

Decoding *The Secret Garden*

Secrets of Mary's Growth

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Abstract—The American authoress Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel *The Secret Garden* is a classic masterpiece of children's literature, narrating the growth path of the young girl Mary. This thesis mainly explores the three keys to Mary's growth: nature, harmonious interpersonal relationship and secret, hoping to provide some reference for the current children's education.

Keywords—*The Secret Garden*; keys; the theme of growth

I. INTRODUCTION

In the colorful garden of children's literature, the American authoress Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* can be regarded as a strange and interesting flower with exceedingly fascinating charm and warm radiance. Since its blossom in early 1911, through the cold and heat of one hundred years, this extraordinary flower still stands proudly on the branches, fragrant and lasting. It attracts generations of young people all over the world and brings the best memories of childhood to many of them. Why is this exotic flower planted by Burnett so exuberant and long-lasting? Apart from its unusual characterization of completely unattractive heroine Mary and one of the heroes Colin, the exquisite technique of female writing, concise and clear language style, elaborately designed plot, Gothic mystery and the application of exotic atmosphere, what strikes the readers most is the ten-year-old girl Mary's journey of self-growth. How does Mary transform from a weak, strange, obstinate and selfish little bully to a healthy, lively, friendly and loving girl? What leads to Mary's final transformation and self-redemption? The present thesis intends to explore the three keys to Mary's growth: nature, harmonious interpersonal relationship and secret, hoping to provide some reference for the current children's education.

II. THE BAPTISM OF NATURE

Born in India, Mary had always been infected with various diseases since childhood. The hot weather deprived her of her good appetite and the harsh environment limited her range of activities. Every day, little Mary just stayed in a gorgeous room, surrounded by a group of Indian servants, doing nothing at all. The loss of appetite and the lack of outdoor sports made Mary lifeless and she became "a sickly, fretful, toddling thing". (Burnett 1) Those who had seen her all agreed that she was the most disagreeable-looking child

ever seen. "She had a little thin face and a little thin body, thin light hair and a sour expression." (Burnett 1) The long-term captive life not only did damage to Mary's health and appearance, but also gave birth to her moody, tyrannical, selfish and domineering personality. Such a dull and enclosed life lasted for ten years. At the age of ten, her parents died of cholera suddenly, and she was left orphaned. Soon later, she was sent to live with her uncle in Yorkshire. There, for the first time, Mary had the opportunity to get close to nature, starting a very important journey in her life.

The Misselthwaite Manor of Mary's uncle was located on the edge of the vast moor of Yorkshire. When she first arrived in Yorkshire, it was just in the middle of winter. Mary was very uncomfortable with the bitter cold, high winds and the endless expanse of the moorland. Because she used to live in a humid and hot enclosed environment all the year round, the wide and bleak moor seemed to be a little bit scaring for her. For the little girl who had just left her hometown, all she could sense was infinite loneliness. However, nature seemed to have magical power which often blew away the gray mist and clouds over the moorland with cold wind, and revealed a brilliant, deep blue sky, like heaven, tempting Mary to run on the wasteland and feel the vastness and clearness different from India. The long-time outdoor sports added some red color into her cheeks, her dull eyes brightened and her appetite increased. She no longer hated food, and even developed a healthy sense of hunger. One morning, when she woke up, she felt hungry for the first time in her life, and for the first time, she "did not glance disdainfully at her porridge and push it away, but took her spoon and began to eat it and went on eating it until her bowl was empty"! (Burnett 53) Bathed in the soothing atmosphere created by nature, Mary's body gradually became stronger, and her chaotic brain began to work. The fresh, powerful and pure air from the moorland gave her a desire to think and awakened her infinite imagination. She began to pay attention to her surroundings and was eager to try new things.

The howling winter wind from the moor swept away Mary's weakness and listlessness. When spring came, the bright spring started to bring vitality to her life. The soft rustling of spring shower, the fresh smell of spring mud, the warmth of spring sun, and the clear and blue sky, all exerted a positive influence on Mary. She squatted on the ground to observe the pointed buds that had just emerged. She was immensely immersed in the joy of digging and weeding. She

smiled and murmured at the grass and the pale green points. She ran across the vast moorland. Gradually, she looked better and stronger, and people were surprised to find that her thin and dry hair began to shine. Even Mary herself realized that “she looked quite a different creature from the child she had seen when she arrived from India”. (Burnett 184) The young girl was brimming with vigor for the first time in the spring of England.

For Mary, the lively, cute, gentle and docile animal is another important gift from nature. Usually, children are instinctively close to animals and enjoy dealing with them. Hayao Kawai, a famous Japanese child psychologist, believes that children can have a profound understanding of how to interact with people through their interactions with animals. (Kawai, 58) When Mary came to England, it is a robin that first showed its willingness to get close to the lonely and scarred girl. The little robin seemed to have the ability to read Mary’s mind and soon melted her cold heart. Mary treated the little bird as priceless treasure. She carefully, gently and earnestly asked if it could be her friend. She ran around the robin all day, shouting “I like you! I like you!” (Burnett 55) In the communication with the robin, Mary gradually opened her heart and began to try many new things for the first time: she felt sympathy for someone (her uncle); she began to notice maid Martha’s daily nagging; she had a strong desire to meet her peer (Dickens); she tried to like five people; she patiently coaxed her insolent cousin Colin into sleeping...

The howling winter wind, the bright spring, the smart little animals... Nature is like a fantastic magician, constantly casting spells on Mary, opening the dusty heart of the little girl. Nature gradually turns Mary into a nice girl with rosy face, soft temper and reasonable curiosity.

III. THE CALL OF LOVE

The famous British novelist and critic Marghanita Laski considers *The Secret Garden* to be a masterpiece for children’s introspection. “I do not know of any children’s book other than *The Secret Garden* that frankly poses this problem of the introspective unlikeable child in terms that children can understand.” (Laski 88) Nature awakened Mary’s long-lost heart, and let her lifeless heart gradually wake up in the warmth of spring sunshine. However, what really made Mary begin to pay attention to herself, examine herself and introspect was through contact and communication with all kinds of people. Centering upon Mary, Burnett created different characters in the small world of Misselthwaite Manor, letting them intermingle, interrelate and interact with Mary, thus giving birth to a brand-new Mary.

The old gardener Ben was the first person that Mary met in the garden when she first arrived at the manor. Ben was eccentric, rude, cold, stubborn, and always alone in the garden, taking care of flowers and plants. However, when he first met Mary, this cold, strange gardener whistled softly and lowly, summoning his only friend, a robin. From then on, the red-breasted, small creature with a pair of bright, gentle eyes plunged into Mary’s heart. In her communication with

Ben, Mary realized for the first time that loneliness was “one of the things which made her feel sour and cross”. (Burnett 48) The old gardener also bluntly pointed out that the two of them had a lot in common. “We was wove out of th’ same cloth. We’re neither of us good lookin’ an’ we’re both of us as sour as we look. We’ve got the same nasty tempers, both of us, I’ll warrant.” (Burnett 49) Of course, the unexpected negative comment from Ben annoyed Mary. “She did not know she was disagreeable. She often thought that other people were, but she did not know that she was so herself.” (Burnett 15) What Ben said made Mary wonder whether she was really so unattractive, unlikable and disagreeable. To a certain degree, the old gardener serves as a mirror for Mary, urging her to start to self-examine. In the following story, Mary grew fonder of this strange-tempered old man, gradually got close to him and asked him about gardening from time to time. Through the interaction with the old gardener and the robin, Mary not only started the journey of self-exploration, but also found some spiritual consolation and emotional identification, which gradually let her defenses down.

Compared with the old gardener Ben, Mary’s cousin Colin gives Mary a chance to have a deeper understanding of herself. Originally, the two kids have much in common. Both of them are 10 years old. Neither of them is likable, agreeable or attractive. They are like evil twins, domineering and selfish. In addition, both of them are physically weak and lack of parental love. When Mary first came into contact with Colin, she was deeply disgusted with Colin’s hysteria and arrogance. She described Colin as “a rude little brute”. (Burnett 281) She even realized that Colin’s main problem was that the enclosed life deprived him of the opportunity to compare himself with others. In her view, Colin “had lived on a sort of desert island all his life and as he had been the king of it he had made his own manners and had had no one to compare himself with”. (Burnett 281) Gradually, she saw in Colin what she used to be, which prompted her to have a further self-examination.

If the old gardener and Colin set off an alarm bell of self-examination for Mary from the negative side, the Sowerby set a positive example for her. The Sowerby live in a small moorland cottage. There are 14 people in the family and Mr. Sowerby can only earn 16 shillings a week. But the humble farmhouse is always full of laughter. The 12 kids are lively and healthy. This is a harmonious and loving family. They love and care for each other. They are satisfied with their life and proud of their way of living. In their eyes, the shabby cottage is “good enough for a king to live in”. (Burnett 83) The first person from the Sowerby that walks into Mary’s life is the eldest daughter of the family, Martha. The young farm girl was sent to the Misselthwaite Manor, serving as the maid of Mary. Though untrained and slightly clumsy, this simple and innocent farm girl was neither humble nor impolite. She dared to face Mary’s insolent insult, totally different from the native servants in India. The Indian servants that Mary was accustomed to “were not in the least like this”. (Burnett 30) “They were obsequious and servile and did not presume to talk to their masters as if they were their equals.” (Burnett 30) Yet, Martha did not have the

slightest humility to her master. She even dared to tease Mary because Mary could not get herself dressed and eat by herself, which really annoyed Mary. Mary could not even stop cursing her and said she was “daughter of a pig”. (Burnett 33) In the face of the hysteria of the little master, Martha did not panic or bow her head down like an Indian servant. Instead, she firmly pointed out that it was quite improper for a young lady to behave like this. In such confrontation with the servant, Mary failed for the first time, and tears of grievance and loneliness poured into her heart. Yet Martha’s sincere comfort let Mary feel the true friendly attitude for the first time. The conflict between the two girls gave Mary the first experience of normal and equal interaction between people. Servant Martha not only showed Mary the usual way to build an equal relationship with others, but also loved Mary like a big sister, urging her to dress and eat by herself, encouraging her to walk out of the room for outdoor exercise. Gradually, Mary grew attached to this big sister. She forgot to resent Martha’s familiar talk with a strong and funny Yorkshire accent. Because Martha talked about her brother Dicken a lot, Mary began to “feel a slight interest in Dicken, and as she had never before been interested in anyone but herself, it was the dawning of a healthy sentiment”. (Burnett 37) Later, she even felt sorry when Martha stopped or went away. Under the encouragement and influence of Martha, Mary stopped locking herself up and even desired to have normal interpersonal relationships.

Though only two years older than Mary, Martha’s younger brother Dicken embodies all the good qualities of children: likeable, agreeable and attractive. He is like the son of nature, wandering in the wilderness all day, accompanied by animals and surrounded by various plants. He knows the secret of the growth of plants, and his skillful hands seem to have magical power. The flowers and vegetables he grows show great vitality. This kind-hearted child also saves countless grassland creatures. He seems to have some kind of attraction. No matter where he goes, there are always small animals to follow around. “The new-born lamb was in his arms and the little red fox trotted by his side. Nut sat on his left shoulder and Soot on his right and Shell’s head and paws peeped out of his coat pocket.” (Burnett 242) When Mary and Dicken met for the first time, they felt as if they knew each other quite well. The pure-minded Dicken naturally entered Mary’s cold heart like the bright light of the early morning sun. He voluntarily taught Mary the gardening techniques and helped her to buy seeds and garden tools. It was the first time in Mary’s life that she had made friends, and for the first time, she experienced how sweet and beautiful the friendship could be!

Apart from Martha and Dicken, their mother Susan Sowerby also exerts great influence on Mary. Susan has successfully raised 12 children. She is the embodiment of a perfect mother, sensible, hard-working, good-tempered and clean. More importantly, Susan understands her children, allowing them to play and explore in the fields, encouraging them to get close to nature and release the real nature of human beings. This farmer woman is also concerned about the children from the wealthy family who have nothing to do

with her. She repeatedly reminded Mary’s uncle, Mr. Craven, to find a governess and a nanny for Mary. She always told her daughter, Martha, to pay more attention to Mary’s physical and mental health. She even squeezed out two pennies to buy a skipping rope for Mary, so that Mary could carry out outdoor exercise. Although she had to try her best to fill the bellies of 12 kids with big appetite, every day she still managed to prepare a bucket of fresh milk, a crusty loaf or some buns for Mary and Colin who secretly worked and exercised in the garden. How different and special Susan is! Mary’s own mother was indifferent to Mary while she was alive. Her mother was a great beauty “who cared only to go to parties and amuse herself with gay people”. (Burnett 1) She even didn’t want Mary at all, and “when Mary was born she handed her over to the care of an Ayah, who was made to understand that if she wished to please the Mem Sahib she must keep the child out of sight as much as possible”. (Burnett 1) In the eyes of little Mary, her mother was more like a beautiful and busy hostess and she never had the chance to feel maternal love. In contrast, Susan is like the warm spring breeze, gently blowing away the gloomy mist hanging over Mary’s heart. Every little thing Susan did made Mary feel rejuvenated again, nourishing Mary to sprout herself into a brand-new self.

Under the guidance and influence of the Sowerby, for the first time, Martha experienced the preciousness and beauty of sisterhood, friendship and healthy mother-daughter relationship. The warm and harmonious interpersonal relationships in the wilderness opened Mary’s heart, and this former little bully from India began to change quietly towards goodness and beauty.

IV. THE MAGIC OF SECRET

Secret is an important theme in *The Secret Garden*. It is not difficult to find that Burnett has carefully crafted two secrets in the novel: the secret garden that has been locked for ten years and Colin, the young master who has also been hidden for ten years. It can be said that the plot of the novel is built around the two secrets mentioned above — how the heroine discovered, kept and shared secrets until the final disclosure. Undoubtedly, secrets accompany the whole process of the heroine’s growth and transformation.

Secrets are so precious to children and have an indescribable magical appeal to them. Almost all the little protagonists in the story have inexplicable curiosity and enthusiasm for secrets. When Martha accidentally mentioned the hidden garden that had been locked up for ten years, Mary was so attracted by it and even could not wait to search for it. After hearing the wail of some child, Mary, with four attempts, finally discovered Colin, the hidden kid that everyone in the manor tried to avoid mentioning. The two children immediately reached an agreement that they must keep their friendly relationship under wraps. Later, they even tried to find some excuses to divert the servants. Thus they could slip into the secret garden “secretly”. In fact, The “Secret Garden” was what Mary called it. “She liked the name, and she liked still more the feeling that when its beautiful old walls shut her in no one knew where she was. It seemed almost like being shut out of the world in some fairy

place.” (Burnett 107) Here, the kids found a secret space that completely belonged to them. They were amazed at the exuberant vitality of the plants in the garden, feeling the pleasure and fulfillment of labor, and experiencing the sweetness of friendship. This is the most beautiful and mysterious Pure Land in the world, where the children’s long-lost hearts sprout again.

In *Children’s Universe*, Hayao Kawai uses a large number of psychotherapy cases to illustrate the importance of having secrets in the process of the children’s growth and the magical healing power of secrets. Undoubtedly, secrets play a vital role in little Mary’s self-growth. Because of having the secret of “the secret garden”, Mary felt the value of being for the first time, and her life became full and meaningful. She was immersed in gardening secretly all day, which made her look better. Her appetite increased, her body became stronger and her temperament became softer. Hayao Kawai also points out that secrets are valuable only when they are kept, but the value of them can also be added by sharing them with others. (Kawai 48) After keeping the secret for a while, Mary had the impulse to share it with others. She first chose to share it with the kind-hearted Dicken, which proved to be a very successful try. The successful first try not only helped her find friendship, but also enhanced her trust in others. Therefore, she bravely took the second step and told the secret to Colin. After tasting the joy of sharing the secret twice, she began to extend the scope of trust to the adult world, deciding to share it with Susan Sowerby, which is actually not quite easy for a girl who has never been loved by parents. In the process of sharing secrets, Mary constantly explored how to interact with people and gradually built up a sense of trust in the outside world. When Mr. Craven, the owner of the manor who traveled all the year round, returned to the manor, he was surprised to find that the long-deserted garden was full of vitality and Colin, who had been bedridden all day, became strong. At this point, the children’s secrets were completely revealed to the public, and the two little protagonists Mary and Colin appeared in a brand-new manner. Through having, keeping, sharing secrets and finally bringing them into daylight, Mary’s whole life was renewed.

V. CONCLUSION

Through the bathing of nature, the call of love, the secret possessing, keeping, sharing and publicizing, the young girl Mary has undergone a magical change in body and mind, and eventually turns into a healthy and loving girl. In *The Secret Garden*, Burnett creates a secret Pure Land for Mary’s growth, and also shows the readers three special keys to open this Pure Land: nature, harmonious interpersonal relationship and secret. The three keys mentioned above transcend times and cultural differences, and they are still of universal significance to current education. It is the primary responsibility of all educators and parents to help children find these three keys, letting them thrive in the Pure Land of their own and burst into the most beautiful flower of their soul.

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