,  
 The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green. (1-6)

Michael Alexander, who discusses these opening lines at length, is disparaging toward the work, as, he notes, are most critics, who “shake their heads at Morris’s escapism.” Still, Alexander claims that this work and its initial popularity are illuminating of the times. Morris

implicitly rejects the pollution of the Industrial Revolution in the opening lines, and perhaps more importantly the *ugliness* that industrialization has introduced into modern life. He envisions a rural, although not necessarily medieval world of clear waters and “gardens green,” thereby establishing a close connection between pre-industrialization and paradise. Alexander remarks that the famous revivalist architect Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin created a “remarkably similar” portrait of contrasted cities in *Contrasts*, but that Morris here replaces Christianity with nature, “a common Victorian substitute” (177).

Outside of the explicit attempts to envision a utopian society, as Carlyle so grandly announces—“There lies the Heroic Promised Land; under that Heaven's-light, my brethren, bloom the Happy Isles,—there, O there! Thither will we” (45-6)—medieval, Celtic, and Arthurian revival texts exhibit similar impulses. In Arthurian literature, attention to Arthur’s death, to Avalon, and to the Grail Quest reached an unprecedented level. All three of these subjects connect in different ways to a quest for a higher spiritual state of being. The mysterious events surrounding Arthur’s death and journey to Avalon—an otherworld that, while reserved for the worthy king, is not quite outside a mortal’s grasp, something that may explain nineteenth-century pilgrimages to Arthur’s supposed grave—fascinated Victorian authors, artists, and audiences. Inga Bryden devotes a substantial part of her work *Reinventing King Arthur: The Arthurian Legends in Victorian Culture* (2005) to the importance of Arthur’s death in the Victorian period. In Tennyson’s monumental *Idylls of the King* (1859-86), according to Bryden, the depiction of the “island-valley of Avilion” is both a “quasi-heaven” and yet recognizable as an idealized, *English* rural landscape (126). For Tennyson, Bryden argues, Avalon is “a sign of an already disappearing (therefore mythical) English landscape” (12). Writers employing the legend of Arthur’s passing “were concerned with...examining the otherworldly, rather than the

earthly, aspects of the isle....[and] their ‘quest’ can be read as an exploration of notions of eternity and immortality” (128).

The substitution of Avalon for Heaven calls for close examination. While Arthur as the ‘once and future king’ was often interpreted as a Christ-figure, according to Bryden the “Victorian interpretations of Arthur’s ‘Avalon’....[are] notably in stark contrast to the eschatological picture of hell and its torments as a final destination” (133). Unlike Christ’s descent into hell and his world-shattering resurrection on the third day, Arthur and his escort of otherworldly women embark on a tranquil journey to what might be described as a paradisiacal purgatory.

Another exceptionally interesting Victorian depiction of Avalon, particularly in light of its rather striking similarities to Burnett’s *The Secret Garden*, is the 1853 short story by Dinah Maria Mulock entitled “Avillion, or, The Happy Isles: A Fireside Fancy.” Bryden, who discusses the work at some length, describes “Avillion” as an attempt to move beyond the contrast of past and present so often evoked in medievalist literature. Instead, Mulock uses the Arthurian legend to embark on “a wider-ranging and ultimately unresolved exploration of the nature of death itself; of the deep mysteries of our being, of the unseen and immaterial world” (129).

Rather like Mary in *Secret Garden*, Mulock’s spiritually “dead” protagonist Wilfred Mayer sets out on a voyage across the sea in search of a mysterious western island “whose dwellers have all joys of humanity without its pain—all the sensuous delights of the earth, combined with the purity of heaven” (“Avillion” 13). The island thus belongs to the tradition of the garden utopia (Bryden 130) that combines the joys of the body and the soul. Although the island is equated with Avalon, its positioning as an island across the sea is also distinctly Celtic. The sojourn is not permanent; Wilfred ultimately returns to England. In the process, however, he

has gained something infinitely precious: an understanding of how to live a spiritually fulfilled and fulfilling life, in a ‘quiet spot on earth, which its inhabitants try to make as near as they can to Paradise’ (131).

The importance of the Grail in the Victorian period is also illuminating of the role the spiritually transformative quest played in the popular consciousness. As mentioned above, the age was marked with often intense crises of faith and religious tensions that, Sydney Eisen maintains, “were part of a greater struggle between the forces of conservatism and the forces of change” and “found expression in some of the best (and worst) literature of the day” (2). This literature often took for its subject “the pilgrimage of the individual soul...on the way to a new resting place, either within or outside the Christian fold” (3).

The grail answered perfectly to the needs of a literary quest. An infinitely malleable image that, in the modern sense of the word, represented “something unknown but supremely important and desirable, which, if it can be discovered, will transform the world” (Field 141), the grail became intertwined during the Victorian period with both a quest for a “promised Land” and a general cultural discourse on the nature of faith and spirituality (Bryden, 49). Notably, this quest took the form a spiritual journey “paralleled in, and shaped by, the literary journey” of the hero (55). The grail quest also generally dealt not with a society so much as with an individual, or several individuals. The reader of grail narratives thus embarks on a similarly individual quest for meaning.

In short, one of the primary observations we can take away from the goals of medievalism is the way in which these tales—tales which had often in their original conception depicted some form of idealized Celtic otherworld—were being reappropriated hundreds of years later for similar purposes. When Chandler states that “Medievalism was a philosophy

rather than a fad because it satisfied the nation's needs" (12), we hear echoes of this quest for the ideal.

It should be no surprise, then, that medievalism soon permeated children's literature, and often found its most durable form of expression in the genre. According to John Stephens and Robyn McCallum,

When compared with general literature, the literature produced for children contains a much larger proportion of retold stories. In part this is because some domains of retellings, especially folk and fairy tale, have long been considered more appropriate to child culture than to adult culture, but this relegation is not entirely because such materials might seem ingenuous and accessible to children. Rather, retold stories have important cultural functions....The existential concerns of society find concrete images and symbolic forms in traditional stories of many kinds... (3)

The rise of fairy tale and folktale retellings that grew, like the Medieval Revival, out of a renewed interest in old narratives naturally responded to the nineteenth-century search for paradise, and not only due to the fairy-tale happy ending. According to Jason Marc Harris, Romanticism motivated English writers to "create Utopian worlds in fairy tale to criticize the real one" (45). These fairy-tale societies were often populated by children (56), whose presumed innocence added to the power of their respective visions of paradise.

It should also be noted that the Victorian fairy tale's emphasis on the heroine has surface similarities with the Celtic sovereignty myth, becoming a conduit between the lost hero and happiness:

The female is not necessarily an alien, or Other; where magic is the normative condition of the fairy-tale world, it is the male who is initially alienated from both power and

knowledge—he lacks what the female and the supernatural world already has and is.

(Harris 52-3)

In Victorian fairy tales, the female character thus often finds herself in possession of the secret to happiness, and through her bond with the male character enables him to move away from the “unnatural” world of human society to the “natural” world that exists in its most potent form in the figure of the heroine.

In sum, the literary context of Victorian and the almost synonymous Edwardian children’s literature served as fertile soil for a vision of paradise, and more particularly of a paradise with strong legendary influences.

## ***Part II: Burnett, The Secret Garden, and the Influence of the Celtic Narrative***

### **Burnett in her Historical Context**

Born in Manchester, England, on November 24, 1849, Frances Hodgson Burnett would go on to become one of the most successful authors of the English language of her day, and her writing touched on a wide range of topics and genres, something that reflected her own reading habits. The United States was her adopted country, although at the height of her financial success she kept homes in both the United States and England, and much of her work demonstrates a keen interest in entrance of an outsider into a new society. While Burnett's first major success, *That Lass o' Lowrie's* (1877), a depiction of female miners in Lancashire, can be most aptly categorized as a realist novel, her later works in particular have remarkably fantastical underpinnings.

Burnett's own accounts of her early literary influences in the 1893 memoir *The One I Knew The Best of All*, indicates that the young Frances was deeply drawn to mid-Victorian historical novels and folklore, and her later novels seemingly return to these literary models in order to engage in a polemic on spirituality and belief. In her youth Burnett was an avowed lover of Sir Walter Scott, and his works seemed to have helped cultivate her romantic imagination. In *The One I Knew the Best of All*, Burnett writes, "It was Sir Walter Scott who transformed the sofa-arms to 'coal-black steeds'" (60), an imaginative transfiguration of mundane surroundings that Frances applies later in the memoir to a ruined walled garden—the garden that in many ways inspired *The Secret Garden*.

*The One I Knew The Best of All* also provides one of the earlier indicators of Burnett's move into a spiritually experimental space. Gardens appear in some form or another in almost all

of Burnett’s mature work, and they generally act as some sort of “primitive” terrestrial paradise. But while Burnett has a well-documented use of the term “Eden.” She melds the concept with “a sort of fairyland” (29) in *The One I Knew the Best of All*. However, this “Back Garden of Eden,” referring to the gardens of a manor house near to where Burnett grew up, is corrupted by “The Serpent” in the form of a manipulative child (35), a reference Burnett makes in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek manner. It is also important that this first garden, or “Eden,” is completely distinct from the garden on which the secret garden is supposedly based, which the young Frances discovers several years later. Pushing through a green door, she discovers “a Garden”—that is, just a “garden,” not a “garden of Eden”—and a desolate one at that. This second garden is also not a public space, but rather lies hidden amidst a labyrinth of weeds, high brick walls, and rubbish, a “cindery desert” transformed by factory pollution (254). Frances transforms this desert through the power of “the beloved Story” (256), imagining a castle moat and surrounding gardens, a bower covered with roses, fountains, grottoes, and enormous trees with “broad, broad branches” (257). The scene is depicted as the pivotal moment in Burnett’s development into a writer. The garden also suggests that Burnett is not creating a proto-Eden, but rather a mythic landscape in which the living and the dead coexist.

Burnett herself never composed a medieval-style work, although she comes close in parts of *The Shuttle* and *The White People* (1917);<sup>6</sup> however, her depictions of nature and gardens, nearly ubiquitous in her later works, suggest a landscape of legend in which past and present, living and dead, reality and dream are never quite separate. In studying Burnett’s works and the accounts of her childhood reading habits, we find evidence in favor of Burnett’s exposure to

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<sup>6</sup> There is an early Burnett short story, one of many silly romances the young Frances wrote to pay the bills, entitled “Ethel’s Sir Lancelot” (1868). The story itself is contemporary in subject matter, however.



Revival material, which of course demonstrates a similar conception of the British landscape. In describing the bookshelves of her childhood home, Burnett highlighted the presence of *Blackwood's Magazine*, through which she accessed the works of the Romantic poets, of Scott, and of various other authors who would contribute directly or indirectly to the burgeoning medievalist movement.<sup>7</sup> Despite her admission that, as a child, she cared very little for history after the ascension of the Hanover monarchs, Burnett displays in both her memoir and her novels a remarkably detailed grasp of British history, legendary and otherwise. In *The One I Knew the Best of All* she writes,

Druids and ancient Britons, painted blue, worshipping in their groves, and fighting with their clubs and spears against the splendid Romans in their chariots. . . . The poor, half-savage Briton, walking in wonder through the marvellous city of his captors, and saying mournfully, “how could you who have all this splendor wish to conquer and take from me such a poor country as mine”—touched her heart. Boadicea the Queen was somehow a wild, beautiful, majestic figure—Canute upon the sea-shore, commanding the sea to recede, provided the drama—and Alfred, wandering in the forest, and burning the cakes in the neat-herd's hut, was comedy and tragedy at once. (114)

*The White People* likewise conveys a moderately informed sense of medieval Scottish history, but it is *The Shuttle* that perhaps most effectively demonstrates Burnett's awareness of and interest in British history. In her male protagonist, Lord Mount Dunstan, Burnett compresses the breadth of pre-modern British history, comparing him to a “First Man, a Briton stained with woad and hung with skins” (134), to “a revival of what had burned and stirred through lives lived

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<sup>7</sup> *Blackwood's*' contents were by no means restricted to British versions of King Arthur; the 1860 article “King Arthur and His Round Table” discussed *The Mabinogion* and Chrétien's corresponding romances at length.

in a dim, almost mythical past” (183), even to an axe-wielding warrior “in a coat of mail” (143). Mount Dunstan admits that “Layers and layers and layers of centuries must be far from easy to burrow through” (221), but it is precisely these layers that so intrigue Burnett, as she sees buried beneath them a glimpse of some eternal “primeval” truth. It is through Mount Dunstan’s union with the “goddess”-like Betty that Burnett tries to envision this lost, primordial, and explicitly non-Christian paradise:

‘He is a magnificently built man, you know, and she is a magnificently built girl.

Everybody should look like that. My impression would be that Adam and Eve did, but for the fact that neither of them had any particular character. That affair of the apple was so silly. Eve has always struck me as being the kind of woman who, if she lived to-day, would run up stupid bills at her dressmakers and be afraid to tell her husband.’ (324)

Beyond what inspiration history and literature offered, Burnett’s literary fame would bring her into direct contact with some of the most distinguished members of British literary society, particularly with members of the later Medieval Revival. Burnett’s lifelong friend and editor, Richard Gilder, whom Gerzina describes as a source of new artistic and literary knowledge for Burnett (45), would likely have played a role in introducing her to the work of such writers as Matthew Arnold. Arnold, author of the Arthurian poem “Tristram and Iseult” (1852) and of the landmark *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867), in which he called “Celtic nature and its sensibility the main root out of which chivalry and romance and the glorification of the feminine ideal spring” (90), was a friend of Gilder’s and stayed at his home on several occasions. Regardless of whether Arnold and Burnett ever met, it is clear that she traveled in the same circles as members of the Revival. At one gathering organized in her honor in London in 1888, guests included William Michael Rossetti, brother of Dante Gabriel and himself a

founding member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood; Edmund Gosse, a good friend of Burnett who was married to Pre-Raphaelite painter Ellen Epps and who was a friend and editor of Arthurian poet Algernon Charles Swinburne; and George Meredith, another poet and author who produced Revival material, including the unfinished *Celt and Saxon* (1910).<sup>8</sup>

Still, it is difficult to pinpoint specific Celtic and/or Arthurian texts with which Burnett was familiar. If Burnett read *The Mabinogion* at any point in her life, it seems more likely she would have had access to the second edition, released in 1877 by Bernard Quaritch, a London publisher who published large quantities of medieval, folkloric, and Arthurian texts; to the 1902 edition by J.M. Dent's Temples Classics; or to famed folklorist and Celticist Alfred Nutt's 1904 edition, rather than to the initial 1849 edition by Lady Charlotte Guest. Quaritch's edition, taking advantage of the towering success of Tennyson's *Idylls* and its own contributions to that work, featured a far more streamlined format that omitted many of the cumbersome notes in Guest's original translation.

But the strongest argument for Burnett's familiarity with such matter might be her own work directly preceding *The Secret Garden*. Her life had been marred by sorrow in the years preceding *The Secret Garden*'s publication, the greatest tragedy being the death of her elder son, Lionel, in 1890. The impact on her work was enormous. Jen Cadwallader writes

If Burnett's work prior to 1890 may be said to be focused on social relations—in marriage, in politics, between classes, on either side of the Atlantic—her later fiction is punctuated by a focus on spiritual relations....works such as the autobiographical *The One I Knew Best of All* (1893), *In the Closed Room* (1904), *The Dawn of a To-Morrow* (1905), and *The White People* (1917) all have in common a significant preoccupation

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<sup>8</sup> Gerzina describes this gathering on page 121 of her biography, *Frances Hodgson Burnett: The Unexpected Life of the Author of The Secret Garden* (2004).

with death, with the grieving process, and with the relationship between the living and the dead. *The Secret Garden* (1911) shares these concerns. (121)

Many of Burnett’s later novels dealt extensively with death, including her children’s books; according to Cadwallader, by 1911 Burnett had come to the conclusion that death was “not just a subject appropriate to children’s literature, but necessary to it” (120). While death is not always depicted in a threatening way in these novels, her “children’s literature” becomes increasingly unorthodox by modern standards. Gerzina notes that Burnett seemed to be using “childhood fantasy...as a way of holding the difficulties of [her own] life at bay” (112), and her later fiction, whether intended for children or adults, was on some level a creative space in which Burnett dealt with anguish and loss, and envisioned ways of existing with the ever-present reality of death. It is little wonder that Burnett’s later books deal most explicitly with death and exhibit certain characteristics of the quest for Paradise.

*In the Closed Room* (1904), a short novel written for children, concerns the young, ethereal Judith, who through death—and her subsequent arrival in a paradisiacal afterlife—escapes the mundane and ugly industrial world. *In the Closed Room* is substantially more Christian in its conception of this afterlife than the works that follow it, however. Judith escapes the sweltering “hell” of the inner city and its “demonic” “Elevated Train” by ascending to the closed room in a mansion overlooking the park, represented as very near to Heaven. When Judith passes on, she does not descend from this high position, but rather sees that the rooftop garden she has been cultivating now

ended in a broad green pathway—green with thick, soft grass and moss covered with trembling white and blue bell-like flowers. Trees—fresh leaved as if spring had just awakened them—shaded it and made it look smiling fair. Great white blossoms tossed on

their branches and Judith felt that the scent in the air came from them. She forgot the city below, because it was millions and millions of miles away, and this was where it was right to be. There was no mistake. This was real. All the rest was unreal... (112-4)

Although written almost fifteen years after Lionel's death, *In the Closed Room* indicates that this loss remained strikingly fresh in Burnett's mind. Its depiction of an essentially Christian afterlife that exists in a separated, heavenly sphere, "millions and millions of miles away" from the hellish human world, points to a straining to transcend the body and become pure spirit. Burnett inverts the natural order of life, so that the "real" world is neither "real" nor truly alive and sleep is a form of waking up, while death (a deeper state of sleep) represents the truest form of living.

Despite this, other influences have clearly crept into the story. The dialectic set up between urban and rural (or near-rural), in which nature functions as paradise, is a typical Romantic construction; Judith's communing with animals reflects the influence of folktales and foregrounds Dickon and Ben Weatherstaff in *The Secret Garden*. Andrea, the phantom girl who will take Judith with her to the afterlife, might be a Pre-Raphaelite painting, with her face "like a white flower" and her "rich coppery red" that "hung heavy and long about her cheeks and shoulders" (28).

*The Dawn of To-Morrow* (1905), a disturbing novel involving depression, suicide, poverty, prostitution, abuse, and faith, is likewise a primarily Christian-based text. Again, however, new influences have begun to seep in, including Glad, the twelve-year-old personification of faith with ancient eyes, "a shock of brilliant red hair" (34), and "pure animal joy" that "leaven[s] the lump of" her companions' "humanity" (69). By the time of *The Shuttle*'s 1907 release, it is clear that Burnett is moving away from the blueprint of Christianity and attempting to get at something more "primitive." Her heroine, Betty Vanderpoel, seems

remarkably uneasy with Christian doctrine; upon hearing the actions of hero Lord Mount Dunstant described as “like the Scripture,” Betty decides to “construct for herself a less Scriptural version of what she had heard” (245).

*The Shuttle* is also one of the first works in which Burnett seems to be collapsing time in her attempt to reach an eternal truth: “There was always a First Man behind all that one saw or was told, one who was the fighter, the human thing who snatched weapons and tools from stones and trees and wielded them in the carrying out of the thought which was his possession and his strength. He was the God made human” (133). Rather than taking the medieval ages as her inspiration (151), Burnett’s reference to “woad” (133) soon makes it clear that this “First Man” is a distinctly Celtic construct, in the most ancient sense of the term. Subsequent references to druids, to pre-Christian Roman Britain, to Angles, Juts, and Saxons, and to Hengist and Horsa<sup>9</sup> reveal, like Burnett’s memoir, an astonishing detailed and chronologically accurate grasp of early British history. When compared to both the preceding *The One I Knew the Best of All* and the late Burnett novels *The White People* (1917), *The Head of the House of Coombe* (1922) and *Robin* (1922), the interest in the “primeval” that Burnett demonstrates in *the Shuttle* is revealed as a clearly consistent theme.

Despite the influence that the Revival seems to have had on her later work, Burnett was likely very aware that the movement often attracted scorn from realists and social reformers for being out of touch with modern life, and for being associated with an overly romantic view of the

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<sup>9</sup> Hengist and Horsa are closely tied to the early English Arthurian canon. First made prominent in Bede’s eighth-century *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, Nennius’s ninth-century *Historia Brittonum*, and Geoffrey of Monmouth’s immensely influential twelfth-century *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Hengist and Horsa are Saxon invaders allied with Uther Pendragon’s predecessor, Vortigern, and continue to function as Uther and Arthur’s foes in Wace’s and Lawman’s Arthurian histories, among others. They are more generally known, however, as legendary 5th-century leaders of the Anglo-Saxon invasion. Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* references them as such: “Heathen, the brood by Hengist left” (*Guinevere*).

world. She seemingly defends the Revival's aims, however, in the 1913 newspaper article "Mrs. Burnett and the Occult":

What, more than all else, seems to me indicative of vital mental life is the existence of the different cults that have sprung up, new twigs from an age-old root of thought. What though in each cult there are seemingly absurd claims made. What though these claims are later proved false, in the very proving are opened up new vistas of thought in the common mind. There is a grain of truth in all of these various teachings, and the essential thing is that there is something vital about them, a something that the people who accept such creeds believe without doubt to be true because it corresponds to the present condition of their development. ("Mrs. Burnett")

While Burnett is not explicit as to the type of "cults" she is referencing, her description of these "new twigs [sprung] from an age-old root of thought" would seem to include the new passion for ancient myths that had taken hold not only in Ireland and the United Kingdom but in the United States as well; and despite Burnett's tongue-in-cheek profession of a belief in fairies, the above statement appears to critique believers and naysayers alike. Burnett's remark that, regardless of the verity or falseness of such beliefs, "there is something vital about them" that responds to the needs of man's present condition suggests an awareness of these tales' interpretive potential.

Therefore, despite *The Secret Garden* often being called old-fashioned, a thoroughly Victorian novel composed at the dawn of modernism, I would argue that Burnett's novel is not merely rooted in an Edwardian nostalgia for the rural and the pre-industrial. Rather, with the aid of mythic material Burnett aims to create an atemporal space in which to delineate and debate what she saw as atemporal issues. Indeed, *The Secret Garden* appears to be about the creation of

ethics and belief, as she explores different tropes and literary traditions in the novel’s early chapters and then weaves a theology out of them.

We can thus sense, beneath the “Victorian” surface of *The Secret Garden*, the same anxieties that obsessed Burnett’s supposedly more modern contemporaries. One can argue that *The Secret Garden*’s status as Burnett’s masterpiece is due in large part to the subtle realism of its depiction of childhood, loss, and grief. Burnett’s own life had its share of sorrow and tragedy, which undoubtedly led to an increasing obsession with the nature of life and death. Many critics have pointed out the similarities between invalid Colin Craven and Burnett’s son, Lionel, who passed away as a teenager.<sup>10</sup> The prominence of Colin in *The Secret Garden*’s final chapters, with his cry that he will live “forever—and ever—and ever,” would thus seem an attempt to reverse the powers of death itself. The phrase “forever and ever,” which first appears in Mary’s journey across the moor in the third chapter, will be repeated and reworked throughout *The Secret Garden*, firmly placing the characters outside the normal bounds of time and instead transferring them into a more archetypal cycle of seasons (Bixler 41). The conclusion of *The Secret Garden* thereby functions as a triumph over mortality and human sorrow, as Burnett draws her characters out of death and delivers them into life. This being said, Burnett does not deliver her protagonists without first demanding considerable effort on their part. A transformation is required. Both children must change their ways not merely to be worthy of paradise, but to access it at all. Mary’s reawakening of the secret garden thus functions as the gradual revelation of an eternal paradise, one that she does not initially have the ability to perceive.

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<sup>10</sup> Quite a few characters in Burnett’s later books have been interpreted as stand-ins for Lionel.



Examining Revival influences on *The Secret Garden* requires a multi-pronged approach. The first approach, the historical and literary context of *The Secret Garden*'s composition, has already been conducted. Second, I will undertake an examination of the surface similarities between *The Secret Garden*, *Owain*, and *Le Chevalier au Lion*, not so much to theorize that *Owain* played a direct role in the creation of *The Secret Garden* as to begin the argument for the influence of Celtic otherworld imagery on Burnett's work. Third, I will delve into general Celtic motifs that *The Secret Garden* appears to make use of, the quantity of which reinforce the impression of Celtic folklore as a sustained literary influence, rather than a fleeting reference. Fourth and most significantly, I will analyze the structural similarities between the three works, and how these narrative structures are reflective of the broad tradition of Celtic otherworld quest narratives.<sup>11</sup>

There *are* surface similarities between the three tales, which may be partially coincidental, in that a similar source tradition would logically result in similar literary motifs and figures. In *Owain*, *Le Chevalier au Lion*, and *The Secret Garden*, a self-centered hero(ine) embarks on a quest into the "otherworld," a realm of magic, of new customs and duties, of exchanges, and of transformations both physical and mental. In all three works, the narrative of this "otherworld" quest is transmitted multiple times, as new characters reach or attempt to reach the realm of a mysterious female deity-like figure. In each work there is a servant figure (or

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<sup>11</sup> In beginning an analysis of the structural attributes of *Owain* and *Le Chevalier au Lion*, the challenges of this analysis must briefly be addressed. The connection between the two tales has been documented from the point of *Owain*'s translation by Guest, who references Chrétien in her notes. There is an increasing consensus in modern scholarship that *Owain* was likely inspired by Chrétien, but that Chrétien himself was drawing on Celtic folklore, which he used as a framework for a psychological exploration of duty, desire, and glory. This framework may help explain the tale's hypothetical appeal to a medieval Welsh audience or author, but the documented relationship between the two texts also situates the narrative as one extremely open to reinterpretation.

several servant figures) who serve as important guides, advisors, and allies in negotiating the rules of this new world, although servant-figures are by no means the only guides for the new interloper. In each work there is a theme of madness, in which a character lost in the wilderness is called back to life and sanity through the interventions of otherworldly figures; in this context, madness operates as a type of annihilation that prefaces rebirth.

In each work there also exists a central,<sup>12</sup> implicitly sacred location that heals this madness or illness and bears the promise of a happy ending. In *Owain* and *Le Chevalier au Lion* this location is a valley surrounding a tree and a magical spring at its base; on a more fundamental level, however, the sacred location is actually the Lady of the Fountain, who acts as the living embodiment of the spring. In *The Secret Garden* the location is, of course, the eponymous garden, but Mary likewise acts as a human expression of the garden’s revival, and slowly takes on its power as a revitalizing force.

In the presence of these sacred sites, an inner transformation occurs that is visually echoed by the site’s “magical” alteration from a place of death or destruction to one of life and joy. By the tales’ conclusions, this “otherworld” has become a home, and the discoveries and interior alterations gained there not only better the otherworld, but better the ordinary one as well. Such amelioration of the ordinary world is not achieved from the alteration of the sacred site, however, but through the effort of altering it, which takes on a physical and mental dimension beyond the bounds of the site itself. In *Owain* and *Le Chevalier au Lion* this dimension takes the form of a series of feats that often involve the restoration of land to its rightful owner; in *The Secret Garden*, Mary’s quest outside the garden itself involves the rejuvenation of the sickly, temperamental Colin, preparing him and by extension his grief-

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<sup>12</sup> See Eliade’s theory of the “Centre,” a conceptual or spiritual, not geographical center in which “one has direct contact with the sacred” and which thus becomes sacred itself (39).

stricken widowed father, to reassume their positions as “Master Craven” and “Master Colin” of Misselthwaite Manor. Thus, while *The Secret Garden* in particular features a reclaiming of the self effectuated through the land, these stories equally concern the (re)claiming of land as a means of embracing societal identity.

There initially appears to be a significant dissimilarity in the structures of the novels’ otherworld quests, in that Owain/Yvain undertake a double quest, once for personal glory and again, after utter failure, in a spirit of loyalty and selflessness, which contrasts to Mary’s single, painstaking journey. Yet this apparent difference becomes yet another corresponding structure upon closer inspection. Mary initiates this initial quest with no thought of pleasing anyone but herself, and insists that she must keep the garden secret or she “should die” (89). It is only after coming across her double, Colin, that Mary learns to make the journey to the garden in a spirit of generosity. Colin’s first journey thus functions as Mary’s second, and his coming alive parallels Mary’s acceptance of her role as a nurturing figure who can benefit all of society.

Beyond these surface similarities are deeper, more intriguing ones that point to a Celtic, or at least a “pagan” heritage in *The Secret Garden* never explicitly named. *The Secret Garden* can be summarized as many things, but it perhaps most simply constitutes the development of a new belief system—a belief system tied to nature, to the correlation between body and mind, and to the transmission of legend as offering a means of temporarily escaping and/or radically bettering contemporary society. *Owain* and *Le Chevalier au Lion* similarly concern the establishment of moral or chivalric codes, so that the narrative acts as a polemic on medieval behavior in which individual desires must be reconciled with the demands of feudal society. Yet this reconciliation has been cast in terms of a quest for paradise, so that fully assuming one’s role in society becomes its own reward.

#### 43 Influence of the “Celtic” Revival in *The Secret Garden*

Beyond similar plot elements, however, the construction of the quest narrative at work in all three works exhibits striking similarities to both medieval romance narratives and to a phenomenon of Celtic sacred sites called “enclosure,” both of which will be discussed in more detail below. Perhaps not coincidentally, the two often feature episodic, cyclical movement that gradually approaches the heart of the sacred; *Owain*, *Le Chevalier au Lion*, and *The Secret Garden* reproduce this movement both narratively and physically, in the movement of their characters. Rituals and circular structures abound in *The Secret Garden*, which the characters echo and enact by physically circling sacred spaces; *Owain* and *Le Chevalier au Lion* likewise seem structured by repetitive “ritual,” as Kynon, Owain, King Arthur, and Owain again make the preparatory journey to the blissful otherworld, only to lose it because they are not yet fully worthy of it. By their conclusions, the otherworld seems to have become a place of peace and stability, effectuated and paralleled by the union of the hero and the goddess-figure. The world is, at least for a while, locked firmly in the stage of joyous peace. Yet the conclusion of *The Secret Garden*, while it might provoke criticism for its unabashedly utopian feel, hints at just how fleeting this “promise of paradise,” the reward of immense effort and preparation, may be.

#### **Review of Literature**

The question of what *The Secret Garden* “means” has given rise to an impressive array of often contradictory responses over the past century. Critics have approached it in relation to colonialism, feminism, class, power struggle, the late-Victorian passion for fairies, Christian, New Age, and pagan theology, Classical archetypes, and Romantic and pastoral imagery. It has been analyzed as a Christian allegory, as a modern Persephone myth, as a children’s *Jane Eyre*,

as a medieval-style exemplum, as a fairy tale, and as a strikingly realistic depiction of child psychology.

The only point on which most scholars seem to be in accord relates to *The Secret Garden*'s utopian themes—and even then, no one can quite agree on what kind of utopian myth Burnett is drawing on. Jerry Phillips claims that “[s]o many themes flow into Misselthwaite Manor's garden that its meaning is textually overdetermined.” The central metaphor of the garden, Philips argues, corresponds to distinct discourses that within the confines of the garden are forced into “conversation; competition; and, possibly, contradiction—a subversion of the comfortable Utopianism of the text” (176). Philips identifies three specific discourses at work: child psychology, Romanticism, and Oriental mysticism.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Phillips’s conception of the secret garden as a utopian space encompassing multiple traditions and forcing them into contention or coexistence can be extended to discourses beyond the three that he identifies. *The Secret Garden*'s confrontation of Classical, Indian, Christian, Celtic, and fairy-tale motifs with modern spirituality and science confirms the secret garden as an example of Milad Doueih's “neutral place,” within whose bounds Burnett and her readers explore life, death, and immortality.

The candidates for *The Secret Garden*'s influences, both conscious and subconscious, are evidently vast, and not solely due to the mysterious atmosphere that infuses the novel. As

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<sup>13</sup> Phillips is by no means the only commentator to attempt to break down the different discourses at play in *The Secret Garden*; Gerzina calls the novel a mixture of “Christianity, nature worship, paganism, and science” (*Annotated* xxv) with three specific overlapping belief systems: traditional Anglo Christianity, “New Age” thinking related to self-healing and positive thinking, and “a kind of paganism” related to nineteenth-century Romanticism (xxvii). Peter Hunt highlights gothic romance and feminism, while Phyllis Bixler identifies the fairy tale, the exemplum, and mythic and pastoral traditions, and calls the book a “hybrid combination of realist fiction with myth and folk tale” (42).

Gerzina note, “One of the greatest mysteries about the writing of *The Secret Garden* is that there is so little record of it” (“Essay” 180). The most extensive piece of authorial commentary on record is a letter written on October 9, 1910, from Burnett to her English publisher William Heinemann. In the paragraph Burnett devotes to the upcoming publication of *The Secret Garden*, the “potpourri” of influences that commentators have remarked upon is evident:

Ella Hepworth Dixon though it was a sort of childrens [sic] Jane Eyre....It contains also a sort of Faun who charms wild creatures and tame ones and there is a moorland cottage woman who is a sort of Madonna with twelve children—a warm bosomed, sane, wise, simple Mother thing. You only see her for a moment at the end of the book but she is the chief figure in it really. “Mother” baking and washing in her cottage on the Yorkshire Moor makes all things happen merely because she is....And in the hidden garden—which I adore—many strange and lovely quite natural human things happen. Oh, I know quite well that it is one of my best finds. (qtd. in “Essay” 181-82)

Referencing gothic romance, Greek gods, Madonnas, and “many strange and lovely quite natural human things,” Burnett seemingly confirms *The Secret Garden* as a work of remarkable multiplicity, in keeping with what she called the “subconscious” quality of her inspirations. Especially in her best work, Burnett claimed, “the memory of all things seen, heard and experienced in this life and (granting such possibility) in all previous lives” came together (“Mrs. Burnett”). In *The Secret Garden* it seems that a multitude of such “memories” have suddenly fused, forming not, as Phillips claims, “a richly confused text” (187) but rather one that uses this richness as a means of accessing something essentially human. The suggestion that “quite natural human things” are “strange” and must be “[found]” is particularly illuminating in this regard, in

its implication that humanity has become estranged from its natural state and must be rediscovered in “the hidden garden.”

The variety of scholarly literature that *The Secret Garden* has inspired reaffirms the richness of Burnett’s most celebrated novel as an individual text and as a site of intertextual discourse. Yet despite Burnett’s admission of the work’s diverse influences, utopian discussions of *The Secret Garden* have often centered on its Christian symbolism,<sup>14</sup> combined with a prevalent but vague and undeveloped nod to its “pagan” elements and mythic and fairy-tale motifs. There have been several attempts to draw these elements into a sustained literary analysis, but critical analyses of the non-Christian elements of *The Secret Garden* often demonstrate at least a partial misunderstanding of the text.

For instance, Dennis Butts has claimed that *The Secret Garden* is in “the very familiar pattern of a *Cinderella*-type narrative,” because of the transition from Mary’s initial neglect and loneliness to her ultimate triumph and fulfillment (xii). But while “fairy-tale motifs often lie not too far below its story surface” (Bixler 35),<sup>15</sup> *The Secret Garden* bears only a tenuous and superficial relationship to *Cinderella*, a narrative form evidently employed in Burnett’s earlier *Little Lord Fauntleroy* and *A Little Princess*. It should also be noted that while Burnett references fairy tales, their function in the text appears to be as an indicator of how the child protagonists interpret their lives through the framework of literature and oral tales, not a narrative structure that *The Secret Garden* copies. Furthermore, fairy-tales are distinct of “fairies,” a concept also employed in *The Secret Garden* that in the nineteenth century was often equated with folklore

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<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of Christian allegory in *The Secret Garden*, see Gerzina’s Annotated and Norton Critical editions and Bixler.

<sup>15</sup> Fairy-tale references in *The Secret Garden* include Charles Perrault’s *Riquet à la Houppe*, the Grimm Brothers’ *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Rose Red and Snow White*, and *Jack and the Beanstalk* (Gerzina Annotated) and *Sleeping Beauty*.

and mythology. Gerzina claims that Burnett used “fairies” as a broader term for “the imagination, daydreams, pleasant desires, and hopes” (*Norton* 112), but *The Secret Garden*’s use of the word goes well beyond “daydreams” and “pleasant desires”; there is something deadly serious about the novel’s theological polemic.

Tapping into the gravity of *The Secret Garden*’s mythological influences, Holly Blackwood interprets Mary as a Persephone figure who sets out “to rejuvenate the earth and civil order” (5). Yet while Blackwood provides wonderful insight into the mythic attributes of the novel and its characters, her interpretation occasionally strains logic. The Persephone myth features an *underworld* from which the passive goddess must be rescued and returned to the ordinary world by her active mother. This is in contrast to an *otherworld*, a realm that is both beyond the ordinary and yet through the efforts of the outsider-heroine ultimately becomes the site of transformation. Persephone in a sense loses her divinity in her unwilling passage to Hades, in that she is unable to fulfill her function as a fertility goddess, and she must leave the underworld in order to regain that function. Passage to Hades thus signifies the loss of the fertility figure and by extension the death of the world. Furthermore, the myth concludes with permanent division: the alternating separation of mother and daughter and husband and wife, which successively impoverishes the human world and the underworld. Like the Eden myth, the Persephone myth envisions a “fallen” present that will never fully recapture the ideal of the past. *The Secret Garden*, however, positions what Blackwood labels an “underworld” as a sacred, timeless, and pastoral space in which the living and the dead coexist—that is, as an otherworld.

M. Sarah Smedmen does not compare *The Secret Garden* to a specific narrative paradigm, but in “Springs of Hope: Recovery of Primordial Time in ‘Mythic’ Novels of Young Readers” (1988) she does take a comparative mythological approach by connecting the novel to



Eliade's theories of sacred time—ahistorical time, that is, in which Eliade situates the origin of myths—and sacred space (also called the “Centre”) in which the ideal is manifest. The article focuses primarily on sacred time, in which through repetition of primordial rituals, as performed in myths by god-figures, one can “live, momentarily, beyond the chronological” present (93). Smedman argues that children's books inspire hope, “at least partially, because they create a time-out-of-time, transcending the instant” and that *The Secret Garden* features a notable recovery of Eliade's mythic time (94). Smedman identifies Mary and Colin's naming of the sacred power “Magic,” rather than “God,” as an awareness of life's “transcendent and creative” possibilities (97).

Smedman's approach, while an admirable attempt to connect *The Secret Garden* to a broader myth-based tradition, is cursory in nature, focusing more on the phenomenon of sacred time in a variety of realist children's novels rather than on the specific mythic or theological features at play in each work; it also problematically builds on theories that were neither available to Burnett, nor hold the authoritative weight they once did. Moreover, Burnett may be employing a variety of narratives in *The Secret Garden*, but they appear to play with specific narratives, including Victorian medievalist texts and aesthetics and Celtic folklore, but also Christian imagery and Hindu folklore, rather than the monomythic approach of Eliade and later Campbell. It is through the discourse and occasional fusion of distinct narratives that Burnett develops a personal exploration of spirituality.

The Revival is thus one of many influences on which Burnett is drawing. However, the significance of this influence is potentially quite expansive, as I will attempt to show. Close examination of *The Secret Garden* in conjunction with two medieval Arthurian texts, one Welsh and one French, reveals how Victorian medievalism and the Celtic and Arthurian revival do not

merely illuminate the novel’s utopian themes; they potentially provide the structural base upon which *The Secret Garden* has been constructed.

This said, many of the specific motifs that I will highlight could be interpreted in numerous ways, given that the general category of “myth” encompasses a wide variety of traditions that share significant overlaps. These do not, in most cases, correspond with Christian Paradise narratives, but when channeled through a different lens of interpretation, they offer themselves up for various myth-based interpretations, such as Blackwood’s Persephone theory. I will therefore explore how these elements, integral to understanding the construction of paradise in *The Secret Garden*, are often filtered through Burnett’s all-encompassing use of the word “fairy.” As was previously mentioned, the term “fairy” is particularly illuminating of a “Celtic” heritage, given that fairy-tales, folklore, and Celtic myth were understood as being more or less the same thing by the nineteenth-century public.<sup>16</sup>

Arguing for the influence of the Medieval Revival on *The Secret Garden* is a more straightforward task than arguing for the influence of Celtic myth. Due to analyses comparing *The Secret Garden* with *Jane Eyre* and, less directly, with *Wuthering Heights*, there exists extensive documentation of the gothic elements at play in Burnett’s work. Underpinning and supporting this veneer of influences, however, lies a plot and narrative structure strikingly reminiscent of medieval romances and the overlapping genre of Celtic otherworld quests. As I

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<sup>16</sup> T.C. Crofton, one of the first major figures in British and Irish folklore, entitled a section of his *Fairy Legends and Traditions* series “The Mabinogion and Fairy Legends of Wales” (1828). The American Consul for Wales, Wirt Sikes, wrote *British Goblins: Welsh Folk-lore, Fairy Mythology, Legends and Traditions* (1880), in which he claims that “In Arthur’s day and before that, the people of South Wales regarded North Wales as pre-eminently the land of faerie,” using the 1877 edition of the *Mabinogion* as a primary part of his source material. *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* (1911) by W.Y. Evans-Wentz discusses the Celtic Otherworld at length in relation to “fairy inhabitants.” In all three instances one can observe a lack of distinction between the different levels of myth and folklore.

will attempt to demonstrate, in *The Secret Garden* Burnett eschews the more ordered, structured framework of nineteenth-century literature for a narrative style that both evokes the medieval Interlace technique and corresponds somewhat surprisingly to the modernists' early twentieth-century innovation of Victorian narrative rules.

### ***Part III: Reading The Secret Garden***

#### ***The Secret Garden and the Veneer of Mythic and Medievalist Influences***

By the time of *The Secret Garden*'s publication, the medieval and Arthurian segments of the Revival had more or less petered out.<sup>17</sup> This does not mean that Burnett primarily makes use of later manifestations of the Revival, however; rather, she seems to situate her novel within the broad historical context of the Revival while creating a vague, somewhat atemporal atmosphere that adds to what Smedmen would call the novel's construction of sacred time. A reference to the “Prince Consort” in the chapter “I Shall Live Forever—And Ever—And Ever!” seemingly implies that the story takes place before 1861, the year of Prince Albert's death (Gerzina, *Annotated* 181), at which point the Medieval Revival and Arthurian retellings were still an important cultural movement, and Burnett's depiction of the moor as untouched by drainage projects likewise points to an older era (Gerzina, *Annotated*). Yet various other details evoke a more contemporary setting, at which point Celtic myth was increasingly replacing medievalism as a point of interest.

As if seeking to encapsulate a century of industrialization—and a century of reactions to industrialization—in a story taking place over the course of a year, this non-choice of time period positions the England of *The Secret Garden* as a land capable of transitioning and transforming before our eyes. When Mary steps off the boat from India after her parents die in the cholera epidemic, she is suddenly surrounded by the buses, cabs, and people of a modern city. Yet as she

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<sup>17</sup> As Alfred Nutt correctly pointed out in 1899, however, “the romantic revival which culminated in Keats and Coleridge, [and] was continued by Tennyson, the Rossettis [Dante Gabriel and William Michael], and Mr. [Algernon Charles] Swinburne...received a fresh accession of life alike from Ireland and from Gaelic Scotland” toward the end of the nineteenth century (“The Fairy” 1)

and her uncle's housekeeper Mrs. Medlock travel by train, and then by carriage, into the heart of rural Yorkshire, she appears to be slipping back through time, a process that culminates with her arrival at an immense medieval manor house on the edge of the moor:

The entrance door was a huge one made of massive, curiously shaped panels of oak studded with big iron nails and bound with great iron bars. It opened into an enormous hall, which was so dimly lighted that the faces in the portraits on the walls and the figures in the suits of armor made Mary feel that she did not want to look at them. As she stood on the stone floor she looked a very small, odd little black figure, and she felt as small and lost and odd as she looked. (22)

Gerzina remarks on not merely the great age of this medieval hall but also on the "sense of its being stuck in a dead past" (*Annotated* 22), which reinforces the previous sense of a slippage backward through time. Mary's sense of being lost is thus intensified by her surroundings, as she experiences a profound geographic and temporal dislocation.

The gothic style of the entrance hall is echoed in Mary's bedroom, which is hung with tapestries of a medieval hunting scene with "fantastically dressed people under the trees and in the distance... a glimpse of the turrets of a castle." Mary's observation that she feels as if she is in the forest with them (23), reinforces the impression that she has walked into a world of legend. The stories Mary hears concerning the ancient estate will soon awaken her imagination to the possibilities of that her own narrative can take.

Stories play a vital role in the gradual transformation of both Mary and her cousin Colin. Both children are trapped by circumstance, by character, and by a series of locked and hidden rooms. For each child, stories in a written, but most particularly an oral form serve as the first entity that dissolves the estate's actual and symbolic barriers. The children's relationship will be

structured by storytelling from their very first encounter, when Mary recounts to Colin the narrative of the lost secret garden and then sings him to sleep with “a very low chanting song in Hindustani” (119).<sup>18</sup>

From the beginning of their relationship, then, Mary acts as the intermediary between Colin and the external world, either directly outside his windows or across the sea in India. In return, Colin shares his wealth of books and illustrations with Mary, thereby broadening her *British* education. It is notable that while Mary is most connected to oral storytelling, Colin is instead connected to books and reading, an essentially solitary activity but also one more associated with so-called advanced cultures. When Colin first experiences spring, he says, “It sounded as if things were coming with a great procession and big bursts and wafts of music. I’ve a picture like it in one of my books—crowds of lovely people and children with garlands and branches with blossoms on them, everyone laughing and dancing and crowding and playing on pipes” (182). Colin is thus interpreting the natural world through the framework of literature and art, just as Mary does with tales. His book-based description of springtime joy evokes a medieval-style scene, perhaps even an Arthurian court, although no more details are provided as to the picture’s provenance.

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<sup>18</sup> Phillips argues very convincingly for the importance of India in Mary’s new life in Yorkshire, although he takes a colonial approach to the novel. He therefore equates Mary’s colonizing lessons gained in India with her and Colin’s later “colonization” of the Yorkshire landscape and denizens. I would argue that Indian folk-tale narratives—and Mary’s experiences in India in general—also provide an initial framework through which she and then Colin interpret the “otherworld” of the Yorkshire countryside. Mary’s habit of comparing/contrasting her surroundings to India is increasingly fused over the course of the novel with a growing education in British narratives, furnished by Colin and the Sowerbys. India is thus one of many “discourses” at work in *The Secret Garden*. However, while the significance of India to Mary’s understanding of Yorkshire is a central issue and will be touched on in this essay, it falls somewhat outside its scope. India is also employed as a means to an end, rather than the end itself; it plays the role of an initial, insufficient otherworld, the setting of Mary’s failed attempts at accessing paradise. It prefaces but is separate from the otherworld of the secret garden.

In contrast to Colin's literacy, which acts as evidence of his role in contemporary British society, Mary, having rejected all attempts to teach or civilize her, is literate only because she "really want[ed] to know how to read books" (3); she qualifies this by adding that she only "liked...fairy-story books" (79). When Mary learns that Misselthwaite Manor has an immense library, "she [does] not care very much" about the books themselves (49). Instead, the idea of books awakens Mary's imagination, reminding her of the manor's hundred locked rooms. These rooms thus morph into a series of stories for Mary to explore. As she wanders through the long-deserted sites of previous lives and past portraits of nameless ancestors, Mary is attempting to enter into the *physical* world of the tales and to work some sort of life back into them. The secret garden, which is explicitly associated with these locked rooms (111), acts as the finest and most glorious tale, which Mary must through her gardening efforts retrieve for the modern world. Mary's ability to imagine the garden as it once was and as it might become makes her the inheritor of its legend, which she must reinterpret for the manor's lifeless residents. Yet it is Mary's gradual subsuming into the legend that grants her immense power.

While oral tales consistently fascinate Mary throughout *The Secret Garden*, and while, as Phyllis Bixler notes, Mary "implicitly interprets her experience as if she were living in a folk tale" (35), the initial chapters chart Mary's hoarding of tales gained from other characters, rather than telling them herself. Mary constantly seeks out tales—not from books, as Colin does, but from everyone around her. In the novel's opening scene, Mary finds herself within earshot of her mother and a young British officer. Despite having no emotional connection to the unloving Mrs. Lennox, Mary listens attentively to their conversation. As Mary learns that her Indian nursemaid has died from the cholera, she thinks that perhaps her new Ayah "would know some new stories. Mary had been rather tired of the old ones" (5). It seems, then, that the old (Indian) narratives

have thus proven insufficient as models for living; Mary must search for new (British) ones in Yorkshire.

Mary’s hunger for tales of her new home also mimics the actual hunger that she experiences as she begins to truly live; theoretical hunger for the abstract thus becomes physical hunger for the concrete. Mary’s hunger indicates that, as she slowly pieces together stories of her dead aunt, the mysterious garden, and the wonderful Sowerby family, she has not only developed a formula for fulfillment and agency; she is actually entering into these narratives and altering their trajectory. Mary thus progressed from recipient to recounter to producer and protagonist of this oral tradition.

What literary tropes, then, is Mary reenacting in *The Secret Garden*, and how—and to what end—does she ultimately blend these into a new narrative? If we examine the structure of the novel, *The Secret Garden* seems first and foremost a collection of transitions from death into a space of immortality. India, where *The Secret Garden* begins, is a land of death stricken by the cholera epidemic, although it furnishes Mary with her earliest sense of narrative possibilities. “Magic,” for example, is initially a notion handed down from Mary’s Ayah in the form of Indian fairy tales, causing Colin to declare, ““Magic is a great thing and scarcely anyone knows anything about it except a few people in old books—and Mary a little, because she was born in India” (66).

Yet Mary’s conception of Indian magic seems piecemeal at best, the product of a colonizer’s experience, which can never truly know the colonized. While intrigued by Indian folklore, Mary rather takes this folklore as a foundation on which to base her own experimental construction of “Magic.” “Magic” as it is used by Mary and Colin begins as a vague term for all that is mysterious, otherworldly, or miraculous; it is the power of the unseen “magicians,”



“fairies,” or “magic king[s] and queen[s]” (162; 204; 187), forces with which the garden and its human representatives—Mrs. Sowerby, Liliias Craven, Dickon, Ben Weatherstaff, and ultimately Mary herself—are apparently aligned. Mary and Colin’s early conception of the term thus associates magic with wonder and kindness, in which both children are severely lacking: “Magic....makes [Mrs. Sowerby] think of ways to do things—nice things. She is a Magic person” (222).

Over the course of the book, however, magic alters from a vague idea giving a mythic veneer to the landscape into an omnipresent force that infuses the barren land and its inhabitants with life and spiritual enlightenment. By the novel’s end, “magic” has become “Magic,” a far more intricate concept linked to ritual, to worship, and to the seasons—all enacted and rooted in the miraculous garden—whose contours and limits the children slowly develop. The very name “Magic” is something of a borrowed term, derived from Mary’s Indian folktales and frequent references to fairy realms and far-off kingdoms. Yet as Mary and Colin bypass fairy-tales as insufficient explicators of the “Magic” they observe in their daily interactions with the garden, it is revealed as something far older, more profound, and more universal than the children ever imagined:

‘I never knowed it by that name [Magic] but what does th’ name matter? I warrant they call it a different name i’ France an’ a different one i’ Germany. Th’ same thing as set th’ seeds swellin’ an’ th’ sun shinin’ made thee a well lad an’ it’s th’ Good Thing....The Big Good Thing doesn’t stop to worrit, bless thee. It goes on makin’ worlds by th’ million—worlds like us....Th’ Magic listened when tha’ sung th’ Doxology. It would ha’ listened to anything tha’d sung. It was th’ joy that matters.’ (242)

This dismissal of Christian theology, voiced here by the “Magic” Mrs. Sowerby, as the sole path to joy, perhaps most effectively argues against a straightforward Christian allegorical approach to *The Secret Garden*, and like Ben Weatherstaff’s doubt that Lilies is in “Heaven,” despite “what the parson says” (82) Mrs. Sowerby’s comment that Lilies “couldna’ keep out” of the garden (243) denounces the conception of paradise as a distant realm.

The dismissal of simple allegory warrants examination, for beyond charting the gradual shift from isolation and misery to joy, on a deeper level *The Secret Garden* concerns the *writing* of a new myth drawing on but not tied to any specific tradition. This theme can be observed in much of Burnett’s twentieth-century work. Yet in contrast to such novels as *The Shuttle* or *The Head of the House of Coombe*, which more explicitly reference legends and legendary figures, *The Secret Garden* seems particularly vague in its allusions to mythic tradition. This does not entail a lesser presence of various mythologies in *The Secret Garden*; it suggests that Burnett, while making use of an evidently well-informed sense of mythology, is rather employing the blueprint of preexisting myth to write one of her own.

The opening of *The Secret Garden* supports the impression of a myth coming into being. During the cholera epidemic, Mary’s survival seemingly owes nothing to physical fortitude. Mary, who has from the moment of her birth been dismissed, hidden, marginalized, and ultimately forgotten by her parents and by British Indian society, is never at risk of dying because she does not in a sense fully exist. Mary’s first attempts at building a garden occur as “[s]he was actually left alone” amidst the onset of the epidemic (3), but the construction of a garden functions not merely as a rejection of death, but as an attempt at *creation*, the creation of the self as well as of a physical space. In gardening, Mary participates in the writing of her own myth.

Burnett emphasizes, however, that at this point in the novel Mary is merely “pretending[ing]” to garden (3). She sticks red hibiscus blossoms into earth, as if constructing a mirage of life in the desert, but the blossoms act as foreign transplants, with no roots to put down in the arid soil. After her parents’ deaths, as she waits to travel to England, Mary tries again, “making heaps of earth and paths for a garden” while other children mockingly sing, “Mistress Mary, quite contrary/How does your garden grow?” (10). But the narrator has already told us that the only thing that can grow in India is Mary’s anger (3).

This anger is compounded when Mary wakes from a wine-induced slumber to a ghost house, its residents dead or fled to the hills, whose only living entity is a “harmless” little snake (7). The appearance of the snake marks the beginning of the myth, and its association with Mary quickly places Mary outside a Christian paradise allegory, indicating that, for all the novel’s surface similarities to the Eden narrative, Burnett’s focus is much broader. If a Christian Eden is ever haunted by the possibility of temptation, in which the serpent introduces death into paradise, here the snake offers a form of guidance *out* of the land of death; Mary, hearing the snake rustling near her feet, is not frightened and remarks that “he seemed in a hurry to get out of the room.” Mary, too, is in a hurry to get out of the room, and immediately following the snake’s exodus she is discovered and removed from the empty house.

The association of Mary and the snake also confirms *The Secret Garden* as a documentation of transformation and metamorphosis that finds physical expression in nature and animal familiars, common features of medievalist and fairy-tale art and literature. The snake, with its magical ability to shed its skin and be “reborn,” has long been associated with Celtic mother-goddess figures due to their shared links to life, death, and rebirth (Green, *Dictionary* 175). At Misselthwaite Manor, the robin who lives in the secret garden will act as yet another

“familiar,” guiding Mary’s journey and guarding her during her spiritual rebirth. Birds, the animal perhaps most commonly associated with both the Happy Otherworld of Celtic lore and with Celtic mother-goddess figures, feature prominently throughout *The Secret Garden*, and they likewise act as heralds to the realm of the Countess of the Fountain in *Owain* and *Le Chevalier au Lion*; in *Owain*, the titular hero is further associated in the text’s conclusion with ravens.

Mary, who will take on many aspects of a mother- or fertility-goddess figure over the course of the novel, exhibits an astonishing capacity to cross boundaries and to enable similar transcendence by others, and her associations with the snake and the robin underscore her power to open pathways for those around her as well as herself. Both birds and snakes possess metamorphic or boundary-crossing qualities that correspond closely with mother-goddesses’ ability to “open the gates of heaven, or to lead their suppliants through the barrier between death and the afterlife” (Green, *Dictionary* 128). As Mary “reawakens” the secret garden, Misselthwaite Manor, and all its inhabitants, she transitions from a child locked away from life and love to a figure powerful enough to open not only the lost walled garden but also the hundred “shut up and locked” rooms of her uncle’s estate (16).

It can be argued that what I have labeled *The Secret Garden*’s mythic elements may be more indicative of fairy-tale influence. Certain aspects of Misselthwaite Manor certainly do evoke a *Sleeping Beauty*-type story, with this medieval “castle” of half-sleeping residents that slowly begin to awaken; and when Mary first enters the secret garden, the first literary association she forms relates to the secret gardens of fairy stories, whose residents sleep for a hundred years. “[S]he...thought [this] must be rather stupid” (79), however, which would seem a rejection of this story as a pattern *The Secret Garden* wishes to emulate. Rather than a slumbering fairy-tale kingdom, Misselthwaite Manor, surrounded by an “endless, dull, purplish”

moor and renewed only through the intervention of the outsider hero(ine), can be more effectively connected to one of the most well-known Celto-Arthurian motifs: the Wasteland.

The Wasteland inspired a significant number of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century authors, including Nutt (*On the Legend of the Holy Grail, with Especial Reference to the Hypothesis of its Celtic Origin* [1888]), which as its title explains argues for the Celtic origin of the Grail; Jessie Weston (*From Ritual to Romance* [1920]), who interprets the Grail legend as the remnant of an ancient fertility myth, although not necessarily of Celtic origin; and T.S. Eliot, whose *The Waste Land* (1922) extensively references Weston in the footnotes. The Wasteland proved an extremely fertile and flexible symbol for those exploring concepts of faith, meaning, order, or the lack of all three, as was increasingly the case amidst British *fin-de-siècle* malaise and the ensuing brutality of the First World War.

The significance of the Wasteland in relation to *The Secret Garden* lies in the connection the novel draws between the physical incapacitation of its ruler and the corresponding devastation of the land. Sacral kingship, in which the king and/or the sovereignty goddess he weds are fundamentally bound up with the fortunes of the land, plays a major role in much of mythic Irish and, to a lesser extent, Welsh literature and the early Arthurian canon.<sup>19</sup> The fact that the British moors, which could be both wetlands and dry heaths, were during the nineteenth century “seen as wasted or useless land” (Gerzina, *Annotated* 17) supports Burnett’s employment of the moor as a *terre gaste*. The Dolorous Stroke that fells the Fisher King thus corresponds to the fatal fall of Lilius Craven, which serves to mentally and physically cripple her grieving husband and her infant son Colin. As Mary begins to effect a radical transformation of Misselthwaite Manor, however, the moor is revealed to be a realm of astonishing activity, for as

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<sup>19</sup> It is generally agreed that *Y Tair Rhamant* are at their most fundamental level sovereignty myths.

the garden comes back to life, so, too, does the land that surrounds it. When the wound suffered in the garden, as symbolized by the broken tree limb from which Lilies fell, is covered over with climbing roses, the land is correspondingly renewed. Only after Mary, the outsider, has revived first the son and then the father can the two “masters” of the house reoccupy a prominent position in society.<sup>20</sup>

The second major Celtic quest narrative that *The Secret Garden* appears to make use of, and which overlaps somewhat with the image of the Wasteland, is the general tradition of otherworld journeys, particularly the *echtrae* and *immrama*, in which the hero sometimes unintentionally voyages to (a series of) paradisiacal western islands.<sup>21</sup> The Celtic otherworld tradition would seem to concentrate in large part on the journey itself, as the traveler cuts across boundaries of time and space to a fluid and ambiguous realm taking the form of “magic” islands in the west or “hollow hills” (Nutt, *The Happy* 229), or merely a “magical, idealized mirror image of the human world” (Green, *Dictionary* 167). Notably, transition between realms often requires the presence of boundary-crossing features, particularly water (167). Water, which as in most religions occupies a central role in Celtic sacred space, symbolizes both the connection between the human world and the otherworld, and the transformative process undergone in the transition between these realms. The water features of Celtic myth, whether in the form of a sea, a lake, or a magical fountain, therefore do not operate as mere symbols of transformation; they

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<sup>20</sup> One characteristic of the Grail legend is the occasional presence of multiple wounded sovereigns, often fathers and sons.

<sup>21</sup> One of the most famous examples of this tradition, *Immram Brain*, was rewritten as *The Voyage of St. Brendan*, a narrative with which Burnett would have in all likelihood had some familiarity. Albrecht Classen describes *The Voyage of St. Brendan* as a tale in which “Spiritual and material features intertwine and confirm how much rural space and divine space are part and parcel of God’s creation” (*Rural Space* 32).

serve also as the medium of transition between realms, and additionally as the obstacle to that transition. Water, in a sense, structures the hero's journey.

In *The Secret Garden*, England is a land deeply connected with water on all levels. It is too simple, however, to portray India as the land of death and desiccation and England as the land of life and water. England has also witnessed death and illness; and India, prior to the onset of the cholera epidemic, is far more "alive" than Misselthwaite Manor, with its dead mistress, its locked and lost garden, and its half-dead master and heir. Mary's initial transition is from one land of death to another, because Mary *herself* is not alive. The state of the surrounding world reflects Mary's internal state, and will experience a metamorphosis mirroring her own. The presence of water thus posits rural England as a land conducive to transformation but requiring intervention, while India, another "wasteland," remains a land of stasis.

While Mary, like her cousin Colin, is a vivid example of a damaged child, Burnett balances instances of psychological realism with varying degrees of magical or mythic abilities. For example, the associations between Mary and her animal familiars, and between Mary and the land, indicate her role as a fertility/mother goddess, a role she shares with Mrs. Sowerby and the ghostly Lilies Craven. Dickon Sowerby, the most overtly mythicized character, is also intimately connected with the tradition of pagan chthonic deities, although critics most often connect him with the Greek Pan. Yet Colin, Mr. Craven, and Ben Weatherstaff also exhibit mythic attributes.

Dickon does possess striking connections to a "Faun" figure, as Burnett herself pointed out in her letter to Heinemann, with his half-tame "creatures" and his pipes. But while he consistently plays the part of a local nature god, there is little to indicate that Dickon's mythic attributes are restricted to the Greek pantheon. In many ways, Dickon is the most mythically flexible of *The Secret Garden's* characters, a universal type whose demonstrated ability to feel as

much at home on the moor as in Buckingham Palace (180) lets him help the other characters embrace their own parts in the myth Burnett is constructing.

Beyond the coterie of orphaned animals that Dickon has rescued, the series of comparisons between his eyes and the English sky, his “clean fresh scent of heather and grass and leaves about him, almost as if he were made of them” (86), and his ability “to look like grass and trees and bushes” (138) equate Dickon’s body with the land itself, emphasizing his role as a supernatural guardian of the moor. His association with Soot, the black crow always perched on his shoulder, cements Dickon’s otherworldly status. Gerzina notes that “The crow is generally interpreted as an omen of bad luck or death in English mythology and folklore, particularly when a single crow is seen,” and yet as can be observed in the tradition of Odin, crows and ravens’ connection to death merely reflects a possession of secret knowledge. Mary’s nervous reaction to the “big glossy-plumaged blue-black bird, looking down at her very wisely indeed,” may therefore be a sense of awe in the presence of otherworldly wisdom. The juxtaposition of the life-bringing Dickon with the ominous crow further confirms his connection to the natural world in all its guises, both living and dead. In the same vein, Soot’s friendly behavior toward Mrs. Sowerby (241) emphasizes her own mystical connection with the dead Lilies and the superior wisdom she has gained from her ability to see and communicate across normally impermeable boundaries.

The straddling of life and death that Burnett seems to find so vital is likewise exemplified in the figure of Ben Weatherstaff, the crotchety under-gardener once responsible for Lilies Craven’s roses. Blackwood observes that “The gardener Ben has an inherent mythic position, keeper of the grounds and secrets of the dead, such as the hidden garden,” and argues that his name, “Weatherstaff,” indicates both a connection to the weather of the moor, “which can be



neither tamed nor predicted,” and yet a possible ability to control it, as indicated by the word “staff” (9). Underscoring this hypothetical ability is Ben’s spade, which he looks at “as if there might be Magic in it” (*Annotated*), and his twittering conversations with the garden’s resident robin. Ben thus occupies a similar but more domesticated guardian role to Dickon’s, keeping the secret garden alive until Mary can awaken it fully.

Colin and his father, Archibald Craven, are the least “mythic” of the seven central figures, despite their previously mentioned similarities to the Wasteland motif. Colin, who will develop ambitions toward the novel’s conclusion to connect “Magic” with science, an endeavor that Smedman has identified as an attempt “to have power over” magic (97), is perhaps the character most evidently living in both worlds—the mythic, timeless world of rural Yorkshire and the scientifically advanced, even cosmopolitan world of modern England. Colin’s dual role is fitting, given that the Cravens are not merely descendents of an ancient landholding family but part of what is still a politically, socially, and economically powerful upper class. That Colin aims to translate the vague appellation “Magic” into a scientific discipline suggests he is attempting to bridge the gap between an empirical, science-minded, and potentially disillusioned modern world and a mystical sense of faith.

Yet the most interesting mythic connections can be drawn between Mary, Mrs. Sowerby, and the lingering spirit of Lilius Craven and their earth-goddess attributes. According to Bixler, one of the literary and religious traditions Burnett is drawing on is “the pagan emphasis on an often matriarchal deity that is immanent in nature as compared to the patriarchal, transcendent deity frequently envisaged in the Judeo-Christian tradition” (73). The series of similarities between the three women, who all take on mothering roles toward Colin and who are all

connected on an allegorical level to the secret garden, thus posit Mary as an inheritor of this nature-goddess role.

The connection between Mary, Mrs. Sowerby, and Lilies Craven and the garden is most vividly expressed through the image of the garden roses, which seem to simultaneously flower out of the three women’s bodies. Mary, who is initially described as a yellow “old woman” (16; 38), will over the course of her gardening efforts develop into a flushed and vibrant young girl: “Tha’lt be like a blush rose when tha’ grows up,” Mrs. Sowerby tells her (241). Mary is therefore both a gardener and a garden, blossoming alongside her creation. Mrs. Sowerby, who prophesizes Mary’s transformation, herself has a “comfortable rosy face” (241), and her children Martha and Dickon, who also help Mary “blossom,” possess similarly “rosy” faces. As Gerzina has noted, the name “Sowerby” evokes the idea of sowing or planting seeds (103), and Lilies is likewise connected with the garden through her name, a Scottish appellation meaning ‘Lily.’ When Lilies’s voice calls Mr. Craven home in the novel’s final chapter, the moment is notably linked with both roses—the symbol of the garden’s renewal—and water, the means of its transformation: “He thought that as he sat and breathed in the scent of the late roses and listened to the lapping of the water at his feet he heard a voice calling” (248).

Lilies, or at least the story of her tragic death, seems to call Mary to the garden as well, which she does in conjunction with Mrs. Sowerby, “a true earth mother whose all-encompassing warmth suffuses the entire story...for like Nature, she is always in the background subtly manipulating characters and events to bring about small miracles” (Gerzina, *Gretchen* 191). Burnett called Mrs. Sowerby the “chief figure” of her novel, a claim that seems somewhat surprising until a closer examination of Mrs. Sowerby’s role reveals just how instrumental her actions are in effectuating first Mary’s, then Colin’s, and finally Mr. Craven’s rehabilitation.

Mrs. Sowerby is highly attuned to Liliás's lingering presence, and seems to act as a partner or intercessor in Liliás's endeavors to reawaken this land of the dead. She fosters Mary's growing interest in her new home, providing a jump rope, flower seeds, food, and advice, and she aids Liliás's spirit in calling Mr. Craven home again at the novel's end, repeating Liliás's disembodied message in the form of a letter (250).

The resulting triplication of Mary, Mrs. Sowerby, and Liliás Craven as goddess-figures evokes a classic trope in myths and legends, reinforcing the roles they play and extending their symbolic potential. Celtic mythic figures, in both legend and according to anthropological record, were most often presented in sets of three, or as triadic in nature, which signified a way of "expressing the divine" (*Archaeology* 54); this was especially true of Celtic goddesses, whom Christopher R. Fee and David A. Leeming single out as a significant example of this "common" formation (80).<sup>22</sup>

The association of the basic Celtic fertility goddess with motherhood corresponds to Mary, Mrs. Sowerby, and Liliás's shared maternal role for Colin, the motherless, spiritually dead, and physically ill boy who, like the garden, lies hidden at the center of a labyrinth that Mary must penetrate and illuminate. Mary takes on the role of mother from their first meeting, which occurs about halfway through the novel, singing Colin to sleep, disciplining him when the need arises, awakening his imagination, teaching him how to interact with others, and drawing

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<sup>22</sup> The triune or triadic goddess is not, of course, restricted to Celtic mythology, appearing, for example, in Classical myth as the Three Fates and the Three Graces, or as Hecate, the "triple goddess." Jung identified the triple deity as a classic archetypal image, the most famous example being the Christian Trinity. However, according to Miranda J. Green, the prevalence of the triple (or triad) *goddess* is particularly "ubiquitous...in the Welsh and Irish mythic imagery." In the *Mabinogion*, examples of the triple goddess construction include Branwen (referenced as one of three matriarchs of the land) and Rhiannon's three singing birds, a sign of otherworldliness that finds an Irish counterpart in the goddess Clíodna's magical healing birds (Green, *Archaeology* 54-5). Triple goddesses are often, but not always, associated with fertility and motherhood.

him out of the literal darkness of the manor and into the light of her earthly paradise. Liliias lingers above the proceedings as a ghostly mother figure, seemingly orchestrating the events unfolding in the secret garden “through elements and creatures from nature, specifically wind, rain, moonlight, and the robin” (Bixler 68),<sup>23</sup> while her physical body has become subsumed in Colin’s own face and in a single shrouded portrait. Initially shut away, just as the garden is shut away, and unable to mother her child, Liliias has by the novel’s end become a figure less ghostly than otherworldly, her voice and her face guiding her husband and son back to the garden. Mrs. Sowerby, a tangible counterpart to Liliias, assures Colin that “Thy own mother’s in this ’ere very garden” (243). Liliias thus reassumes the role death forced her to relinquish, directing the rebirth of her son and of the land. When Colin draws back the curtains from Liliias’s portrait, he is thus accepting her disembodied attempts to mother him.

The garden’s role as an earthly paradise that revives those who access it is therefore strengthened by the corresponding role of the three “mothers” who enable and embody that rebirth. Still, as I have attempted to demonstrate, Mary’s mythic journey does not concern merely the reawakening of a secret paradise, but the *writing* of paradise. If, as Phillips has hinted, Burnett is attempting to work out a new system of belief and vision of the world through “that primal image of paradise, lost but maybe regainable” (Mackey 367), it is worth wondering to what extent the young Frances’s gnawing hunger for stories of “Gods and goddesses, legends and wars, Druids and ancient Britons” plays out in her classic children’s book fifty years later—not merely (or even necessarily) in allusions to these legends, but more intriguingly in a

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<sup>23</sup> In *Owain the Countess of the Fountain* and to a lesser extent *Luned* are likewise associated with the water, the moon, and birds; this imagery is typical of fertility goddesses in both Celtic lore and Indo-European mythology in general.

repurposing of their narrative construction and motifs to chart the passage from mundane non-existence into mythicized existence.

It is therefore within this context that I will attempt to situate *The Secret Garden*.

### **Quest Structure and the Otherworld in *Owain*, *Le Chevalier au Lion*, and *The Secret Garden***

R.M. Jones, in his essay “Narrative Structure in Medieval Welsh Prose Tales,” speaks of two types of structure at work in the *Mabinogion*. The first, which is often called diachronic or “vertical structure,” develops chronologically as each period adds to, and in doing so partly obscures, the “traces of mythology and remnants of more primitive story structures” from earlier versions (217). The second type of structure, which Jones variously terms “linear or synchronic,” “narrative,” or “horizontal” structure, is not the deepest structure, which is presumably mythological. Jones maintains, however, that this narrative structure “is so fundamental as almost to be related in its elementary state to the mythological structure” (218).

A consistent criticism leveled at the *Mabinogion* concerns its seeming lack of coherent structure, its repetition of scenarios or motifs, and the presence of unwieldy “appendage” episodes that disrupt the supposed balance of the original narrative. Jones identifies the phenomenon of duplication as a particular target for criticism regarding the author’s carelessness, or else his determination to include differing versions of the same tale. Jones, however, attributes this criticism to a lack of consideration of medieval narrative expectations, which would have perceived repetition, lengthy description, or hyperbole as emphasizing the magnitude of a particular event, character, or object (233). Jones argues that such repetition is not “merely a stylistic device” but “a basic structure for combining diversity in unity, a way of

thinking about and analysing [*sic*] reality...[and] a *form of being* within which narrative may exist” (235).

In the context of a quest, this “diversity in unity” enables a lengthy journey to operate around a unified set of principles, and to give epic scope and exterior expression to the fundamental and interior experience of personal metamorphosis. In *The English Romance in Time* (2008), Helen Cooper emphasizes that the quest motif can provide medieval romances with “structure or impulse” even when no physical journey takes place (48). This remark does not apply to *Owain* or *Le Chevalier au Lion*, which feature geographically diverse journeys. It does, however, apply in many ways to *The Secret Garden*, which manages to convert a relatively small space into the site of a quest of considerable scope. Cooper also notes that the Arthurian quest narrative in particular seems to “proceed by a process of enquiry, many episodes being triggered not by the dominant quest nor hazards randomly encountered but by successive changes of direction impelled by local report or advice” (69). The narrative thus unfolds as a constant and almost haphazard learning experience, in which advice-bearers—oftentimes supernatural beings—guide the unwitting protagonist (and reader) toward an unanticipated endpoint.

When bringing this point to bear on rediscovered Welsh and Celtic lore’s influence on nineteenth-century literature, structure as well as more superficial attributes must be examined. As has been touched on, the Victorian Medieval Revival involved both an inquiry into the essence of medieval and mythic literature and a recycling of the specific attributes, patterns and archetypes featured in ancient art, fiction, and poetry, something that was becoming particularly prominent toward the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century in the work of Jung, Weston, and others. Some early- and mid-Victorian authors sought to impose a Victorian structural aesthetic on the works, as in the case of Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, which

is more classical in structure, with a clearly connected beginning, middle, and end. But the original versions of the tales, which were of ever-increasing interest to the scholarly community and which gained a popular audience in large part due to their mainstream reworkings, transmitted the more episodic narrative structure that both Jones and Cooper have detailed in their work.

While perceived as unsophisticated by many Victorian readers, this episodic narrative structure was not, critics increasingly argue, due to a lack of narrative control, but to a conscious stylistic choice, as well as to half-forgotten mythic roots. Building on Eugène Vinaver's Interlace theory and on J.K. Bollard's application of this theory to the Four Branches of the Mabinogi, Jones posits *Y Tair Rhamant*<sup>24</sup> as powerful examples of a literary aesthetic in which it may have been "acceptable...to have several centres [sic] of interest, numerous climaxes, and even a series of beginnings and endings." In this context, the episodes are not necessarily linked by causality but by chronology and even (in their original Welsh) by duplicate or triplicate syntactic and rhythmic stress patterns (246). In unfolding through a pattern of decentralization, the individual events are not subordinated to a central climax in the way that, "at least until the mid-twentieth century, most readers had expected from their story-tellers" (242-3). Instead, *Y Tair Rhamant* contain multiple center-points that "are scattered, decentralised, strung out" (243).

Perhaps not entirely coincidentally, modern archaeology has revealed that "enclosure," occasionally in concentric rings, "was the primary and indispensable feature of Celtic cult sites," so that as one approached the center, or *medio*, one participated in a spiritual ritual that preceded entry into the sacred, a process in which the crossing of each boundary likewise had sacred connotations (Green, *The Celtic* 451-60). Green explains in *The World of the Druids* (1997) that

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<sup>24</sup> The Three Romances, *Peredur*, *Owain*, and *Gereint*. For more information on the role of *Y Tair Rhamant* in Lady Charlotte Guest's *Mabinogion* project, see Rachel Bromwich.

the significance of boundaries may be attributed to the way “they separated and belonged to two worlds” and “facilitat[ed] contact with the divine powers” (121). The Celtic (literary) voyage to the otherworld would seem to parallel this ritualistic moving toward a divine center—a center that is, however, “not set apart from the ordinary secular world, but rather provid[es] a vital centre for the needs of the community and for the maintenance of a kingdom” (Davidson 35).

The structural composition of *Owain* and *Le Chevalier au Lion* would seem to respond to this principle of enclosure. Both works exhibit an accumulation of characters, of journeys, and of events that closely and often explicitly parallel each other, something similarly characteristic of *The Secret Garden*. In particular, the various journeys the characters undertake function as an experiment in variation, so that through variations on a central quest motif the hero pursues a circular progression toward the quest’s often-unstated goal. Each new boundary that they cross thus acts as a signpost on the road to the “divine center.”

*Owain* and *Le Chevalier au Lion* play out through two parallel crescendos of action that speak to each other through superficially or structurally similar episodes. The first crescendo of action thus charts Owain/Yvain’s initial, physical journey to the “happy otherworld,” only to lose it through their evident unworthiness; the second crescendo correspondingly charts their mental and moral efforts to gain reentry not so much into the physical bounds of the otherworld as into the affections of the realm’s apparently supernatural countess. The pleasure gained in reading these works derives in large part from the almost musical fashion in which the narratives progress, regress, and progress again.

In a similar fashion, the enjoyment *The Secret Garden* provides relates not to its strong plot but to its thematic variation and expansion over the course of the novel. Like *Owain* and *Le Chevalier au Lion*, *The Secret Garden*’s narrative unfolds not merely episodically and



incrementally, but through a layering of similar subplots, characters, and motifs. These elements overlap chronologically and thematically, but they do not necessarily come into contact until the novel's final chapters. It is only at this point that the extent to which these apparently disjointed details interrelate becomes clear. Mary's discovery and subsequent healing of the garden, her introduction into the functioning of society, her wanderings through the locked-up Misselthwaite Manor, her brief but striking encounter with her broken uncle, and her meeting with her cousin Colin seem like disparate events, and yet each one essentially serves the same function and follows the same narrative pattern: a mystery structured almost like a labyrinth, which Mary must penetrate without truly knowing what she does or what awaits her at the end.

It is therefore through the *journey*, as much as through the destination (the garden, which itself heralds another kind of journey), that Mary and her surroundings engage in a mutual act of transformation. Mary's failed attempts at gardening in India and her wanderings through the Misselthwaite gardens are undertaken with little initial thought of entering the lost, locked garden. She performs these actions almost without knowing why. A series of encounters with Ben Weatherstaff and the robin help guide her to her destination, as if she has been unknowingly chosen to undertake this quest, but Mary herself does not recognize the aim of this quest. Only after entering the garden does she instinctively start to pull away the weeds and work the garden back to life.

In employing *Le Chevalier au Lion* and *Owain* as exemplifying Celtic otherworld quest structure, it should be noted that the two works place a different emphasis on that quest. In comparison with *le Chevalier au Lion*, *Owain* takes as its primary focus the initial journey to the enchanted fountain, which occupies 68.5 percent of the text, rather than on the process of rehabilitation, although this, too, retains a major role. In contrast, the fountain section in *Le*

*Chevalier au Lion* occupies a mere 39 percent (Thomson 167). Despite the difference in emphasis, *Le Chevalier au Lion* and *Owain* follow more or less the same episode order. The first section begins in the court of King Arthur—that is, in the realm of the known. The unknown soon takes center stage, however, as the young warrior Kynon (Calogrenant in the French version) recounts a journey he once undertook to a realm beyond the borders of the ordinary world. The otherworldly quality of this realm is established when Kynon states, “after I had achieved all the adventures that were in my own country, I equipped myself, and set forth to journey through deserts and distant regions” to discover “whether any one was superior to me, or whether I could gain the mastery over all” (151). In prefacing his tale this way, Kynon is moving beyond the ordinary world in order to test the limits of his strength.

The tale ends with Kynon’s defeat in battle at the hands of the Black Knight, the guardian of an enchanted fountain. Upon hearing the tale, Owain determines to undertake the journey himself and to succeed where Kynon failed. He retraces Kynon’s steps, and in doing so the reader experiences the journey a second time. Owain defeats the Black Knight in battle and several days later marries his widow, the Countess of the Fountain, taking over as guardian of the fountain. The second half of the tale commences three years later when King Arthur himself journeys to the fountain—the third instance of the journey being made—and Owain returns with him to the court for a stay that is to last three months. Tarrying instead for three years, Owain is denounced by his abandoned wife and falls into madness. The remainder of the tale deals with Owain’s gradual rehabilitation, conducted in part through the aid of the titular lion, as he learns how to serve those in need, to display gratitude, and to combat injustice. Only after accomplishing this set of feats can Owain be truly worthy of the happy otherworld and be reunited with his wife, who embodies the promise of happiness the otherworld offers.

The importance of tales in effecting action in *Owain* and *Le Chevalier au Lion* warrants examination, for their prominence reflects the literary nature of the quest for paradise, in transmitting specific instructions needed to attain permanent entrance into the otherworld (or into a state of general fulfillment). The tale itself, as much as the many guides Owain encounters along the way, constitutes part of a long preparation for hero and reader alike.<sup>25</sup> The occasionally prescriptive quality of Owain's story will find a forceful echo in *The Secret Garden*, which is likewise full of guides, of stories, and of implied instructions to the reader on how to live a fulfilling life.

A considerable quantity of advice is necessary for Owain's journey, given that he is constantly slipping between different parts of the otherworld. Owain is a permanent outsider in this equation, a figure forever in flux who must repeat the same actions until he gets them right. Owain is shown to be initially unworthy of the otherworld, and yet it is precisely *because* of his outsider status that Owain will so effectively better the realm into which he has traipsed. A long tradition in both Celtic and Arthurian literature involves a mortal entering the otherworld (or vice versa) who by dint of his very foreignness is capable of effecting positive change.<sup>26</sup> In Owain's case, he becomes worthy of this otherworld while—and because—he transforms it; the metamorphosis is therefore mutual.

Owain's constant outside status has an additional impact, in that it prevents him from attaining any sense of stability until the tale's end. The majority of the tale rather charts the

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<sup>25</sup> Sioned Davies attributes repetition of events, rhyme and alliteration, phrasing, advice, and instructions as indicative of a prior oral history, presupposing an audience that must focus their attention, react to the story as it is told, and confront “ethical dilemmas concerning moral, political and legal issues” (25). See “‘He was the best teller of tales in the world’: Performing Medieval Welsh Narrative” from *Performing Medieval Narrative* (2005).

<sup>26</sup> This pattern is particularly evident in *Pwyll*, the First Branch of the *Mabinogi*; examples of a (supernatural) foreigner entering the bounds of Arthur's realm include Marie de France's *Lanval*, Chrétien's *Le Chevalier de la Charette*, and *Peredur*.

constant transformations, the constant deaths and rebirths of the hero on his path to achieving individual fulfillment in a way that corresponds to a beneficial role in society. In fact, if we break down the different liminal stages or thresholds that Owain passes through, it looks somewhat like this:

- 1) First move beyond the bounds of the known world
- 2) First symbolic washing in the castle of the Yellow Man
- 3) Serpents and dragons in the clearing of the Black Man
- 4) The fountain’s storm and the arrival of the otherworld birds
- 5) The double portcullis
- 6) The ring of invisibility, second symbolic washing in the castle of the Countess
- 7) Madness in the wilderness
- 8) Healing of Owain, third symbolic washing at the castle of the second countess
- 9) Rescue of the lion from the serpent, beginning of rehabilitation process in earnest

Taken together, these stages, particularly those that involve “washing” or water, imply a continual process of transfer and alteration that slowly but surely moves Owain toward the heart of the sacred.

The process of transfer is aided by the apparent presence of multiple, often quite distinct otherworlds. When Owain first leaves the known world, he arrives out of the wilderness and deserts into the most perfect otherworld realm depicted in the tale, the valley of the Yellow Man:

I came to the fairest valley in the world, wherein were trees of equal growth; and a river ran through the valley, and a path was by the side of the river...and at the extremity of a plain I came to a large and lustrous Castle, at the foot of which was a torrent. (151)

Inside the castle, beautiful maidens feed and wash Owain with water from silver bowls remarkably similar to the one that sits beside the magical fountain. The moment reads as a preparatory ritual for Owain's future journeys and is directly followed by an oral form of preparation, as the Yellow Man indicates the next stage of Owain's quest. Interestingly, Kynon evinces no real expectation of remaining in this otherworld, but rather hopes to press onward, as if he senses the impossibility of attaining so unmitigated a state of bliss.

The pattern of washing established here will be repeated in two instances, at two other otherworldly castles. The first of these instances involves a preparation for Owain's marriage with the Countess of the Fountain. At this point Owain seems more of an interloper, or as Leslie Ellen Jones posits caught "between two worlds." Owain is at his most liminal in this sequence, having been trapped between a set of portcullis doors and forced to accept the aid of a ring of invisibility to escape; he is neither specifically here nor there, neither visible to the realm he has left nor the realm he seeks to enter. Moreover, Jones claims that it is the serving maid, Luned, who orchestrates Owain's initial acceptance into the otherworld, while Owain sleeps "in an isolated, incubatory position" (264).

Perhaps because he takes no real hand in his transference in either of the first two washing scenes, Owain experiences no *essential* change. He merely adopts the appearance of transformation, in that he is newly washed and richly clothed. It is the third washing that initiates the "much more intense and agonizing metamorphosis" necessary for Owain to become a true member of the otherworld (Jones 264). Immediately following the third washing, Owain comes across a fierce battle between a lion and a serpent and must decide which animal to aid. The

ensuing choice of the lion becomes, in essence, the choice of loyalty, valor, and constancy, rather than changeability and inconstancy.<sup>27</sup>

The pattern of *Owain* thus operates through a compounding of similar scenes that echo the gradual and painstaking arrival of Owain at the sacred center, as expressed by his permanent union with the Countess of the Fountain. More so than Chrétien, who keeps the otherworldly quality of Laudine’s realm somewhat subdued, the *Owain* author communicates the unearthliness of the otherworld. The initial otherworld sequence, in which Kynon enters into the valley of the Yellow Man, acts as the crucial first variation to which the ensuing sequences respond. First, the sequence establishes the importance of bounded areas, in the form of the valley and then of the castle itself. Both valley and castle demonstrate a surreal quality; the castle and its residents, dressed in yellow and gold, seem to shine, while the trees of equal height equate to a sort of impossible perfection that can exist only in a realm outside of time.

Second, the author first introduces the significance of water in this scene. In a general sense, water is equated with passage in the form of “a path...by the side of the river.” But more significantly, when the inhabitants of the shining castle begin the pattern of preparing Kynon, as they clothe and nourish him, they provide him with the silver bowls of water that foreshadow the fountain scene, which will likewise feature a silver bowl of water and a symbolic “washing.” The image of the castle with a “torrent” of water at its base seems a visual echo of the tree and the fountain.

The Yellow Man sequence also establishes the pattern of guiding figures that Kynon encounters throughout his quest. Despite warning Kynon that his journey may bring distress and

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<sup>27</sup> While in primitive Celtic myth serpents were often associated with fertility and immortal life, the influence of Christianity casts them in a far more negative role that still resonated in the Victorian period.

loss, the Yellow Man provides a source of insight and wisdom for the next stage of the challenge. Taking up the narrative thread, the Yellow Man points Kynon toward his next guide, the Black Man. Here, Kynon arrives in yet another bounded area: a sheltered glade in the middle of the forest with a mound at its center on which the monstrous, one-eyed, one-legged man sits.

Numerous scholars have pointed to the Black Man's connection with Cernunnos, the Celtic lord of animals, and more distantly with the Norse Odin, who similarly is associated with beasts, and also with death and magical wisdom. In both *Owain* and *Le Chevalier au Lion*, animals surround the Black Man ("le rustre"). In *Le Chevalier* the Black Man's monstrousness manifests not as a missing leg or eye, but as an amalgamation of disparate animal body parts, as if to emphasize his mastery over them:

la tête plus grosse que celle	his head larger than that
d'un cheval de somme, ou de n'importe	of a packhorse, or some other
quelle autre bête;	kind of beast;
les cheveux en désordre	his hair in disorder
...de grandes oreilles velues	...with great hairy ears
comme celles d'un éléphant;	like those of an elephant;
...de yeux de chouette et un nez de chat;	...with the eyes of an owl and the nose of a cat;
la bouche fendue comme celle d'un loup;	mouth cleft like a wolf's;
des dents de sanglier aiguës et jaunâtres	with sharp and yellowed boar's teeth
...mais il portait, attachées à son cou,	...but he wore, attached at his neck,
deux peaux nouvellement écorchées,	two animal pelts newly skinned,
provenant de deux taureaux ou de deux	from two bulls or two cows

bœufs

(68-9; verses 293-311)

The encounter with the Black Man constitutes a vital preparatory episode purposefully juxtaposed with the previous episode in the Valley of the Yellow Man. An entirely new universe is, in a sense, contained within this glade filled with countless animals. This universe, ruled by laws of strength and natural order, contrasts with the paradigm of generosity exhibited in the Yellow Man’s domain (Maddox 55). Both lessons will be required for the accomplishment of Kynon’s, and later Owain’s quest. Just as the Yellow Man narrates to Kynon his encounter with the Black Man, so does the Black Man narrate the next episode of the quest, continuing the pattern of tale prefacing journey. Kynon follows the Black Man’s instructions, coming to “an open space like to a large valley” that evokes both the Yellow Man’s valley and the Black Man’s clearing. At the valley’s center, however, instead of a shining castle or a *sidhe*-like mound, stands “a tall tree, whose branches are greener than the greenest pine-trees” and at whose base flows a fountain. Beside the tree are a marble slab and a silver bowl.<sup>28</sup> Following instructions, Kynon throws water on the stone, unleashing an apocalyptic storm of thunder and hail that according to the Black Man “it will be scarce possible for thee to endure...and live” (155).

Kynon survives, but the Black Man’s words suggest that he has not truly survived the storm, but has instead been reborn. As if to herald Kynon’s “birth,” birds descend onto the now-leafless boughs and begin to sing as the world lights up in joy. The appearance of the Black Knight, which comes just as Kynon is basking in the glory of this new world, is cast as the final test, which will ascertain his worthiness of remaining in the happy otherworld: “And if thou dost not find trouble in that adventure, thou needest not seek it during the rest of thy life” (155).

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<sup>28</sup> This image evokes a similar scene in the Welsh mythic tale *Manawyddan*, in which Rhiannon and Pryderi touch a golden bowl set upon on a marble slab beside a fountain. They immediately disappear into a (somewhat hellish) otherworld (Duggan 236).



Leslie Ellen Jones claims that *Owain* “describes journeys to a series of Otherworlds, each of which emphasizes a different kind of Otherness” (153), a claim that Donald Maddox echoes in his examination of customs in *Le Chevalier au Lion*, which he describes as an series of often conflicting lessons in different ways of behaving. The encounters with both a benevolent lord of men and a feral lord of animals therefore act as educational episodes in different types of customs, different types of power, and different types of knowledge intended to prepare the quester for the test that will take place in the final “site of enclosure.”

Most of these customs concern the ownership of land, which Maddox terms “*tenir terre*.” However, the various episodes that compose *Owain* also constitute a series of trials that require wisdom, tact, strength, and determination to negotiate. These trials serve not merely as educational experiences in different customs or types of otherness, but as preparatory episodes for the ultimate goal: to attain permanent access into an otherworld that is “suspended somewhere *between* dream and reality (Mac Cana, *Mabinogi* 114, emphasis added)—that is in many ways “coextensive with reality” (Mac Cana, *Celtic* 125), which certainly seems to describe Burnett’s secret garden. Just as the aim of Owain’s quest is not the elysian valley of the Yellow Man, but a more livable paradise, so is Mary’s foray into the garden a search for a better form of reality.

In *The Secret Garden*, too, Mary gains access into the secret garden after a series of trials and encounters, but it is through her continued association, not her initial encounter with the “Happy Otherworld,” that she and Colin are radically transformed and help transform the impoverished otherworld in the process. Mary instantly recognizes the ethereal quality of the garden, a space of “curtains” and “hazy mantle[s]” and “fairy-like gray arches” (70-1). Yet even then Mary has no conception of the garden’s real significance. She renames it the “secret

garden,” rather than the previous phrases “locked” or “hidden” garden, because she sees the enclosure as “her new kingdom,” whose discovery would be catastrophic (73, ).

A by-product of long neglect, Mary’s stubborn independence evokes the overly independent nature of Owain and Yvain. In establishing the lost garden as her personal secret, Mary is responding to an apparent conviction that life and death must be conducted in a solitary and even covert manner. Death pervades the early chapters of *The Secret Garden*, yet whereas *Owain* and *Le Chevalier au Lion* make death highly visible, Mary never actually witnesses death. Likewise, she rarely witnesses and never participates in the business of living. Mary is cut off from the communal aspect of both life and death. The mocking name “Mistress Mary,” given to Mary by the other Anglo-Indian children, becomes doubly biting because Mary has no real place in this world. That Burnett persists in using this title for Mary throughout the book, and that its connotations slowly shifts from derisive to quite serious, suggests the importance of societal integration in this text. Integration would, in fact, seem to be one of the prime factors in the novel, as the splintered pieces of the world and of the narrative itself come together through the figure of the secret garden, inside which the many characters slowly gather. The irony of the name “the secret garden” is that the garden is *not* meant to remain secret. The shift of Mary’s vision from her new “secret kingdom” to a communal paradise is thus vital to Mary’s growth from an entirely egocentric child to a largely selfless and even nurturing figure by the novel’s end.

The need for integration likewise structures *Owain* and *Le Chevalier au Lion*, as the protagonist must fumble his way from his “self-centered pursuits—personal esteem, matrimony, tangible acquisitions, and so on...to the pursuit of objectives lying beyond the self and its immediate satisfaction” (Maddox 119). Indeed, Owain’s self-centered pursuit of glory explains

why he is fundamentally unprepared for the societal role he gains in his marriage to the Countess. Although provided with a series of lessons preceding his arrival at the fountain that he ought to interpret, given that they are juxtaposed for the purposes of debate and synthesis, Owain believes that he already knows the “goal” of this quest—“I am in quest of the Knight that guards the fountain”—and thus fails to note these episodes’ significance. Moreover, the Quest for the Fountain has little to do with the Knight who defends it. Rather, it concerns the as-yet unseen and unmentioned Countess of the Fountain.

The appearance of the Countess relatively late in the tale reinforces how little either Kynon or Owain understands about the journey they have been sent on. Yet for all that we do not encounter the Countess until halfway through *Owain*, her presence haunts the text from the beginning. Unlike *Le Chevalier au Lion*, which in the title places its emphasis on Yvain, *Owain*’s Welsh title is *Chwedl Iarlles y Ffynnon*—the Tale of the Countess of the Fountain. Reader’s expectation of her arrival is thus established early on.

According to most scholars, the Countess is intimately linked with the fountain, and the character is in all likelihood the descendent of “a fountain fay” (Foster 198) or of a Celtic goddess whose rule over the land requires a protector and “whose willing union with its ruler confers legitimacy on his rule and peace and fruitfulness upon his kingdom” (Mac Cana 115). This link between land and human so prevalent in both *Owain* and in Celtic mythic material functions as yet another type of paralleling, so that the hero’s interior journey finds vivid and often supernatural expression in his surroundings. Yet it also reflects what Mac Cana has called “a remarkable concern” among insular Celts “with the physical configuration of the land upon which they live.” Partly due to this concern with the land’s composition, “a conspicuous, even a dominant role” is assigned

to the female divinities, for it is these, as avatars, or manifestations, of the earth-goddess, who are primarily associated with the land in all its various aspects: its fertility, its sovereignty, its embodiment of the powers of death as well of life, and so on. (*Celtic* 49)

The magical fountain, with its connection to both terror and joy, with death and with life, is thus presented as the natural materialization of the Countess’s links to her land, which lives or dies by her (and the fountain’s) successful defense. The idea of female ownership is also emphasized in *Le Chevalier au Lion*, in which the serving girl Lunete warns Laudine that she must “maintain the custom/of defending *your fountain*” (165; lines 1850-1; emphasis added), and Yvain generally refers to the realm as his lady’s land rather than his own. Interestingly, when the narrator describes Yvain’s sudden love for Laudine, this love is likewise communicated in terms of land: “it wants no other dwelling, no other host than this one, and it acts wisely/when it quits an unworthy place/to devote itself entirely to this one” (137; verses 1384-7).

In *Owain*, Owain’s love similarly takes “entire possession of him” (161). Yet if love is connected to place, so too is inner transformation, of which Owain/Yvain’s sudden love is merely one manifestation. The fountain thus acts as the physical representation not merely of the Countess’s true nature, but of the transformation Owain must undergo to prove himself worthy of her. Just as the destructive winter hailstorm tears the leaves from the trees and pounds the crops into the ground, only to be followed by the glorious birdsong of spring, so Owain’s selfishness must perish and be replaced by a readiness to defend the helpless and the weak.

The transformative qualities of the fountain are reaffirmed by the role water plays. In both *Owain* and *Le Chevalier*, the unleashing of the storm requires the hero to pour water from the spring onto a nearby stone or slab of marble. The storm and its aftermath indicate the fundamental change the world has undergone, as water scours the land in a preparatory ritual that

is physical as well as spiritual. If one takes the Countess to represent, like the fountain itself, divine wisdom and Owain to represent its seeker, this reaffirms the Countess as the physical incarnation of a successful otherworld quest. She represents the chance for fulfillment on both an internal and a societal level.

This last part is important, for the two halves of *Owain* and *Le Chevalier au Lion* concern a transition from a quest for individual glory to a series of exploits undertaken anonymously and in the defense of others, which Maddox describes as a reorientation toward altruistic service (61). When Owain is denounced and banished by his wife for what is essentially an obsession with personal glory, he falls into madness and flees into the wilderness. After being rehabilitated through the aid of a magical unguent,<sup>29</sup> he completes four feats, all of which in various ways echo his first quest. Owain's defense of the countess who provides the unguent demonstrates gratitude, but it also evokes his relationship with his estranged wife. Whereas Owain abandoned his wife and left her land defenseless, here he aids the second countess (called the Dame de Noroison in *Le Chevalier au Lion*<sup>30</sup>) in defending her land against an intruder. Whereas as Owain hastily weds the Countess of the Fountain and then is proven unworthy of her, he refuses to wed the second one, yet still manages to convey gratitude and loyalty.

Owain likewise rectifies his lack of gratitude toward Luned, who helped bring about his marriage and is now sentenced to death for her actions, by defending her claims of innocence in single combat. The location of this combat beside the fountain indicates that the fountain

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<sup>29</sup> In *Le Chevalier au Lion*, this unguent is the gift of a generous countess but comes from Morgan la Fay, suggesting the continued intervention of the Otherworld in his fate.

<sup>30</sup> It has been pointed out by Joseph D. Duggan that the name 'Noroison' implies 'black birds' or ravens, traditionally associated with the Celtic goddess the Morrigan and perhaps here linked a with the similarly named Morgan la Fay As Morgan has occasionally been depicted as Yvain's mother, Duggan posits the Dame de Noroison as a mother-figure as well as healer for Yvain (237), which would further establish this episode as a moment of rebirth for Yvain.

clearing has morphed from the site of an egotistical contest for glory to one where truth is defended and loyalty exhibited. Owain’s defeat of a giant terrorizing a fief likewise mirrors the (failed) task he once had of defending the realm of the Countess of the Fountain from outsiders.

Finally, Owain’s battle with the “savage black man” or “demon” who has imprisoned twenty-four women and kept them in awful conditions suggests that Owain is now ready to protect the life and future not merely of an individual, but of a realm, to free that realm from death and bring it back to life. This sense is further confirmed by the corresponding episode in *Le Chevalier au Lion*, in which three hundred hostages from the Île de Pucelles (the Island of Women) work in a veritable sweatshop until Yvain defeats the two “fils de netun” holding them prisoner. By freeing the hostages of this distant realm, Yvain defends the happy otherworld—the Island of Women is a common form of the Celtic otherworld, particularly in Irish mythology—from a malevolent supernatural force and simultaneously preserves its future.

The order that these feats take place varies between *Owain* and *Le Chevalier au Lion*. In *Le Chevalier au Lion*, the order of the feats is 1) la Dame de Noroison, 2) the fief terrorized by the giant, 3) defending Lunete, 4) the freeing of three hundred hostages, or La Pesme Aventure, and 5) the defense of a young woman’s inheritance claims, although the completion of the final four adventures are structurally interwoven. Only after completing all five tasks can Yvain be reunited with his lady. In *Owain*, the order of feats is 1) the second countess, 2) the fief terrorized by the giant, 3) defending Luned, and 4) the freeing of twenty-four maidens. *Owain*’s structure is less intricately intertwined than it is in *Le Chevalier*, and the reunion with the Countess actually takes place between the third and fourth feats. Some critics identify this dislocation as a mistake, although Leslie Ellen Jones posits that Owain, having gained the power to enter the happy otherworld, must now confront the unhappy one, the Land of the Dead (286).

When one considers the parallel this episode forms with the twenty-four maidens in the valley of the Yellow Lord, her theory seems to hold some degree of merit.

What both versions share, however, is an intensive and layered educational experience. Each feat offers variations on previous challenges, testing not merely Owain/Yvain's physical prowess but his wisdom—or, as Jones puts it, his learning not merely how to act but “how to *feel*” (168). It is in fusing action with wisdom, through achieving enlightenment and using that knowledge for the benefit of society, that Owain reaches the sacred center of the happy otherworld.

The primary components of the Celtic otherworld quest as it is expressed in *Owain* and *Le Chevalier au Lion* can thus be grouped into several categories. First, the quest features an initial journey to a legendary land, which is followed by a gradual movement through different regions of the otherworld toward a mysterious, magical central location. In this movement, the significance of boundaries in defining the different regions of the otherworld, the repetition of this journey, undertaken by various characters regardless of previous failures, and the doubling of characters and situations, imbue the story with a ritualistic quality.

Second, the success of an otherworld journey seems to depend on a number of elements, first and foremost the motif of physical and mental transformation, an alteration the quest both requires and provokes. Emphasizing this motif is the role of water in transcending the different otherworld barriers. Various guides, advisors, storytellers, and animals are likewise crucial in leading the hero toward his destination, providing an education in the different customs and conduct of this new realm.

Thirdly, the transformative process that the hero undergoes is expressed in dramatic terms by the different stages of his quest, so that inner metamorphosis finds expression in the

natural world. The natural world thus becomes a numinous region, forever connected with the unworldly and infinitely porous. This porous quality can be observed in the coexistence of life and death at the heart of the sacred—epitomized by the goddess-figure—and in the concept of death or intense struggle as prefiguring a rebirth into earthly paradise. One can add to this a general state of liminality that persists until the transformed hero permanently attains access into this paradise.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, the quest seems ultimately intended to bring bliss not to an individual but to a society that is somehow impoverished—in wisdom, in happiness, in security—prior to the quest’s achievement. The significance of society is emphasized by the outsider position of the quester; his entry into the otherworld implies a mutually beneficial meeting of societies and customs, as the outsider shakes the otherworld out of stasis and, after an initial disruption, betters it. Interestingly, while Yvain remains with his lady in the otherworld at *Le Chevalier au Lion*’s conclusion, Owain and the Countess are said to return together to Arthur’s court. It is unclear whether the otherworld is thereby entering into mundane society in order to improve it, or whether the continuing love of the Countess for Owain signifies that even in rejoining society, Owain retains the promise of paradise.

### ***The Secret Garden* and the Influence of the Medieval Narrative**

*The Secret Garden*’s quest for paradise corresponds in almost every particular to the narrative structure laid out in the preceding section. Like Owain, Mary must move through progressive rings of enclosure, often crossing over or around water sources in the process. Like Owain, she is first initiated into this new world by tales and by various local guides, who incrementally prepare her for the quest she must undertake. Like Owain, Mary initially



approaches the heart of her quest with little understanding of its meaning and no thought of anyone but herself. In the second half of the novel, however, she becomes instrumental in effecting positive change on the garden and on society as well. Yet while Owain's transformation is completed through his reunion with the Countess, Mary herself takes on the identity of the goddess-figure, the incarnation of the garden's promise.

I will detail the rings of enclosure throughout my analysis of *The Secret Garden*. However, it should be noted that passage through these rings is often indicated not merely by water, but by a noticeable "jolt" (19). The word "jolt," which describes Mary's initial entry onto the moor, will be echoed by the "strong, steady, splendid, push" of Colin's arrival in the secret garden (185); by Mary's rapid shutting of the garden door when she first enters; by the "beating" of the rain against the window on the night when Mary discovers Colin's hidden room; and by the "spring" Mary takes into the blossoming garden the morning after a torrential rainstorm. The final jolt, however, when in the final chapter Colin "bursts" out of the garden into his father's arms, causing Mr. Craven's soul to "[shake]" in reaction (255), marks a reversal: the integration of the garden's healing qualities with external society.

Setting aside the indicators of transference, storytelling plays an equally important role in guiding Mary toward her destination. I have counted fifteen distinct instances of storytelling in relation to Mary's quest (there may, of course, be more). Twelve of these are related directly to the garden itself, and each version offers varying degrees of information, generally providing more elaborate instructions as the quester nears his or her goal. Moreover, as stories accumulate around the figures of Dickon, the garden, and the Craven family, so do they slowly achieve a stature of mythic proportions long before Mary ever encounters them. When Mary starts to alter the course of this story, she becomes part of this inherited legend.

Rumors of the strangeness of Misselthwaite Manor first reach Mary in India, when the young Basil Crawford warns Mary about her “hunchback...horrid” uncle and his “great, big, desolate old house in the county” (10). Mrs. Medlock, the housekeeper and Mary’s traveling companion, serves as the second storyteller, relating to Mary the first narrative of Lilies Craven. Mrs. Medlock concludes her tale by saying, “but there’s nothing else” (16); and yet it immediately becomes clear that there *is* something else to this story.

The third storyteller, the servant Martha Sowerby, acts as Mary’s primary guide to British ways and customs, teaching her how to dress herself, how to amuse herself, and, inadvertently, how to speak the Yorkshire dialect. Manifestly embedded in the British class hierarchy, Martha acts as a teacher of the customs of British life. As Maddox had discussed, the relinquishing or modification of old customs and the acquisition of new customs plays a particularly important role in *Le Chevalier au Lion* and to a lesser extent in *Owain*, and Mary is likewise deeply attached to her previously learned customs:

She said that very often—‘It was the custom’....It had not been the custom that Mistress Mary should do anything but stand and allow herself to be dressed like a doll, but before she was ready for breakfast she began to suspect that her life at Misselthwaite Manor would end by teaching her a number of things quite new to her. (27)

Martha does not merely educate Mary in British ways, however; after sending Mary outside to play, Martha tells her, “‘One of th’ gardens is locked up. No one has been in it for ten years.’”

The fleeting mention of this garden haunts Mary from the beginning, so that as Mary wanders through the unfamiliar grounds, “She could not help thinking about the garden which no one had been into for ten years....How could a garden be shut up? You could always walk into a garden” (32). Mary’s frustration and her subsequent wanderings through the grounds in search of

the lost garden reflect a misunderstanding, however, of the garden's significance. It is not enough to simply find and unlock the garden; first, a transformation will be required of Mary.

It is in the gardens that Mary meets her three guides to the natural world: Dickon, Ben Weatherstaff, and the robin. Martha's stories have also anticipated introduction of Dickon, Martha's "Magic" brother (180). It is the mention of Dickon that helps Martha coax Mary outside, although he will not appear until after Mary has already opened the garden and slipped into her role as its resident goddess. Dickon and Martha occupy parallel functions in Mary's growth, the one a teacher of human society, the other a teacher of nature.

Yet Ben Weatherstaff equally plays the role of a guide to the natural world. He is the Black Man figure, the gruff guardian of the garden and its creatures who grudgingly provides the next pieces information about the garden. He also—somewhat inadvertently—initiates Mary into the ways and languages of the garden. Mary takes to her new surroundings with astonishing speed. As she tries to imitate Ben's speech with the robin, her sharp, disagreeable voice suddenly alters into a "soft and eager and coaxing" tone (38), and she has soon begin to adopt the robin's ways, blending into her surroundings only to "[spring] out of the earth" This prompts Ben to tell her, "'Tha'rt like th' robin.'" He then adds, "'Tha's fair unearthly'" (80-1).

In these pronouncements, Ben has labeled Mary as something more-than-human. As becomes increasingly clear, Mary has not merely assimilated into the English landscape; she has become somehow otherworldly, and in becoming so has been deemed worthy of undertaking the lost garden's resuscitation. The robin confirms Mary's worthiness of the garden. Greeting Mary with "a clear rippling little sound" (38), he acknowledges the girl's existence in a way that her own parents never did, affirming Mary's reality and endowing her with a sense of agency. Mary notes that "He was not like an Indian bird," as if referencing the neglect that she experienced in

India, and she immediately looks to the robin as a figure of authority in all things pertaining to the mysterious manor and gardens. As Ben Weatherstaff tells Mary, the robin “knows all th’ things Mester Craven never troubles hissel’ to find out” (37). Mistress Mary, in troubling herself to find out quite a few “things,” will use her newfound authority to effectuate immense change around the manor.

It is Ben who also continues the narrative of the lost garden and first mentions its rose-trees, which will become one of the most potent embodiments of the otherworld’s “magic.” Ben offers information only grudgingly, and his full relationship with the garden—which he has secretly kept from dying over the past ten years—is only revealed toward the end of the novel. Yet if Ben is stingy in providing information, he provides Mary with surprising insights about herself. It is through speaking with Ben that Mary first realizes that she might be unlikeable: “This was plain speaking, and Mary Lennox had never heard the truth about herself in her life....She felt uncomfortable” (38).

The revelation of the garden therefore coincides with the revelation of self. Notably, the garden as it is first presented exists as a half-realized dream that is remarkably “hazy” when Mary first enters (70). Dickon’s initial description of the garden as a “body in a dream” (90) confirms the garden as interwoven with the physical bodies of its occupants; and given its close association with female figures, we can think of this “body” as distinctly female. Mary’s ability to perceive this “body” thus relates to her ability to perceive and understand herself. As Mary works, helping the garden to “breathe” again (72), the garden slowly materializes, so that Mary is both calling the ideal of paradise once more into existence and coming into existence herself.

The parallel between the garden and Mary’s body is confirmed by the fact that, as she begins to dig and to weed and to sow new seeds, Mary is physically affected: “[s]he had such red

cheeks and such bright eyes and ate such a dinner that Martha was delighted.” The robin’s observation that she has the extraordinarily good “sense to come into his garden and begin [gardening] at once” also indicates this immediate communion between girl and garden. Mary’s unspoken dreams of fulfillment are made manifest in the awakening garden; as her happiness grows with her work, the garden “look[s] twice as cheerful” as before she arrived (73).

While Mary’s efforts to access and then to revive the garden are effectuated by hard work, the enlightenment that she is experiencing is underscored by the presence of water. Water, in nearly all its forms, pervades *The Secret Garden*, which features at least three major water-features—the moor, which is compared to a “sea,” three narratively significant downpours, and a fountain—and myriad other uses of water imagery, particularly in relation to the garden’s copious roses, which are described as a “cascad[ing] “fountain” (93, 157). In dramatizing Mary’s journey, water draws attention to the structure and the almost ceremonial repetition underlying her quest. The parallel quests that Mary and Colin—and, in highly abbreviated form, Mr. Craven—undertake confirm the sense of the garden as being surrounded by multiple boundaries; and water repeatedly draws our attention to their presence.

Yet very little emphasis has been placed in criticism of *The Secret Garden* on the significance of water, which acts as both a representation and a means of metamorphosis. Mary’s story begins in the bone-dry heat of rural India, where the complete absence of water—which may contribute to Mary’s inability to grow a successful garden—reflects India’s function here as a land of infertility. Mary thirsts for change, for fulfillment, for love, but is unable to satisfy this need. When, abandoned amidst the cholera epidemic—a disease that kills by desiccation—Mary finds only half-empty wine glasses. Instead of reviving her, the wine sends her straight to sleep.

Without the presence of water, she will remain in a death-like limbo, unable to begin the transformative process necessary to reach—and to be worthy of—her garden paradise.

Mary does not encounter water until she leaves India for England, a figurative “island in the west.” Burnett spends no more than a paragraph on Mary’s first sea journey. Rather, the vast moor that surrounds Misselthwaite Manor, which is repeatedly described as a “sea” in the opening chapters (20, 23), functions as the waters dividing modern England from the otherworld of Misselthwaite Manor. Blackwood claims that Mary’s journey across the moor “evokes imagery of an *island*,” although in keeping with her Persephone interpretation she sees this island as the Underworld, not an Otherworld (6). Colin’s statement that he “ha[s] lived on a sort of desert island all his life” (202) supports the impression of the moor as a great sea, surrounding the island of the manor house and gardens.

Water also mediates Mary’s transition into an increasingly timeless sphere. Burnett repeatedly describes both the moor and the journey across its expanse as endless, suggesting that Mary has passed into a realm where time does not operate quite the same way it does elsewhere. Mary’s nocturnal crossing over the moor, in which she is blinded, literally and metaphorically, to the possibilities of the world around her, cast this transference as a physical journey to the unknown that foreshadows her reawakening of the garden.

This “sea journey,” which coincides with the novel’s first of three major rainstorms, also acts as a backdrop to the first story of Lilies Craven. Mary’s reaction hints that, even at this early stage, she is already prepared to take Lilies’s place in revitalizing the land and its inhabitants:

It sounded like something in a book and it did not make Mary feel cheerful. . . . it seemed quite natural that the rain should have begun to pour down in gray slanting lines and

splash and stream down the window-panes. If the pretty wife had been alive she might have made things cheerful....But she was not there any more. (17)

Her grasp of the mystery surrounding Misselthwaite Manor is clearly still vague, but in this passage Mary instinctively makes a connection between the obscuring winter rains, the locked-up and hidden estate, and Liliás's death. The description of the "gray slanting lines" of rain evokes the image of woven fabric and call to mind the later employment of the term "veil" for the garden's greenery (142, 149, 157, 172, 185). The moment, in conjunction with Liliás's entrance into the text, points to Mary's dawning awareness of the permeable separation between living and the dead,<sup>31</sup> which she must acquire if she is to play her part in Burnett's myth.

Rain, then, calls attention to the secretiveness of Mary's new home and serves as a backdrop for their revelation; notably, Mary's discovery of Colin occurs on a stormy night, as the howling wind seems to echo and amplify Colin's cries. Yet rain also signifies an "incubatory" state that, as in *Owain* and *Le Chevalier au Lion*, precedes and prepares for the hero's transition. In all three works, rain and sleep seem intimately connected, giving the land or the sleeper the appearance of death, but holding the promise of awakening into a new world. Mary, who previously fell asleep during the epidemic and awoke to a deserted bungalow, sleeps continually during her long, rainy journey from London to Yorkshire. It is only when they reach the edge of the moor that Mrs. Medlock admonishes, "'It's time to open your eyes!'" (18). The moment is echoed when Mary "open[s] her eyes" on her first morning at Misselthwaite. Awakening to the sight of Martha kindling a fire (23), Mary seems to be moving with each awakening from a life of isolation to one of companionship, and a fire is being similarly kindled in her soul.

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<sup>31</sup> See Jen Cadwallader's "The Three Veils: Death, Mourning, and the Afterlife in *The Secret Garden*" (2011).

Just as awakening progressively shows Mary new possibilities, the moor itself, a “sea” full of many small, rushing, noisy waterways that the carriage must repeatedly cross over (20), represents the new (other)world into which Mary has entered. Here, the motif of enclosures begins to accrue. The image of multiple bridges is followed by passage through the park gates, the long, “vault”-like avenue leading toward the manor,<sup>32</sup> and finally the stone courtyard that the manor “ramble[s] round” (20-2). Together, these points of passage visually evoke a series of bounded rings that Mary must cross if she is to discover what hides at their center.

The word “round,” of which the manor’s courtyard is one of the first instances, occurs 73 times in *The Secret Garden*, of which a mere 18 instances are used as adjectives (this is usually in relation to characters’ eyes or faces, particularly in describing the instrumental Sowerby family, who foster and guide Mary’s quest). The remaining 55 occurrences, however, function primarily as adverbs, related to moving or looking about in a circular manner. Nearly every journey into the secret garden will involve walking, turning, and staring “round and round and round” (185), and as the word’s uses multiply, it transforms the garden and the act of gardening into a ritualistic form of nature worship. The first instance of “round” actually occurs during one of Mary’s first attempts to garden in India, as the other children dance “round and round” her fruitless efforts, singing “Mistress Mary, quite contrary” (10). The sentiment behind this circling is one of mockery, and yet just as the title “Mistress Mary” alters from a term of derision to one of respect over the course of the text, this circling prefaces Mary’s future gardening success.

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<sup>32</sup> The image of the vault also calls to mind the double portcullis scene in *Owain* and *Le Chevalier au Lion*, functioning as a gradual and mysterious movement between two worlds. The portcullis scene turns on the idea of sight, blindness, and imprisonment, so that the initial meeting of Owain and the denizens of the Countess’s realm is mediated by the ring of invisibility, potentially predicting the damage that Owain’s lack of understanding of otherworld “customs” will bring. Here Mary, trapped in a “vault” and almost entirely blind, must be transformed before she can “see” this world clearly.



The pace of the narrative slows dramatically once Mary arrives at Misselthwaite. In the same way that in *Owain*, Kynon describes his initial journeys in the space of a sentence, stating, “I equipped myself, and set forth to journey through deserts and distant regions” and “at length...I came to the fairest valley in the world” (151), the physical distance that must be crossed to reach this new realm establishes that realm’s profound otherness, but is not otherwise crucial to the transformative process. In *The Secret Garden*, Mary’s journey from India to England and then from London to Yorkshire takes remarkably few pages to describe. In contrast, the events of Chapter Four through the middle of Chapter Twenty-Three take place over the course of roughly a month and a half, and Burnett depicts several of these days in immense detail. This eliding or abbreviating of long spans of time in conjunction with an intense focus on small moments within the narrative, calls to mind the medieval narrative technique of “leaping and lingering,” in which long, repetitive stretches of time are condensed into the space of a paragraph or several verses and the most detailed and extensive accounts tend to occur at moments of great significance; in *Owain* and *Le Chevalier au Lion*, the narrator generally “lingers” the protagonist’s interaction with the otherworld.

In *The Secret Garden*, Burnett lingers on two days in particular, each of which spans four chapters and charts a significant part of Mary’s and Colin’s transformations, but both the beginning of Mary’s and the conclusion of Colin’s journeys are extraordinarily condensed. By placing such intense scrutiny on the transformative process itself, and by then partially “leaping” over the blissful result, Burnett zeroes in on the preparatory process that precedes the entry into paradise.

As a result, entrance into the garden involves complex ritualistic imagery. One of the more important stages of this entry ritual includes the bypassing of a fountain, in what is perhaps

the detail the most evocative of *Owain*'s otherworld. This fountain's existence is little remarked on because it does not lie within the secret garden itself, but in one of the maze-like network of gardens that surround it. Nevertheless, the “fountain garden” appears in seven separate instances in the text, and in all seven instances its appearance directly precedes either a clue as to how to get into the secret garden, or a journey to the secret garden itself. When Mary first enters the fountain garden, she sees that

There were trees, and flower-beds, and evergreens clipped into strange shapes, and a large pool with an old gray fountain in its midst. But the flower-beds were bare and wintry and the fountain was not playing. This was not the garden which was shut up. (32)

Because it is not the garden she seeks, the dead appearance of the fountain garden does not warrant the same immediate industry that Mary brings to the locked garden. Yet in the fountain's final appearance, when Mr. Craven at last returns to Misselthwaite Manor, we are told that “The fountain was playing now and was encircled by beds of brilliant autumn flowers” (254). It is as if the reawakening of the lost garden correspondingly reawakens the fountain garden.

Moreover, Mary's many visits to the fountain garden reward her with two guides: Ben Weatherstaff and the robin. It is the robin who on this first morning reveals to Mary the location of the secret garden: ““He has flown into the orchard—he has flown across the other wall—into the garden where there is no door!”” (39). On the mornings when the robin reveals the lost garden key and then the garden door, Mary is likewise coming from a visit to the fountain garden. Visiting, and specifically circling the fountain garden thus seems to act as a preparatory ritual, which Mary must perform before venturing further into the otherworld.

Moreover, while the physical configuration of Misselthwaite Manor and its gardens creates the impression of concentric circles, Mary's movement through her new surroundings

emphasizes this circling movement. The morning that the robin shows Mary the key, she runs “round and round the fountain flower garden ten times. She counted the times carefully and when she had finished she felt in better spirits” (56). Mary’s running in carefully counted laps, which anticipates the processions Mary, Dickon, and Colin will make around the secret garden each morning, has a performative quality, in that it sets “her inactive brain to working and...actually awaken[ing] her imagination” (60), but also serves to strengthen Mary’s weak, thin body, buffeting her like some invisible “giant” and “whipp[ing] some red color into her cheeks” (40).

On the morning the robin shows Mary the door, Mary is again performing a circling action, as Mrs. Sowerby’s gift of a jump-rope prompts Mary to skip “round” the fountain garden (64). The rope’s motion creates an image of Mary at the center of an ever-moving circle, a foreshadowing of her immanent arrival in the garden—that is, at the center of Misselthwaite Manor’s rings of enclosure. This explicit circling action corresponds to a general intensification of circular movement following *The Secret Garden*’s second major rainstorm. When rain confines Mary to the manor and she begins wandering through the house’s maze-like interior, her explorations initially seem a reenactment of Mary’s passage from India to England. In one velvet-hung boudoir Mary discovers a cabinet full of a hundred ivory elephants of all different sizes,<sup>33</sup> while another room contains “inlaid furniture such as she had seen in India.”

The sequence functions as Mary’s investigation of her past, and a portrait of a girl who looks very much like Mary” “stiff, plain” with a “sharp, curious look” in her eyes and “a green parrot on her finger” (50) plays the part of the pre-Yorkshire Mary; Colin later claims that she

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<sup>33</sup> Extensive commentary has been produced concerning colonialism in *The Secret Garden*. For further reading, see Jerry Phillips.

looks like Mary “when you came here. Now you are a great deal fatter and better looking” (230). Like Ben Weatherstaff, the portrait functions as a mirror being held up to the self in a way Mary has never experienced before. Even as she uses it as a basis for comparison, Mary is therefore using the “parrot” portrait (229) to reject her former (Indian) identity. The association of the painted girl with an exotic bird presents a further contrast with the increasingly healthy Mary and the robin (the national bird of England).

It is also during this second rainstorm that Mary becomes convinced that a person is crying somewhere in the house (53), a second mystery that she must unlock before the novel’s end. However, as Mary’s growth—both physical and mental—must precede Colin’s, if she is step into the guise of the mother-goddess, his discovery must wait until she has entered into the garden.

On the morning that she enters the secret garden, Mary is determined to skip the entire length of the walk bordering the garden. We see here an echo of Kynon seeking something to overcome, or to be overcome by. Mary can only get halfway, but her effort itself yields a reward, as a “Magic” gust of wind blows a strand of ivy into Mary’s hand, revealing a doorknob beneath (66). The ivy acts as a final “veil,” “a loose and swinging curtain” that she must push aside as the robin chirps encouragement. The very crossing of the threshold morphs into a journey, so that at its end Mary must lean back against the door “breathing quite fast with excitement, and wonder, and delight” (68).

The garden is immediately established as unearthly, an entire new world all for Mary (71). Yet its mystery remains, and Mary’s ability to see the otherworld is thus obscured by the “hazy tangle” of climbing roses that drape from all the trees, indicating that the quest for paradise has merely begun. As if suddenly gifted with new strength to begin this quest, Mary

decides to “skip round the whole garden” (71). She halts, however, at the sight of green shoots coming up through the black soil and instinctively clears away tangles of weeds. When Mary later introduces Dickon to the garden, he serves as a teacher in the nurturing of plants and creatures, but he expresses astonishment at Mary’s initial attempts at gardening, declaring, “A gardener couldn’t have told thee better” (93). Dickon’s commendation of Mary’s gardening thus acts as an acknowledgement of her position as the garden’s resident goddess.

The day that Mary entrusts Dickon with the secret of the garden is one of the two days spanning four chapters, and it brings Mary into contact with the many mysteries she has encountered: the long-awaited introduction of Dickon, the garden, which is miraculously awakening, Mary’s reclusive and deeply depressed uncle, and the inexplicable crying Mary always hears in the halls. The structure of these encounters warrants examination, as they coincide with Mary’s experiences in that “fairy place,” the garden and her corresponding transformation into a “fair unearthly” thing (79, 81). Mary is falling deeper into her otherworld role, and is therefore ready to meet Dickon. The legendary Dickon does not only serve as a guide in this otherworld; he quickly becomes Mary’s teacher in the meaning of friendship, a concept as wholly foreign to Mary as Yorkshire itself. Mary’s ability to feel compassion and friendship comes to life with the garden, so that by the day’s end she is ready to encounter the two “madmen” of Misselthwaite Manor—first her uncle, who, even hidden beneath a haze of melancholy, nevertheless senses Mary’s similarities with Lillas (104), and then Colin, the habitually hysterical invalid hidden away at the very center of the vast manor.

The meeting with Colin is the final episode of the day, although Mary has so altered over its course that the reader is likely not to realize all four chapters take place in less than twenty-four hours. As the novel’s third, and wildest rainstorm is unleashed, Mary feels compelled to

unlock this final mystery: “She felt as if she must find out what it was” (107). Like Mary’s sensation of having slipped into the world of a tapestry on her first morning, here she must open a door hidden *behind* a tapestry. She must, in other words, enter into Colin’s story and reverse the results of Lilies’s death.

Mary’s discovery of Colin marks the moment when she transforms from audience into a storyteller, “bewitch[ing]” (121, 124) Colin with her accounts of the garden. Just as Martha’s and Ben’s stories worked a sort of magic on Mary, here Mary’s stories initiate a magical transformation of Colin. When Martha reacts to the news of the children’s meeting with the exclamation, “‘Th’ world’s comin’ to a end!’” (123), she is not entirely wrong. There is something apocalyptic about this third rainstorm, just as the terrifying tempest of rain and hail in *Owain* and *Le Chevalier au Lion* prefaces the arrival of spring. When Mary awakes the next morning, the natural world seems to be responding to this upheaval:

The sun was pouring in slanting rays through the blinds and there was something so joyous in the sight of it that she....drew up the blinds and opened the window itself and a great waft of fresh, scented air blew upon her. The moor was blue and the whole world looked as if something Magic had happened to it. There were tender little fluting sounds here and there and everywhere, as if scores of birds were beginning to tune up for a concert. Mary put her hand out of the window and held it in the sun. (133).

Mary subsequently rushes into the sunlight and stands amid “the fluting and twittering and singing coming from every bush and tree” and “clasp[s] her hands for pure joy.”<sup>34</sup> It is at this point in the novel when the disparate elements Burnett introduces upon Mary’s arrival at

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<sup>34</sup> For the corresponding scene in *Le Chevalier au Lion*, in which birds descend in a burst of sunlight onto the fountain tree and “sang/In such a way that they formed a perfect harmony,” prompting Calogrenant to observe, “Never before had I heard an expressed such joy,” see pages 77-9, lines 453-473.

Misselthwaite begin to come together. The characters that once existed in separate spheres—characters that were in essence “locked away” from each other—have become part of the same narrative.

Emphasizing this growing theme of unification, Burnett will rework this image of sunlight, birdsong, and a joy bordering on ecstasy in Colin’s first journey to the secret garden:

The arch of [the sky] looked very high and small snowy clouds seemed like white birds floating on outspread wings below its crystal blueness...[Colin’s] big eyes looked as if it were they which were listening—listening, instead of his ears. (184).

The linking of these scenes through similar imagery deepens the impression of Mary and Colin’s attainment of this garden paradise as being the result of a circular progression, one which functions on a linguistic as well as a narrative level.

In fact, it is in large part through recurring phrases that Burnett tightens the link between the natural world outside the manor and the psychological shifts of her protagonists. When Mary rejects the dark confines of the manor in the first of these two passages, “unchain[ing] and unbolt[ing] and unlock[ing]” the door and “[springing] across the step with bound” (134), this single sentence encapsulates Mary’s entire experience at Misselthwaite, as she progressively and energetically unlocks both internal and external confines and enters into a world of eternal spring. Burnett further connects Colin’s debilitating tantrums with the apocalyptic rainstorms, so that the “dreadful sounds” and sobs he produces (152) echo the “beating” rain. When Mary summarily rejects Colin’s long-held conviction that he is going to die, she is thus rejecting death as an option for both Colin and for the world outside. Colin’s tantrum, like the rainstorm, will be the last violent outburst.

It therefore makes sense that the theme of immortality here enters the text. The initial introduction of the phrase “forever and ever” (18) coincides with Mary’s journey across the moor, when the moor still suggests a wasteland. The phrase therefore suggests the apparent hopelessness of the land’s desolation. The words are given a new voice and new meaning after the third rainstorm, however, when Dickon uses them in reference to the fresh moor air: ““He says he feels it in his veins and it makes him strong and he feels as if he could live forever and ever.”” Colin is so taken with the phrase that he repeats it, and as he mimics Dickon’s, breathing in deeply, “he felt that something quite new and delightful was happening to him” (172). When Colin enters the secret garden, he will again repeat Dickon’s words in what functions as a triumphant affirmation of immortality:

[he] look[ed] round and round and round as Dickon and Mary had done....and there were fluttering wings and faint sweet pipes and humming and scents and scents. And the sun fell warm upon his face like a hand with a lovely touch. And in wonder Mary and Dickon stood and stared at him. He looked so strange and different because a pink glow of color had actually crept all over him—ivory face and neck and hands and all.

“I shall get well! I shall get well!” he cried out. “Mary! Dickon! I shall get well!

And I shall live forever and ever and ever!” (185)

With this statement, Colin’s first journey to the garden, which like the day of his discovery spans four chapters, coincides with the end of real time and the progression into the timeless “wonderful months.” The narrator likens these months to the experience of watching the sunrise, a ritual “which has been happening every morning for thousands and thousands and thousands of years” and which gives the viewer the fleeting sense that he or she will live forever (186).



Colin experiences just such a feeling when he first enters the garden, and it seems that Mary and Dickon have a similar sense of the garden. Their “most absorbing” preparation for Colin’s arrival in the garden, which they chart out days in advance, seems undertaken with a respectful awareness of the garden’s sacred dimensions:

They would go up this path and down that one and cross the other and go round among the fountain flower-beds....They would turn into the shrubbery walks and lose themselves until they came to the long walls. It was almost as serious and elaborately thought out as the plans of march made by great generals in times of war. (178-9)

The prominence of the fountain garden in their plans, preceding and aiding in the final attainment of the center, means that both Mary and Dickon will relive the original mystery even as Colin experiences it for the first time.

Of course, as in *Owain* and *Le Chevalier au Lion*, the fountain bears the promise of failure as much as it bears the promise of success, as evidenced by Mary’s repeated circles around it before she gains access to the secret garden. Colin, too, has experienced failure in the fountain garden, in a moment described by Martha as ““One of th’ worst fits he ever had.”” Taken into the garden one day in an attempt to improve his health, Colin became convinced that the roses around the fountain will make him sick and begins to sneeze. He ultimately ““threw himself into a passion an’ ....cried himself into a fever”” (124).

When Mary and Dickon take Colin into the garden, however, Colin is at last approaching the garden’s promise of health and happiness. As if sensing the importance of this moment, the children approach the garden with something akin to awe:

they wound in and out among the shrubbery and out and round the fountain beds, following their carefully planned route for the mere mysterious pleasure of it. But when

at last they turned into the Long Walk by the ivied walls the excited sense of an approaching thrill made them, for some curious reason they could not have explained, begin to speak in whispers. (184)

Here, Mary once again slips into the role of the storyteller, recounting her meetings with Ben Weatherstaff and the robin, her discovery of the key and of the door, and her first entrance into the garden, so that the very act of physical passage into the garden becomes intertwined with the legend Mary has begun to compose.

Yet this scene also demonstrates to what extent Colin’s and Mary’s understandings of this “story” diverge. Whereas Mary and Dickon would seem to accept the natural miracle they are participating in without question, Colin attempts to try to construct a coherent theology out of them, which he can take back to the ordinary world under the name of science (207). Previous to his meeting with Mary, Colin’s impressions of nature derive almost entirely from books, and just as Mary begins to interpret the garden as something out of a folktale, Colin interprets Mary’s descriptions as if they were from a book of ancient history.

This distinction is accentuated once Colin enters the garden, so that while Mary’s perceptions of the garden remain more abstract, centered around the instinctive need to nurture, Colin imposes an inherited literary and historical structure on the children’s doings in the garden. When Mary and Dickon walked “round” the garden each day, they were unconsciously participating in a natural ritual. Colin, however, dubs this circling a “procession,” the garden a “temple,” and the children as forming a “mystic circle” (212, 209, 222). Similarly, when Mary announces the coming of spring one morning, Colin imagines a scene from one of his books, “with a great procession and big bursts and wafts of music....crowds of lovely people and children with garlands and branches with blossoms on them, everyone laughing and dancing.”

Mary, somewhat startled, admits that spring does feel just like his description, although she imagines “flowers and leaves and green things and birds and wild creatures” dancing rather than people (182), a statement that encapsulates one of the fundamental differences in Mary’s solitary journey and Colin’s own journey, which always keeps human society in view.

Thus, as Colin quickly eases into the position of the ruler of the garden, its descriptions alter from a vague reference to “fairy arches” into a detailed, hierarchal, and even economic vision of “the country of a magic king and queen” full of “mysterious riches” and “golden” sunshine (188). Colin rapidly morphs into a “High Priest,” and he gathers his followers in a circle each morning, chanting “like a strange boy spirit” and then leading them around the garden in a “procession” (112).

Like Mary’s running and jump-roping, this procession has a double purpose, to convoke the garden’s magic and to strengthen Colin’s unused legs. In a similar fashion, as Colin’s strength grows, the children begin to perform strengthening exercises together, which we observe through the eyes of the curious robin:

all three of the children at times did unusual things. They would stand under the trees and move their arms and legs and heads about in a way which was neither walking nor running nor sitting down. They went through these movements at intervals every day and the robin was never able to explain to his mate what they were doing or trying to do.  
(228)

By presenting what is doubtless a routine set of exercises through the eyes of an outsider to human culture, Burnett transforms these movements into religious ritual. Physical strength, or power, and spiritual growth, or “belief in the Magic,” are thus fused.

Coinciding with Colin’s attempts to impose a societal structure on this natural paradise is the entry of adults into what has been heretofore restricted to children. As Ben Weatherstaff is drawn into the children’s games and as Mrs. Sowerby enters the garden, Burnett is signifying the return of adults to this child’s paradise. Mr. Craven’s return in the novel’s final chapter, which will act as a much-abbreviated repetition of his son’s and his niece’s journeys, concludes this final process of integration.

*The Secret Garden*’s final chapter devotes itself entirely to Mr. Craven’s travels. It also quits the folktale perspective of Mary, transforming Mr. Craven from a symbol-laden embodiment of the Misselthwaite’s overpowering grief into a psychologically complex character.

As if seeking his own rebirth, Mr. Craven has traveled to “the quietest and remotest spots” of Europe, to the places where “it seem[ed] as if the world were just being born.” His wanderings, however, have no effect on him: “darkness so brooded over him that...it was as if he poisoned the air about him with gloom” and “[m]ost strangers thought he must be either half mad or a man with some hidden crime upon his soul” (246). It is not until the moment when, a world away, Colin cries, ““I am going to live forever and ever and ever,”” that an awareness of life begins to penetrate the gloom (247). As he lies one day beside a clear, bubbling stream in a deserted valley, surrounded by birdsong, “It was as if a *sweet clear spring* had begun to rise in a stagnant pool and had risen and risen until at last it swept the dark water away” from his soul (246, emphasis added).

If we are to interpret this final chapter as a replication of the journeys of Mary and Colin, this moment reproduces the fountain scenes at Misselthwaite, awakening Mr. Craven’s mind to the possibility of beauty and life but not allowing him to embrace a full rebirth. His abiding

nightmares indicates that Mr. Craven lingers in an uneasy incubatory stage between death and life. Yet as time passes, the nightmares fall away and the days becomes a “dream” (247). While not yet awakened, sleep is no longer a place of terror, and the dream of happiness slowly becomes “so real that he did not feel as if he were dreaming.” It is here that Liliass’s voice calls out to Mr. Craven, telling him that she is “[i]n the garden” (248).

Mr. Craven’s subsequent return to Misselthwaite Manor naturally echoes Mary’s own arrival, as he crosses the sea to England and takes the same “long railroad journey” to Yorkshire. Yet once he enters into the moor, the changes that have been wrought by Mary, Colin, Dickon, Ben, Liliass, and Mrs. Sowerby become evident, so that “[t]he drive across the wonderfulness of the moor was a soothing thing” (252).

Upon reaching the house, Mr. Craven continues to follow the call of the garden, and he takes his way

as Mary had done, through the door in the shrubbery and among the laurels and the fountain beds. The fountain was playing now and was encircled by beds of brilliant autumn flowers. He crossed the lawn and turned into the Long Walk by the ivied walls. He did not walk quickly, but slowly, and his eyes were on the path. He felt as if he were being drawn back to the place he had so long forsaken, and he did not know why. As he drew near to it his step became still more slow. He knew where the door was even though the ivy hung thick over it—but he did not know exactly where it lay—that buried key.

(254)

The passage obviously follows the same pattern established on Mary’s first day at Misselthwaite, moving from the fountain garden and down the Long Walk toward the garden door. As Mr.

Craven nears the door, however, an abrupt reversal occurs as, instead of Mr. Craven bursting *into* the garden, it is Colin that “burst through at full speed” and into his father’s arms (255).

The scene implies a final homecoming for Colin, yet it also signifies that Colin’s destiny lies beyond the garden, in modern British society and in the realm of sciences into which he plans to introduce the concept of Magic. Through Colin, the garden thus finds its most expansive impact on the external world. Even as Mr. Craven is ushered into the garden for his own final healing, looking “round and round” this “embowered temple of gold” and hearing the entire story recounted a final time (257), the father and son are preparing to walk back to the house together, to reassume their positions as “the Master of Misselthwaite” and “Master Colin” (258). The garden has served its purpose where the Cravens are concerned, endowing them with strength and happiness but then sending them back into the world.

This is not necessarily the case with Mary. Much has been said about Mary’s disappearance in this final scene. She is mentioned briefly in the garden but never speaks, and appears nowhere in Mr. Craven and Colin’s return to the house. As a result, some critics have labeled this scene a reaffirmation of class and gender roles at the novel’s end. The topic of gender and class in relation to *The Secret Garden* has inspired what is perhaps the novel’s most heated commentary. What many of these criticisms fail to note, however—and what several essays touching on *The Secret Garden*’s utopian themes have remarked—is that Mary does not disappear in the final chapter; she simply remains, like Lilies, *in the garden*. Mary is so entirely subsumed in her “legendary” status that while Colin and his father return, rejuvenated, to reassume their position in society, Mary is left in the garden—an apparent abandonment that somehow seems entirely natural.

Thus, while Colin and his father reassume their societal roles, and as Colin prepares for a career as an Athlete, a Lecturer, and a Scientific Discoverer (257), Mary remains separate; she has given society life, she has learned its customs and forged human connections in the process, but her role remains that of an outsider—or, if we regard the secret garden as the center and society as external, an insider—who has gained the power to nurture and inspire human society but who is not fully part of it. That Mary remains in the garden suggests that she has developed into the mother-goddess of this happy otherworld, protecting the garden just as Dickon protects the moor, and as Mrs. Sowerby protects all of them. Colin may be the figure who cries that he will “live forever and ever,” but the novel’s curious conclusion suggests that it is Mary who may gain that gift of immortality.

The theme of immortality, although only partially in earnest in *The Secret Garden*, does not appear in *Owain* or in *Le Chevalier au Lion*, and only in a limited sense—primarily in relation to the western Islands of the Blessed—in surviving Celtic mythic lore. In fact, in this aspect of her work Burnett seems to be most clearly drawing on the inherited Christian concept of immortal life, but she transforms the concept into something more spiritual than strictly theological. While certain imagery and motifs evoke Eden and New Testament figures, the deeper structure of *The Secret Garden*’s tale of rejuvenation indicates that, beneath a façade of Christian imagery, a very different canon is at work: the texts of the Victorian Revival, which have donated to *The Secret Garden* a numinous, transfigurative, deeply layered landscape that, step by painstaking step, leads the heroine toward the tantalizing promise of paradise.

### ***Concluding Thoughts***

In analyzing *The Secret Garden* in conjunction with Medieval Revival texts and themes, both in specific reference to *Owain* and *Le Chevalier au Lion* and in a more general sense, it seems increasingly probable that this canon has had a far greater impact on the novel’s composition than has previously been considered. Acknowledging this influence therefore provides increased insight into the meaning of twentieth-century literature’s most famous garden paradise. Situating *The Secret Garden* within the context of Celtic myth and legend has an additional advantage, however; it illuminates Burnett’s late works, particularly *The White People* and *The Head of the House of Coombe* and its sequel, *Robin*. *The White People* in particular seems to refer to one of Burnett’s earliest literary loves, Sir Walter Scott, and all three works cast rural Scotland as the land of primitive and often mythic truth.

*The White People* has significant thematic overlaps with the much earlier *In the Closed Room*, but like *The Secret Garden* it demonstrates the extent to which Burnett’s views on life and death—or at least her methods of dealing with them in a literary setting—evolved after the composition of *In the Closed Room* in 1904. It also shows how much these views continued to deepen after the doctrine-establishing conclusion of *The Secret Garden*. *The White People*, written seven years after *The Secret Garden*’s initial serial release, is more explicitly Celtic-influenced and, written toward the end of World War I, explores in far greater detail the sufferings of bereaved parents, children, and lovers.

The world of *The White People* is one of permeable veils and uncertain temporal bounds, in which the past and the present, the living and the dead (recently so or otherwise) slip in and out of each other’s lives without a moment’s notice. The young Scottish heiress Ysobel, who narrates the book, is not initially aware that “the white people” she sees everywhere are ghosts.



They are such a natural part of her landscape—one of them actually becomes her childhood playmate—that she has no cause to think of them as dead. In fact, one of the most revolutionary aspects of *The White People* is its outright negation of death, and its denial of the idea that our loved ones leave us when they die: “It is as if I can’t *believe* it” (42).

Gone for the most part is the Christian vision of Paradise; as Burnett claims in “Mrs. Burnett and the Occult,” “I believe that all, everything, is possible” and that I will “live a millions years, if for no other reason than that I am so interested in seeing all of these possible things come true.” While the Bible is by no means rejected in *The White People*, any more than it is in *The Secret Garden*, it is presented as just another book among many in Angus Macayre’s vast library—no more or less true than its fellows. Ysobel’s unique understanding of death thus positions her as the greatest authority on the subject, which brings her to the attention of the terminally ill Hector MacNairn. When asked about death, Ysobel speaks of it as an awakening “in the midst of wonders. I don’t mean angels with harps and crowns, but beauty such as we see now [on the moor]” (92). Ysobel thereby aligns death not with a far-off celestial heaven, but with the legendary Scottish landscape.

Celtic and medievalist influences—notably that of Sir Walter Scott, who almost certainly inspired the character of Scottish author Hector MacNairn—therefore have a far more visible presence in *The White People*. The young, orphaned Ysobel (the spelling alone, as with many of the characters’ names and colloquial dialect, reflects a somewhat stereotypical conception of Scotland) grows up in a “huge, frowning feudal castle” in the Highlands, a world in which stories, histories, legends, and folklore structure one’s daily life. Ysobel describes her dead parents as reading fairy stories together and listening to Angus Macayre’s “ancient tales...of the days when Agricola forced his way among the Men of the Woods, who would die any savage

death rather than be conquered” (5-6).<sup>35</sup> Ysobel herself studies the ancient books in Angus’s library and learns old Gaelic, as well as Latin and Greek (22). When forced to read more modern books, “My chief weariness with them came from the way they had of referring to the things I was so intimate with as though they were only the unauthenticated history of a life so long passed by that it could no longer matter to anyone” (26). Her appreciation for Hector MacNairn stems from the fact that he alone treats marvelous stories as though they are real (39).

Indeed, Burnett emphasizes throughout *The White People* that Ysobel’s Scotland is simultaneously legendary and real. The intersection of these two elements occurs in the figure of the moor, which serves as a backdrop to events both present and past. The moor of course has an enormous presence in *The Secret Garden*. However, as we will see, Mary will retain a certain extent of distance from it; Dickon alone truly belongs in its vast expanse. The garden for Mary will thus become a human-sized microcosm of the moor. In *The White People*, however, Ysobel enters the moor frequently and willingly, even as she acknowledges its potentially frightening sentience: “I began to feel that the moor was in secret my companion and friend, that it was not only the moor to me, but something else. It was like a thing alive—a huge giant lying spread out in the sun warming itself, or covering itself with thick, white mist which sometimes writhed and twisted itself into wraiths” (9-10). Here, amidst misty clouds that the wind “twisted...into weird shapes, almost like human creatures,” she meets her childhood companion, Wee Brown Elspeth, “one of the fair ones” (19).

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<sup>35</sup> The reference is to the Roman general Gnaeus Julius Agricola, who conquered parts of Wales, England, and Scotland in the first century C.E. The “Men of the Woods” are thus pre-Christian Celtic tribesmen.

It is while on the moor that Ysobel attains her personal state of paradise. Toward the end of the novel, Ysobel will recount to Mrs. MacNairn the night in which her spirit escapes from her body and journeys out onto the moor, an experience she refers to as “Out on the Hillside”:

That is what I call The Dream to myself, ‘Out on the Hillside,’ as if it were a kind of unearthly poem. But it wasn’t. It was more real than anything I have ever felt. . . . And in spite of the thrilling beauty of the moon, all but the part [of the hill] I stood on melted into soft, beautiful shadow, all below me and above me. . . . All my being was ecstasy—pure, light ecstasy! Oh, what poor words— But I know no others. If I said that I was happy—happy!—it would be nothing. I was happiness itself, I was pure rapture! I did not look at the beauty of the night, the sky, the marvelous melting shadow. I was part of it all, one with it. (67-9)

The passage brings to mind *In the Closed Room*’s inversion of sleep and awakening, although Ysobel never discounts or lowers the status of waking life. There is no transcendence of mortal existence, but rather a deepening of what mortal existence encompasses. Ysobel rejects the term “unearthly,” wanting to claim the experience for reality. Hector MacNairn, however, sees merit of this description, saying of the moor, “There is a sort of unearthly loveliness in it all” (92). It would therefore seem that the moor is both earthly and unearthly, the meeting point of the living and the dead.

Burnett’s final novels, *The Head of the House of Coombe* and its sequel *Robin*, depart to a certain extent from *The White People*’s intense focus on legendary material. Written four years after the devastating conclusion of World War I, the novels are perhaps Burnett’s more generically diverse works, combining historical fiction, realism, and her long-held interest in the “primitive” and in fairy landscapes with a far more frank depiction of sexuality and morality than

is evident in her earlier novels. Burnett also exhibits a certain degree of ambivalence toward her earlier, more romantic creations, calling the pre-war years “a period when people still had reason to believe in permanency and had indeed many of them—sometimes through ingenuousness, sometimes through stupidity of type—acquired a singular confidence in the importance and stability of their possessions, desires, ambitions and forms of conviction” (*Head* 1). Burnett is at her most intriguing in the beginning of *The Head of the House of Coombe*, which approaches *The Secret Garden*’s fusion of psychological realism and myth-based imagery and which explicitly reworks many of this earlier work’s themes. Yet by the conclusion of *Robin*, Burnett has retreated from cynicism and approached the tone of the more overtly mythic *White People*.

For all its morally complex supporting characters, *The Head of the House of Coombe* anticipates *Robin*’s progression into a more mythic landscape, positioning the “beautifully elemental” Donal Muir—a child Scottish chieftain who marches through London in a kilt and feathered bonnet (126)—and his childhood love Robin as the heirs to an ancient paradisiacal tradition. Their love is established in a walled London garden—“A child Adam and Eve might have known something like it in the Garden of Eden” (91)—but just as Mary opens Colin’s eyes to alternative ways of life, so Donal’s books and stories act as “the beginning of questioning” for the five-year-old Robin. His revelations of Scotland and of love, which the neglected Robin has never known, “combin[e] to form a world of enchantment” around which “a new heaven and a new earth” seem “to form themselves” (98). Donal’s abrupt departure understandably causes Robin to believe that “her new world had gone—forever and ever” (129), sending her into deep depression.

Robin and Donal’s reunion at the close of *The Head of the House of Coombe*, which coincides with the onset of World War I, takes place in a different kind of “enchanted world”

(354)—a ball that the dancers naively hope will continue “forever and ever” (350). When Donal and Robin profess their love for each other, they are seated beside a marble fountain<sup>36</sup> in a conservatory, so that while their surroundings have been transformed into “an inner Paradise” (370), there is something inherently fragile about the conservatory’s glass walls. As Donal notes at the beginning of *Robin*, ““There’s such a lot of life—and such a lot to live for—forever if one could. And a smash—or a crash—or a thrust—and it’s over! Sometimes I can hardly get hold of it” (23).

Although it provides glimpses of the French battlefields, *Robin* leaves behind the London setting of its prequel for rural Britain. Its most significant events occur either in the “fairy-tale cottage” of the “old fairy woman” Mrs. Bennett beside the “fairy wood” (57, 59, 74), or in the “feudal fastness” of Darreuch Castle in the Scottish Highlands (137). Throughout the novel, Scotland in particular is associated with a deeper form of belief and a deeper access to truth than urban England: “In the Highlands we believe more than most people do” (21) and “I’m a Highlander and I know it’s true” (22). While the novel does not repeat *The White People*’s communing with the dead, Robin does share a mystical connection with Donal, who is languishing in a German prison. The couple’s eventual reunion has no impact on stemming the tide of the war, but it does return them to the “Paradise” that they have formed together: “the gates of peace open and earth and war [are] shut out” (232). Different from Colin Craven’s ambitions to spread the bounty of paradise with the world, *Robin* suggests that Burnett has retreated into a more personal conception of paradise. The dreaminess of *Robin*—and of its admittedly bland heroine, who seems in another world for most of the novel—serves to

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<sup>36</sup> The prominence given to the fountain in this scene may be, like the phrase “forever and ever,” a reference to *The Secret Garden*.

increasingly separate the otherworldly from the worldly that Burnett’s earlier novels worked to achieve.

Burnett’s final work, *In the Garden*, again modifies this vision with what has become her most famous quote: “As long as one has a garden, one is has a future, and as long as one has a future one is alive.” Written on her deathbed, *In the Garden* presents what is in many ways Burnett’s simplest, and perhaps most personal conception of a garden paradise. It indicates, moreover, that to the last Burnett continued to wrestle with the mystery of death, an obsession that had played out over the past three decades of her literary career. It also seems clear that Burnett has following the publication of *In the Closed Room* in 1904 moved progressively away from primarily Christian themes and toward Revival texts, although she concludes on a far less mystical note.

On a final note, *The Secret Garden* has since its release gained the reputation of one of the great classics of children’s literature. Its publication lies more or less equidistant between the two other Burnett children’s books most overtly interested in death and the afterlife, *In the Closed Room* and *The White People*, and as such marks a thematic shift in Burnett’s children’s oeuvre. Yet while placing *The Secret Garden* along a temporal and thematic continuum between *In the Closed Room* and *The White People* may stress the thematic alterations in Burnett’s oeuvre, structurally, neither tale truly explains the formation of *The Secret Garden*. Both are far briefer stories, and far more compact in both geography and time span. *In the Closed Room* seems to take place over a matter of days; *The White People* spans the course of a few months. It is also easier to identify their literary influences; *The Secret Garden* may lie chronologically between the two, but it is altogether more enigmatic about its influences, and in some ways more creative in its ideas. Neither do *In the Closed Room* or *The White People* concentrate on the

exploration of the issues of belief. By contrast, *The Secret Garden*'s complex quest structure offers a means of interrogating spirituality at great length, long before Colin begins to distill these ideas into a specific belief system in the novel's final chapters. In this matter, *The Secret Garden* stands out.

It is ultimately legitimate to ask whether *The Secret Garden* can truly be classed as a children's novel, despite its status as a classic of the genre. Beyond its serial publication in the adult-intended *The American Magazine*, *The Secret Garden* seems linked to what *The Head of the House of Coombe* refers to as "the beginning of questioning"—an extended dialogue debating life's meaning that plays out in *The Dawn of To-morrow*, *The Shuttle*, *The Head of the House of Coombe*, *Robin*, and in abbreviated form in *In the Garden*. It therefore seems to straddle the line between children's and adult fiction, even as it straddles the line between realism and romanticism. As such, *The Secret Garden* has the potential to illuminate Burnett's oeuvre as a whole.

Finally, *The Secret Garden* calls attention to the diverse and often subtle influence of the nineteenth-century Revival on genres not strictly related to the movement. It points to far wider impact on the literary landscape of the time than has generally been considered. Moreover, its depiction of a "legendary" British landscape, and its fusing therein of a supposedly ancient aesthetic with a more modern one, potentially elucidates other pre-World War I-era fiction demonstrating comparable preoccupations. E. M. Forster's masterpiece *Howard's End* (1910), for instance, is different in many respects from the simultaneously published *The Secret Garden*. Yet it exhibits a similar desire to "[o]nly connect" the romanticism of the old with the industry of the new, a desire it grounds in the land itself. In one of the work's most celebrated passages, Forster positions his foreign reader on the southern hills of England, so that "system after system

of our island would roll together under his feet,” from the “wild lands” to the “tremendous...City’s trail” (191). “[R]eason fails” to grasp the implications of ancient time and an incomprehensible future, Forster tells us, but in its place “the imagination swells, spreads, and deepens, until it becomes geographic and encircles England” (192). Pointing the foreigner’s gaze toward the sea, however, Forster begins to ruminate on the Isle of Wight, that “fragment of England floated forward to greet the foreigner.” It is this “fragment,” this bounded western island so evocative of the secret garden, that “will guard the Island’s purity till the end of time” (191).

In Forester’s conclusion we hear echoes of Burnett. Her imagination does indeed “become geographic” in her later works, conceiving of contemporary identity in relation to the land, and of the land in relation to a lost sense of the primitive. And it is within that enigmatic walled Yorkshire garden that these lost eternal truths are guarded until the end of time.



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